

MATTEO RICCI AND JESUIT MISSION

THE POWER OF IMAGES

Missionaries have always been aware of the power of images. This was true for Christians and Buddhists missionaries alike. We have already talked about John of Montecorvino, who in the 14th century was the first Christian bishop of Beijing.

Remember that he commissioned six pictures, illustrating the Old and New Testament, and had explanations engraved on them. Rada and Ricci were both of them missionaries and both were well aware of the power of images.

Both saw the keen interest of the mandarins for western books, their curiosity for the book as an object, for the letters that filled its pages and even for the whiteness of the paper.

But what most drew the mandarin's attention were the images. Rada had to give all the religious prints that he carried to an insistent mandarin: scenes with the Virgin and the Passion were featured on them.

Years later, the Franciscan expedition to China also noticed the Chinese attraction for images. Even so, the monastic orders didn't make a systematic effort to approach the Chinese with images that were intentionally adapted to their sensibility and taste.

But Jesuits liked to use images, and Ricci had to find a way to make them work. Loyola was keen to apply images both to meditation and preaching. At his demand, Jerónimo Nadal, a Jesuit from Majorca, drew a complete set of 153 images on the New Testament to serve as support for the Spiritual Exercises and for the missionary work.

The paintings were organized like pictures within pictures, in which various sub-scenes simultaneously represent different moments and spaces within the same narrative. The different scenes are identified with a key, a, b, c, linked to a short explanatory text at the foot of the page.

It was a mnemonic method for preaching, consisting in translating into images what one has to remember. Before the end of the 16th century, Nadal's book was in China, and Ricci and other Jesuits took advantage of it with the

inclusion of some of its illustrations in albums of prayers and religious engravings, albeit adapting them to Chinese sensibility.

The modifications introduced in the original Nadal work provide a glimpse of how Jesuits adapted to their Chinese audiences, as in the case of this scene of the Annunciation.

First of all the painter has erased the shadows that blurred the original scene: Chinese paintings never include shadow. The furniture and the interior decoration have been transmuted into those of an upper-class Ming household.

Instead of the bare wall in the original painting, Mary's room now shows a screen with a Chinese landscape, and a lattice window, while the tiles in the roof have the characteristic Chinese finishing. Another window opens onto a garden with rocks and banana trees.

Furthermore, the clouds that transport the dove of the Holy Spirit and the archangel Gabriel show the forms and the curls that usually come with Chinese religious deities. And he also simplified the method: keys and captions are nowhere to be seen.

More important is the fact that he also simplified the message: the cataracts of angels, reminiscent of Buddhist sceneries, have all disappeared. And so have the creation of man and the crucifixion, both of them sensitive issues for the Chinese audience.

Ricci knew from experience the difficulties that the crucifixion aroused: on his way to Beijing, his luggage was searched and when a crucifix was found, with a suffering nailed Christ hanging from it, Ricci had to face an accusation of witchcraft and black magic.

This being so, for the moment he tried to avoid as much as possible the Passion of Christ. No doubt the other religious orders thought that the Jesuits were going a bridge too far. Both Rada and Ricci wrote accounts about China but neither saw them published during his lifetime.

Both had some elements suppressed: Rada self-censored, but Ricci's original text was retouched, translated to Latin and published in 1615 by the Jesuit Trigault, who suppressed whatever unpleasant details he found.

Trigault's redesign of the text was so thorough that he even thought it appropriate to sign it with his own name.

In the next decade it was translated into French, German, Spanish, Italian and English.

Its chapters on Chinese culture, education, examinations and administrative organization consolidated the image already present in Mendoza's book of a highly civilized and refined Chinese civilization.