

## MATTEO RICCI AND JESUIT MISSION

### CHINESE SCHOLARS AND CONFUCIANISM

The Ricci-Trigault book achieved popularity in Europe, comparable only to that which Mendoza's had enjoyed 30 years before. If we compare the two books, Ricci's is shorter, much more realistic and appealed more directly to the rising European literati.

Moreover, Ricci was not an armchair writer like Mendoza. He entered China with a dream and a project to fulfill it. After spending almost two decades there and becoming highly fluent in the Chinese language and culture, he was admitted by the Chinese court, and obtained permission to establish a permanent mission house just in front of the Forbidden City in Beijing.

His Memoirs are intense but lively, and they ring true. This is especially so in his original draft, which was untouched by Trigault and then found and published in the 20th century.

Ricci's description of China was in tune with that of his Iberian predecessors as far as the geographical description of China is concerned. As was also the case with Rada, Loarca and Mendoza, he makes extensive use of the geographical compendium of the Guangyu du.

Like these other writers, Ricci knows a lot about China's South-East, but he also spent many years in both Chinese capitals, Nanjing and Beijing, and this gave him a much more accurate perception of China's urban and intellectual life.

Ricci's book dwelled especially on the world of the rich scholar-gentry class. He spent two decades with them, eating with them, debating with them, reading their books and actively mixing in their networks.

The Jesuits themselves were subject to rigorous training and an extremely careful choice of personnel. And this allowed Ricci to understand and sympathize with the expectations and frustrations that the promotion through examinations brought about.

Furthermore, his empathy with the Chinese scholar class made his book very appealing to European scholars. Notice how Ricci comments on the political status of the Chinese literati saying bluntly that "Even if it can't be said that in

this realm the philosophers are the King, it can be said that the King is governed by the philosophers."

This idyllic picture was completed with the assertion that the military were subject to the civil authorities. All this was music to the European scholars' ears. In a sense, Ricci was the spokesman that connected the Chinese scholars with an audience of European scholars.

Ricci admires the Chinese education system and he describes accurately how candidates prepared for the exams, the contents of the exams themselves, the differences between their three levels, and the path that each type of exam opened to status, power and wealth.

He also understands just how harsh this ladder to success is: he himself had been through very hard times while living in south China and where he was despised for his Buddhist garb while he strived night and day to learn Chinese classical literature.

In the end Ricci knew all the classical texts by heart and was able to discuss every one of them. He never took the exams and he educated himself, but his training so nearly approximated to that of the Chinese officials, that they began to refer to him as Xiru, the Western Scholar, and therefore an equal of them.

Ricci's narrative excels in everything related to the scholar class: he describes in detail their writing and their printing, but also their paper, their ink, their brushes. He enters into detail about the visits that scholars pay to one another, the gifts they exchange, the calling card that they send, and even the multicolored fans that highlight their movements and to which he attributes a social significance similar to that of gloves in Europe.

He also exalts the decorative arts that the Chinese scholars cherish: porcelains and lacquers, whose beauty and production processes he describes at length. Ricci's Memoirs are at their best when he talks of things that he has seen personally, even when his judgment is a negative one.

Sometimes he can't refrain from cultural disdain, especially related to the arts: he despises Chinese architecture, finding it fragile and insubstantial when compared with the European style.

He criticizes their painting for its lack of shadows and perspective; and dismisses their music as a monotonous rhythmic beat. And he often feels awkward with the scholars' intellectual framework: their ignorance of logic exasperates him.

On the other hand, when working on hearsay he occasionally makes blunders: this is the case for instance when talking of the Chinese voyages to the Indian Ocean, which he deems too bizarre to be true, due to the poor quality of Chinese ocean-going ships.

It is through **Ricci's text that Zheng He vanished from European memory**. Ricci highlights the outstanding Chinese achievements in astronomy, even noticing that they are handicapped by only relying on observation and lacking mathematical bases.

One scholar has said that the Jesuits marched in the shadow of mathematics. But despite these mild criticisms, Ricci is utterly at ease with the moral philosophy that pervades the scholar's circles and that he identifies as a natural religion.

In Ricci's view, early Confucianism was inherently predisposed to Christianity and required only minor modifications. He praises the ancient Chinese books that trained men to be virtuous and to devote themselves to public peace and order.

And he considers the ancient Chinese teachings to be much more rational than those coming from the ancient Romans, Greeks or Egyptians. He admires Confucius, whom he acknowledges as being the prince of philosophers.

And his identification with what he calls Confucianism is so thorough that Ricci's detractors will claim **that the Jesuits' converts were in fact Confucian monotheists**.