

## MATTEO RICCI AND JESUIT MISSION RICCI'S CRITICAL REMARKS ABOUT CHINA

The utter identification of Ricci with the scholar's philosophical background made him nurture strong anti-Buddhist feeling, a stance that was also very common in the scholar's world.

Ricci sided by the Confucians in part because he needed the complicity of the Confucian scholars to fulfill his project of reaching the court. But also because he had serious philosophical and theological incompatibilities with Buddhism, something that didn't happen with Confucianism.

In the long run this will hamper the acceptance of Jesuits by the great majority of Chinese. It is worth remembering that more than 90% of the Chinese lived in the countryside, were poor and felt no sympathy whatsoever for the officials that put pressure on them.

The peasants rather identified themselves with Buddhist and Taoist cults. But not so the Jesuits and this fuelled a strong aversion towards them. Even so, Ricci's book shows him as being very knowledgeable about Buddhism; incomparably more so than the writers of the Iberian reports that just preceded his.

He probably gathered his accurate information from the Jesuit letters coming from Japan. His interest in Chinese religions is also visible in his description of Taoism.

And it makes him identify the presence of Muslims and Jews in China. Both these minorities had already been noticed in the Iberian narratives: Dueñas, for instance, had already mentioned them at some length.

But Ricci knew better how and when they had arrived in China, and in which regions they were mostly to be found. He had even conversed with some minor officials who were of either Muslim or Jewish faith.

In medieval times China had gained a strong reputation in Europe for being a Paradise on earth. The famous books of Marco Polo and Mandeville presented it as the light of the East: a rich urban civilization with a peaceful and hard-working population governed by a magnanimous and enlightened king.

The first European narratives, especially **Mendoza's**, followed suit and dismissed whatever elements could tarnish this utopian vision.

Mendoza so praised Chinese justice, in contrast to Castilian justice, that he transformed it into a model. **Ricci's admiration for the Chinese** state is genuine and complete. He praises it as a model government and transmits in detail the administrative and educative means to achieve it.

With his help, China will retain its aura until the 18th century. But Ricci's book also follows a political directory. His thorough appraisal of Chinese civilization is also meant to persuade its Superiors and benefactors that China is worth the effort.

But he also has to convince them that there was a dark side to China that needed Christianity to eradicate it. This comes in a chapter entitled "Superstitions and some abuses of the Chinese". This is the part of Ricci's book that was most altered **by Trigault's scissors**.

All these paragraphs were stored in **the Society of Jesus' Archives** and were not published until the 20th century. And so, they did not darken the European vision of China.

Only a little piece of this chapter was conserved by Trigault: in it Ricci affirms that "Astrologers, diviners, fortunetellers and impostors are everywhere to be seen. Squares, shops, houses and streets are full of them." And then Ricci denounces in long paragraphs all the Chinese vices.

First of all he links polygamy to the sensuous way of life that induces the very young teenagers to go with women. Furthermore Ricci denounces the fact that prostitution is thriving: he affirms that in Beijing alone there are 45,000 prostitutes offering their services.

This marks a difference with Mendoza who only mentioned prostitution to marvel at how well organized it was in China. Sodomy comes next, with young children systematically involved in it.

Ricci knows the Portuguese writers, and both Pereira and Gaspar da Cruz had voiced their repulsion for the nefarious sin. Mendoza, as we have seen, silenced it for political reasons, to avoid providing arguments for the conquest of China.

Homosexuality was not illegal in Ming China and was even practiced occasionally by heterosexual males. But Ricci's perception that it was so general fits what he has seen in the sophisticated urban literati circles of Nanjing and Beijing, where homosexuality was a common practice.

Ricci also denounces the slavery of small children and the selling of women, as well as infanticide, especially for new born baby girls. And finally he attributes the high rate of suicides to all these vices.

Eunuchs also arouse his anger, as does the castration of little boys by their own families. Ricci voices his aversion to the highly influential collective of eunuchs, qualifying them as idiots, barbarians and cruel.

He is also indignant about the abuses that high Magistrates inflict on their subordinates, flogging them constantly. And he voices his disdain for the false courtesies that make everybody suspicious of hypocrisy.

But all these paragraphs dwelling on the dark side of Chinese urban society were suppressed by Trigault, and are also missing from the other 17th century Jesuit narratives about China.

In the following two centuries many details will enrich the European perception of China. But none will alter the status of model country that China had gained in the West.