

## Lessons from Matteo Ricci Reflection on the Chinese-Western Transfer of Ideas by Matteo Ricci and Its Implications for the Chinese- European Encounter

*Michael Lackner*

Your Excellency, Ladies and Gentlemen, dear friends and colleagues,

Delivering a speech about Matteo Ricci, his missionary endeavor, and his impact on Western images of China is not an easy task. It would have been much easier 30 years ago, when the studies of the Jesuit mission were still dominated by Western historians of that mission, who mainly focused on the missionaries' educational background and their willingness to accommodate their missionary strategies to the respective local conditions they perceived as vital for imbedding the message of evangelization. These issues will still have to be taken into account, however, the past 30 years have witnessed an increasing interest from two more fields: first, scholars of Chinese Studies in the West have departed from the unilateral perspective of their colleagues in Western history and have tried to reconstitute the voices of the Chinese contemporaries of the missionaries. The inquiry into Chinese sources of the period has proved immensely fruitful, mainly because we have become aware of the fact that there was no uniform Chinese response to the Christian mission; instead of speaking with one voice, Chinese literati of all levels, from high-browed to grass-root, articulated very different ideas and reactions with regard to their encounter with the missionaries, not to mention the different attitudes chosen by both the court and the common people.

There is another important factor that makes our image of Ricci and his successors even more complicated: Since 20 odd years, Chinese historians have unearthed hitherto unknown sources concerning the Jesuits' impact on the History of Science in China – and, more recently, materials concerning the Chinese Christians' ideas in matters of religion (for instance, the reaction of the Nanjing Christians during the Controversy of Rites).

Thus, the study of Matteo Ricci now encompasses fields like the history of the mission, history of religion, religious anthropology, history of science, history of ideas, and many other fields; it is a research that is undertaken by both Chinese and Western scholars, and it has become a laboratory for cross-cultural encounters; finally, we have entered the ep-

---

The following text is the contribution of Prof. Dr. Michael Lackner, Full Professor (Chair) of Chinese Studies, Department of Middle Eastern and Far Eastern Languages and Cultures, University of Erlangen-Nuremberg, to the 8th European Catholic China Colloquium "Chinese in Europe – Trends and Catholic Perspectives," Freising, September 16–19, 2010.

och of globalization, and it is no wonder that specialists from different fields and different countries are combining their research in an atmosphere of mutual understanding, and, if I may say so, mutual curiosity – for that was also the intellectual climate that characterized both Ricci and most of his Chinese contemporaries.

Having made so many remarks about the difficulties connected with our study, and the manifold possibilities for approaches, one could easily say that it is almost impossible to find a smallest common denominator, a clear-cut formula that does justice to Matteo Ricci. I will nonetheless try to introduce the one I think suits best: let me call it, in a first tentative step, “rationality.”

Rationality is, first of all, characteristic of Matteo Ricci’s – and the Jesuits’ – education; let us only recall the fact that their curriculum, the “ratio studiorum,” reserved theology, the knowledge of the divine, to the very last parts of their study, instead of starting with it, as many other contemporaneous curricula did. The intellectual approach to the mysteries of Faith is thus considered as the last part of the long ladder that starts with mundane, rational knowledge (mathematics, for instance). Let us also recall that the Jesuits were the first religious order in Early Modern Europe, who measured global distances without a fixed center, like Rome or Jerusalem. Their instruments (many of which are still preserved) indicated, for instance, the distance between Beijing and Luzon on the Philippines, without taking into account the traditional centers of religious Europe. A multi-polar world requires multi-polar and multi-faceted instruments, and this holds equally true for the spiritual realm.

So let us briefly examine some of the intellectual tools Matteo Ricci brought to China. Once again, it has to be stated that the basic assumption underlying his approach to Chinese culture was a rational one: in sharp contrast to many of the cross-cultural studies of our present times that emphasize cultural differences, Ricci focused on the commonalities: “they have academies (he obviously pointed to the Hanlin Academy) just like ours, just like the Accademia dei Lincei (the Papal Academy);” first try to identify things both cultures have in common! In my view, this is a thoroughly rational attitude, notwithstanding its limitations, to which I will come later on.

Consequently, he tried to present his Chinese audience with knowledge he thought suitable to be shared by all rational human beings: ethical wisdom of Western Antiquity, like the *Enchiridion* of Epictetus, his treatise *On Friendship* (*Jiaoyoulun*), and technical wisdom in his treatise on the *Western Art of Memory* (*Xiguo jifa*). In the framework of science, he co-authored, among other works, the translation of Euclid and produced the *Mappamondo*. Some of these works contain what I would call “smuggled” or “filtered” allusions to the Christian Faith, however, none of them is meant to reveal the entire truth about it. Even Ricci’s principal book *The Truth about God* (*Tianzhu shiyi*) cannot be called a full-fledged compendium of Christianity. It is a rather mild and serene picture of the West, where rationality prevails. It is now commonplace to characterize this approach as “accommodation,” but we have to take into account that this accommodation is driven by a firm belief in Reason as a fundamental prerequisite of mankind. In this context, Ricci had a few predecessors, like, for instance, Raimundus Lullus, who, in the 13th century,

tried to convince the Arabs of the truth of Christian Faith by drawing diagrams based on Aristotelian logic.

Not all of Ricci's works were equally successful. Let us simply compare the treatise *On Friendship* with the treatise on the *Western Art of Memory*. Both of them were an expression of the complex interplay between Reason and emotion in the framework of the Jesuits' missionary strategies. *On Friendship* was an enormous success, because, first of all, Ricci, with a fine intuition for the cult of friendship in the late Ming, had sensed that explaining Western traditions of friendship would open up a door to his Chinese contemporaries: emotion, which is the basis of friendship, should always be guided by Reason, this is the fundamental message of the treatise that largely draws on sources of European Antiquity. Let us not forget that, among the Five Major Principles of Relationship in the Confucian doctrine, friendship was the only one that was not based on hierarchy. With an increasing number of literate people during the latter half of the Ming dynasty, there was also an increasing number of what Joseph McDermott has called the "friends of friendship." Once again, it can be said that Ricci looked for common phenomena in China and the West, and friendship no doubt belonged to that category. And, once again, we have to say that there is no explicit Christian message in that work, it simply states that our Western men of old appreciated friendship in more or less the same way you Chinese do. Let us recall that the work was so successful that, later on, it became part of the imperial collection *Siku quan shu* in 1782.

However, the relationship between reason and emotion can definitely not be the same in all fields of two cultures. When introducing the *Western Art of Memory* to a Chinese audience, Ricci relied on the principles Ancient and Medieval Europe had developed for memorizing texts and speeches. At first glance, these techniques seem rather easy: by constructing a large hall with pillars or columns in one's mind (and only in the mind), it is possible to establish the structure of a text. This is the place, *locus* in Latin. If you proceed along the pillars, you will attribute to each of them a word or a passage of your text. Now, the most important thing for memorizing your text lies in striking images each of the pillars is supposed to carry – the more striking, even violent an image is, the better you will remember your text. This is what the Western tradition called "imagines agentes." Even if you have to remember, in an Italian text, for instance, the two words "or that" (Italian: *o che*), you are supposed to invent the image of geese, for the combination of *o* ("or") and *che* ("that") results in *oche*, the Italian word for "geese." Such images were not possible for the Chinese language, and thus Ricci heavily drew on the pictographic aspects of the Chinese characters, adding the Chinese method of dissection to the European technique of attributing images to places. The book was a complete failure: the Chinese official to whom he presented the work (with the second thought that it might be of some help for his sons in their preparation for the civil examination), was disappointed and concluded that, "in order to memorize this art of memory, an already perfect memory is needed."

How can we explain the failure of this undertaking that was nonetheless based on the same intellectual background, as was the case for the treatise *On Friendship*, that is, Western Humanism? In the Western tradition of the Art of Memory, emotion, in the guise of the "striking and violent images," acts as an instrument for a rational undertaking – the

memorization or conception of a text. Emotion serves reason in the context of language. However, I suggest that the Chinese attitude towards their writing system did not allow for emotion in the framework of memorizing: according to the great Neo-Confucian Master Zhu Xi (1130–1200, in his *Method of Reading* [*Dushu fa*]), the canonical texts had to be learned by heart, recited again and again up to a thousand times – then, and only then, a revelation about their meaning could be expected. There is a devotional aspect in this way of approaching the sacred texts, but there is no room for playful images, and emotion as a mere ancillary instrument. On the other hand, emotions with regard to writing in the Chinese tradition were strong when dealing with calligraphy as an expression of one's feelings. Interestingly enough, there is almost no mention of calligraphy in the writings of the early Jesuits, including Matteo Ricci. The fact that calligraphy was regarded as the highest-ranking of the fine arts just escaped the missionaries. Each civilization has its own idea of the hierarchy of Arts (in Ricci's time, architecture would play the role of the finest of the Fine Arts in the West), but each civilization has also its own concepts about the respective functions of emotion and reason in different contexts. Sometimes these functions are largely congruent, and in some cases they differ dramatically. Reason no doubt is characteristic of humankind, but we still have to learn that there are many ways to express it, many ways to find a systematic place for it.

No doubt, Matteo Ricci would have considered his Art of Memory as practical knowledge; however, other attempts at introducing this kind of knowledge were more successful: his *Mappamondo*, his translation of Euclid's *Elements of Geometry* and other works did in fact meet with the interest of Chinese scholars of his time, who were in search of a new kind of knowledge based on individual and practical experience, what they called *shixue*, an expression that can indeed be translated by "practical learning." "Everything the Western scholars have brought to China," said Xu Guangqi, one of the first important converts, "astronomy, mathematics, hydraulics etc., is of practical use." This statement accounts for a strong motivation with regard to some of the Chinese literati's positive attitude to the missionaries' message; however, this is only half of the truth: if we think that it was mere utilitarianism that turned eminent Chinese scholars into Christians, we still miss an important factor in their conversion, namely, emotions. Ricci's missionary strategy may predominantly have relied on rational elements, but we know, for instance, that one of the decisive moments for Xu Guangqi's conversion was the spiritual encounter with a painting of the Holy Virgin; moreover, the emotional tie of friendship with the missionaries, and their overwhelmingly convincing life-conduct seem to have been equally persuasive, as we know from the case of Michael Yang Tingyun. It is still difficult to assess the extent to which these elements were part of a deliberate strategy by the missionaries. But no doubt there is more to faith than meets the eyes of an utilitarian mind.

Let us depart, for the next moments, from the question of whether the first conversions of important Chinese scholars happened in spite of Ricci's rationality or whether there was a mixture of elements that are difficult to identify, precisely because we are not dealing with "the Chinese" as an amorphous mass, but rather with individuals.

If one admits, however, that Reason was the driving force in Matteo Ricci's thought and behavior, this quality would apply for his entire world-view. So let us examine the im-

age of China and the Chinese he had in mind, since this image would alter and become a powerful instrument for shaping European ideas about China. Apart from his letters, there is an important document that reveals many of his impressions, the *De Christiana expeditione apud Sinas*, a report about his mission. We know since a couple of years that the original version, written in Italian, was more realistic with regard to his observations than the Latin translation made by Father Nicholas Trigault; Trigault filtered out several passages that sounded too critical, for instance, Ricci's disapproval of the corruption at the Court, some remarks about superstition, etc. But notwithstanding some minor details, the tenor of the entire report is thoroughly positive. We are thus entitled to say that the message Ricci delivered to the Chinese scholars of his time is largely congruent with the one he brought to the West; we do not deal with a schizophrenic who is speaking to two different audiences in completely different voices, who deliberately tries to conceal vital parts of his insights.

However, there is the idea of a hitherto unaccomplished rationality in Chinese culture, which is close to perfection, but which lacks the final accomplishment that can only be brought about by Christianity. Consequently, the compromises to be made are not radical in nature, and if there is any gap between the cultures, it can be bridged, sometimes just with a gentle smile. In one of his letters, Ricci argues that, in order to prove that Confucius had some knowledge about God, "we will have to pull Confucius more in the direction of our opinions" (*bisogna tirare Confucio alla nostra opinione*). This does not express a radical dissent, it is just an interpretive device.

Once again, it has to be said that Ricci, in asserting that Reason was the phenomenon that characterized the entire Chinese culture, was not without predecessors. In 1583, the very year Ricci set foot on Chinese soil, Alessandro Valignano (Chinese name: Fan Li'an 范禮安), the Visitor for the entire body of the territories of the Portuguese *padroado* after 42 years of Jesuit presence in India (since 1541) described India, Japan, and China from the Society of Jesus' point of view, relying on personal experience for India and Japan, and his comrades' experiences for China. In his *Historia del principio y progreso de la Compania de Jesús en las Indias Orientales* (History of the Commencement and Development of the Society of Jesus in the East Indies), he draws an overwhelmingly positive picture of China, whose main traits will recur in Ricci's descriptions. Meritocracy as a principle governs China, which, in Europe, is only to be found in the organization of the Church (and, as a matter of course, in the Society of Jesus). With meritocracy as the fundament of good governance, China is the motherland of Reason. If Europe would adopt the system of meritocracy, and China would convert to Christianity, both civilizations would benefit from each other.

The firm belief in Reason and a strong sense for the need for soft compromises made Ricci assume that the sacrifices Chinese people offered to their ancestors and the ceremonies Chinese scholars held for Confucius were of mere secular nature. We know by now that the historical background for this view was the Medieval Christian model of division between spiritual (religious) on the one hand, and secular power on the other. In order to obtain the monarch's conversion, there was no better way than to convince the political elite of the country; in this case, Ricci followed the early modern European model of



“cuius regio, eius religio,” according to which a monarch is entitled to decide the religion of his subjects. In the country of Reason, there could simply be no room for manifestations of religious feelings of the elite. True, there were religious sects, but beginning with the moment when Ricci and his comrades, after wandering through China in the guise of Buddhist monks for a couple of years, had decided to dress and behave as “Western Confucians” (*xiru*), this Chinese elite was deprived, in Ricci’s view, of the possibility of religious feelings. Other Christian orders, and even some Jesuits (like, for instance, Ricci’s successor Longobardi) did not share this opinion, the famous Controversy on the Chinese Rites was inevitable.

Notwithstanding the backdrop caused by the Rites Controversy (and many others that would follow), the European image of China during the period between 1650 and 1750 is not conceivable without the impact of Ricci and his successors. In many ways, European Enlightenment has been influenced by their reports on China and the Chinese. King Louis XIV ploughed in public, thus imitating a ceremony performed by the Chinese Emperor; European architecture and decorative arts witnessed the high tide of Chinoiserie. Attempts were made to copy the Chinese civil service examination. The philosopher Leibniz suggested a mutual exchange of cultural embassies so that Chinese and European erudition and knowledge could be fruitful for each other; Voltaire praised Confucius, exclaiming that “how much preferable is Confucius, the first of the mortals who had no revelation; he only relies on Reason, but never recurs to lies or weapons.” Voltaire had read the “Confucius Sinarum philosophus,” published in 1687 as a result of the collaborative efforts of eleven Jesuits. Parts of this translation of the *Analects* (*Lunyu*), the *Great Learning* (*Da-xue*), and the *Middle and the Mean* (*Zhongyong*), especially the latter text, can be traced back to Ricci (and Michele Ruggieri). In translating the Chinese word for “human nature” (*xing*) into Latin, they used the expression *natura rationalis*, “rational nature,” an idea that by no means was intended by the original authors of that Chinese text; but this translation bears witness to the deep conviction that Confucian thought (which, in their minds, was *scientia politico-moralis*, a “political and moral science”) was the embodiment of Reason. No wonder Voltaire was so eager to turn Confucius into the Saint of Reason (think alone of his ironical expression *Sancte Confuci, ora pro nobis*, “Holy Confucius, pray for us.”).

It may seem paradoxical that thoughts about the reign of Reason that were so indebted to Ricci’s perception of China, finally led to the banishment of the Jesuit order. By the mid-18th century, the European image of China started to shift from enthusiasm to criticism. A different kind of persons started to visit China: merchants, whose interests differed dramatically from the missionaries’ efforts to convert the Chinese elite – to some extent, their reports were more realistic, because they were exposed to corruption, lack of trust, and a good deal of superstition. It was the very principle of Reason itself that came to be attacked; consequently enough, the Chinese way of good governance was under fire: puppets without a soul moved by anonymous strings; craftsmen, but no artists, meticulous but not open-minded, etc. When Lord McCartney came to China, at the end of the 18th century, the failure of his mission (that consisted in convincing the Chinese Emperor to establish political and commercial relations with Great Britain along the lines of European political diplomacy) led many Westerners to the conclusion that China was the land of

stagnation and immobility. The 19th century found new denominators for China and the Chinese that were, with a few exceptions, mostly negative: In the eyes of many Westerners, China's backwardness needed modernization, its government was hopelessly despotic; by the second half of the 19th century, more and more Westerners argued that China needed "science and democracy." Western experts no longer searched for commonalities, as Matteo Ricci had done, instead, they rather insisted on the dramatic gap that separated Chinese culture from Western civilization. With Arthur Smith's "Chinese characteristics," the turn of the century witnessed the invention of a Chinese national character: cunning, cowardice, the egoistic search for personal welfare, the lack of interest in public affairs, superstition, and many other devastating depictions became the current stereotypes in dealing with China. Ricci's humanistic perspectives and his conceptions of an intrinsic rational character of Chinese culture had fallen into oblivion.

During the first decades of the 20th century, even many Chinese intellectuals had come to believe in the backwardness of their nation: it was under the influence of a Japanese translation of Arthur Smith's "Chinese characteristics" that Lu Xun wrote his novel on *The True Biography of Ah Q*, where he describes a man, who turns his constant defeats into triumphs, thus deceiving himself until the very end of his life. The 20th century also witnessed the birth of a large panoply of Chinese images of the West; and many of these conceptions served to assess a specific Chinese identity: in the 1920s, Liang Shuming attributed an "analytical mind" to the West, whereas he saw the Chinese way of thought as a "synthetic" one. In the 1950s, the Modern Neo-Confucianist Mou Zongsan stated that the West, with Immanuel Kant, had produced a "philosophy of ethics," but China, on the contrary, had an "ethical philosophy." Westerners, he said, are concerned with what is "outside," Chinese care about what is "inside." The search for identity markers of a specific "Chinese form of thought" (*Zhongguoren de sixiang siwei*) has not yet come to an end; however, instead of enumerating more examples for this way of juxtapositions between "East" and "West," let us just briefly say that most of these conceptions aim at differences, trying to find something that characterizes a Chinese singularity, instead of identifying phenomena that we have in common. It is clear that these attempts are far away from the approach of Matteo Ricci.

None of these ideas that distinguish "us" from "them" may be entirely wrong, but let me say that none of them can be entirely right either. Some truth is hidden in all these formulas, including the denominator of "rationality" Ricci found for China. And yet, reductive simplifications only enable us to find orientations in the first initial phase of cross-cultural contact. The more we learn about another person or another culture, the more we also learn about the limitations of our own views and, consequently, about ourselves.

This year, we are commemorating the 400th anniversary of Matteo Ricci's death in Beijing. Reflecting about his achievements as a missionary, as a scholar, and as a cross-cultural mediator necessarily leads us to think about the possible lessons that we can learn, in our times, from Matteo Ricci. With Ricci, an enduring cross-cultural contact started, which, in spite of its many discontinuities, even ruptures, has never completely ceased to exist until the present day. Through the – admittedly, very short – panoramic view of the history of different mutual perceptions in both China and the West I have introduced so far, I also

wanted to point to the fact that each of our images of Otherness is irrevocably dated. And yet, even if our conceptions are bound by time and circumstances, I do not want to make a case for pure relativism; let us take Ricci's belief in Reason as an example: it was precisely this belief that made him search for commonalities in Western and Chinese culture. Not only did he search for these commonalities, he also found them in many aspects of spiritual and social life.

If our quest for mutual understanding is based on this conviction, the differences will become secondary; however, this does not mean that they will be less interesting. On the contrary, we will become more sensitive to the wealth of mental possibilities of humankind. It is wise to acknowledge that, by the very fact that we are all endowed with Reason, we all share something we have in common. In Ricci's times, this was called "Natural Religion," the first step before the "Religion of the Book" and the "Religion of Grace." But Reason articulates itself in different ways, and this holds true for each individual and each civilization.

In order to illustrate this idea, let me briefly come back to the relationship between emotions and Reason I already mentioned: In Ricci's view, it was Reason that controlled emotions, as shown by his treatises on Friendship and on Memory. In both civilizations, Western and Chinese, emotions were considered as potentially dangerous for the well being of society. However, except for friendship, traditional China exerted a tight control over emotions – not by Reason, but rather through the institution of ritual. It was much more the Rites than Reason that were essential for maintaining the balance of individuals and of society. By establishing a connection between the rituals and the state on each level of daily life, from the family rites to the sacrifices of the Son of Heaven, by ordering the universe in accordance with a calendar and by making sense of a person's activities through divination, the rituals were invested with religious power. The impact of ritual behavior in traditional China is proved by the canonical status of the three books on Ritual (the *Liji*, the *Yili*, and the *Zhouli*), and the importance of divination is proved by the equally canonical status of the *Classic of Changes*, the *Yijing*.

Given the constraints of his approach, Ricci had to neglect the religious character of these phenomena. In his view, the rituals performed by the Confucians (including the ancestor worship and the sacrifices to Confucius) were merely secular. Another phenomenon he had to neglect was the function of pastoral care that divination fulfilled in private life for the overwhelming majority of both common people and the elite. He admitted the existence of religions in China, but these were false religions, or even religions inspired by evil powers, as it was the case for Taoism. The Confucians, on the other hand, having no religion, had a chance to be enlightened by Christianity. They could be persuaded to realize that, in times of old, God did have a place in the oldest writings of Chinese culture, and that this had simply been forgotten. By drawing attention to the idea that the Chinese sources could be read in a way different from their contemporary interpretation, Ricci inspired many scholars, who were eager to depart from the conservative exegesis of the Classics they had been trained in for centuries. However, that was not enough to win the hearts of the majority of these scholars.



For the problems of cross-cultural exchange in our times, we may retain that Matteo Ricci was a pioneer, who made two civilizations accessible to each other. The tool he used was the commitment for understanding Chinese culture (and, first of all, to master the language) by searching for ideas and institutions China shared with the West. Later generations of Westerners, missionaries, diplomats, and merchants, have departed from Ricci's approach and have emphasized the differences between China and the West, describing a country dominated by superstition. On the Chinese side, the 20th century was characterized by an ever-increasing search for differences, aiming at the elaboration of a distinct Chinese identity. The task we are facing at present does not seem easy: on the one hand, we should never abandon the basic assumption that there are more things we share than things in which we differ. On the other hand, many of the differences that exist are legitimate differences, as Pope Benedict XVI recently has affirmed. Moreover, they represent important keys for understanding the cultural wealth of humankind: they are an incentive to make us curious to know more about human condition. As long as we do not impose a limited and all too often narrow minded definition of the values of one given civilization on another one, then, and only then, universality will be possible. So let us be more attentive, and even more curious to the different nuances of Man's Reason.