When West Met East

Matteo Ricci's cross-cultural mission to China
Jeremy Clarke | MAY 10, 2010

May 11 marks the 400th anniversary of the death in Beijing of the legendary Matteo Ricci (1552-1610). The Italian-born Jesuit priest arrived in Macau in 1582, moved to the city of Zhaoqing in the southern province of Guangdong the following year and spent the remaining 27 years of his life in China actively engaged in cross-cultural exchange. So successful was Ricci in immersing himself and the Gospel fully into Chinese culture, that he is almost as well known in China as he is in the rest of the world. In China he is known as Li Madou, which was both his Chinese name and ultimately his identity as the wise man from the West. For the many elsewhere who remember him, Ricci stands as a pioneer of sophisticated and sympathetic East-West engagement.

The early period of modern Chinese Catholic history has been obscured by hagiography because Ricci was a legend in his own lifetime. Despite the oft-recounted anecdotes about him, Ricci is so well known that he is known not at all. This year, as the Chinese Catholic Church rejoices in its more than four centuries of history, it is time to look anew at what Ricci did and why he is remembered.

In one of those strange quirks of history, the year 1552 marked the passing of one missionary giant, Francis Xavier, and the beginnings of another, Matteo Ricci, who was born that year. Xavier’s death off the southern Chinese coast on the island of Shangchuan (also known as Sancian) did not mark the demise of the nascent Society of Jesus’ attempts to enter the Eastern Kingdom. Instead it heralded the launching of a sustained and energetic campaign to gain access to the people of this most cultured land.

Rigorous Adaptation

Over the next 30 years missionaries from many orders sought to enter China, but because the Ming dynasty (1368-1644) rigorously controlled its borders at the time, they were all unsuccessful. Some missionaries were deported, others died in prison. In the end the church was able to breach the defenses of the Ming polity only through the successful application of a new missionary policy, one of rigorous adaptation to local culture. This insight, that the church must be “Indian in India, Japanese in Japan and Chinese in China,” was the brainchild of the chief Jesuit in the East, Alessandro Valignano (1539-1606). As the Jesuit general’s representative for all regions east of Goa, he realized that a colonial mentality would
not work in a culture as sophisticated as China’s, if indeed it could work anywhere. What, he reasoned, was the point of transplanting a Portuguese church into Asia?

Valignano handpicked another Italian, Michele Ruggieri (1542-1607), to travel to Macau, the gateway to China, and study the Chinese language and culture. This often-forgotten pioneer of the China mission achieved two main goals. He became proficient enough to converse with local officials, and he gained enough cultural awareness to avoid major social gaffes. Ruggieri’s lonely labors impressed the local officials, who invited him to live in China in 1582. He travelled to Zhaoqing with another Jesuit, Francesco Pasio (1554-1612), which marked the beginning of a new period of Chinese Catholic history, one that continues. The Jesuits were allowed to remain for only a brief time, however, and soon had to return to Macau.

The next year Ruggieri returned to Zhaoqing with Ricci, who had also studied the Chinese language since his arrival in Macau in mid-1582. He too had been specially chosen by Valignano, his former novice master in Italy. Ricci’s entry into China was made possible by the tenacity of Ruggieri and the sagacity of Valignano. Although these two Jesuits continued to be involved in the development of the China mission (Valignano’s strategic role as the plenipotentiary in the East remained vital), Ricci’s amazing linguistic abilities fast made the fate of the mission synonymous with his exploits. His endeavors in the early years became the main means by which the church spread throughout the country. Ricci focused on reaching the imperial capital and moved ever northward, opening communities in Shaozhou in late 1589, Nanchang in 1595, Nanjing in 1599 and Beijing in 1601. The Jesuits also established a presence in Shanghai in 1608.

Ricci’s activities, varied and impressive, testify to his genius. Once he mastered enough spoken and written Chinese to communicate freely (no easy task even today), he tried his hand at whatever would help him develop relationships with the scholar-officials. Early on, the Jesuits thought such connections were the most prudent and effective means of promoting and protecting the young church. In pursuit of his evangelical goal, Ricci produced works in the fields of horology, hydraulics, optics, observational astronomy, surveying, music, geography and geometry. And this list does not exhaust his exploits.

Among other things, Ricci became famous in China for a large-scale world map that he first constructed in 1584 (which has been on view during 2010 at the Library of Congress and the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C.); a book on friendship, written in 1595, which drew freely on a classic by the scholar Epictetus; and a treatise on mnemonics written in 1596. Ricci impressed dinner and conversation companions with his phenomenal memory, recalling after a single viewing everything from lines of high poetry to manufactured doggerel. In China, where people took pride in their ability to quote readily from Chinese classics, a memory method that made such things easier was highly valued.

Ricci worked with one of the leaders of the early Chinese Christians, the Ming dynasty statesman Xu Guangqi (1562-1633), and together they translated Euclidean geometry into Chinese. This task was made all the more difficult because concepts like parallel lines and acute angles, for example, had no Chinese words. Ever creative, Ricci and his companion simply invented terms for them. So apt were their choices that contemporary Chinese mathematicians still consider these works unsurpassable.

Ricci was a true Renaissance man, representing the breadth of the humanistic learning undertaken by Jesuits at their colleges throughout Europe at that time. He was a man of the cloth as well, who regularly engaged in translating language dictionaries for the use of other missionaries and composing prayer books, apologetic works and catechisms for the Chinese neophytes. Arguably, the most well-known of Ricci’s books about Christianity was The True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven. While his books became widely read, their most important contribution was the encouragement they gave everyone from scholars to simple peasants to engage in conversations about the Gospel and Jesus, the Lord of Heaven.

Following Valignano’s directives, Ricci and his Jesuit companions wore Chinese clothing, wrote and spoke Chinese, ate Chinese food and lived in Chinese houses (often they bought houses cheaply because they were
thought to be “haunted”). Rarely did one or other of them return to Europe. They became Chinese in all things in order to win China for Christ. Although the early years of the mission were marked by difficulty and struggle, Ricci and his companions laid a sure foundation. By the time of Ricci’s death, there were perhaps 2,500 Christians in China. On his deathbed Ricci said, “I am leaving you before an open door which leads to great merits, but not without great effort and many dangers.”

A Ministry of Friendship

Over the centuries Ricci’s work has been described as an ascent to Beijing, an apostolate through books, an early instance of inculturation and an example of cross-cultural exchange. His remarkable feats of scholarship were achieved in the face of shipwreck, home invasion, violence, persecution and the daily travails of being a stranger in a strange land (especially in the early years). Perhaps the best way to think about Ricci’s decades in China, and to hold together his joy of scholarship and his capacity to endure the thousand sacrifices of living far from all that was once dear to him, is to see his ministry as one of friendship.

For all Ricci’s academic and personal talents, his pre-eminent, enduring gift was a capacity to delight in the company of others. He was able to accomplish so much—translate geometrical principles into Chinese, engage pastorally in theological debates with some of the brightest Buddhists of his day, and joyfully welcome thousands of inquisitive scholars to his home—because of the mutual support and companionship of his friends. A few of these were his Jesuit brothers; when Ricci died there were eight European and eight Chinese Jesuits at work on the mission. But the vast majority of his friends were Chinese: the scholars, officials and local people he talked with on his travels and in the marketplace. To recall Ricci’s exploits, it is necessary to remember his company of friends.

It is also appropriate to remember the first two Chinese Jesuits, Huang Mingsha and Zhong Mingren, and the early Chinese Catholics—from the poor peasants in Shaozhou and Nanchang to the influential scholars Xu Guangqi and Li Zhizao. Ricci is considered the giant on whose shoulders subsequent generations stand. In many ways this is right and just, given his inspirational role in promoting both the cause of Chinese culture and Chinese Catholicism. A more appropriate image, however, is to picture Ricci seated at a round table, sharing the hospitality of his friends, sipping tea and talking of many things in order to talk of one thing: God present among us from East to West.

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