

‘Visiting Humanists’ and their Interpreters: Ricci (and Ruggieri) in China

Ronnie Po-Chia Hsia. *A Jesuit in the Forbidden City: Matteo Ricci 1552–1610*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010. xiv, 359 pp. Hardcover £40.00, ISBN 978-0-199-59225-8. Paperback £19.99, ISBN 978-0-199-65653-0.

All books speak about their authors, even if authors are not aware of it; even when, as it is the case with biographies, they intend to distance themselves from their object. This book does so in a special way.

Born in Hong Kong and trained in early modern European history, Ronnie Po-chia Hsia is today known as one of the leading experts in counter-reformation history, a field that was traditionally dominated by very conservative historiography. In his many contributions, Hsia availed himself of remarkable linguistic skills in major modern languages and an equal mastery of classical languages ranging from Latin to old German and Dutch. In so doing, he was able to access and make available to scholars an extremely broad range of hitherto unpublished sources. Enriched by a unique background, Hsia has gradually begun to explore new territories in the field of sinology and Chinese studies. Writing about Matteo Ricci, an Italian Jesuit of the late Renaissance who spent most of his adult life in China, mastered the language, and interacted significantly with both the local and the court elite, may have induced Hsia to think back, on occasion, to his own intellectual accomplishments.

According to Paul Ricoeur in *Soi-même comme un autre*, the self (*ipse*) is not construed by a duplication of itself (*idem*) but by its relationship with the other. François Dosse has interpreted Ricoeur’s words as being particularly true in the case of biographical writing because

biographical writing is closer to this movement toward the other and the alteration of the self that is thereby transformed into the other. Such an endeavor entails some danger because the biographer must strive to maintain the right distance between the loss of his identity and the failure to render the singularity of the subject of the biography. This is not easy at all because the ship may frequently sink under the strength of the waves of passion or the need to maintain an objective distance, both as necessary as it is the permanent preoccupation not to go astray.¹

Although, on occasion, Hsia shows excessive appreciation for Ricci's talents, he manages to counterbalance his esteem toward the Italian missionary by pointing out the external ingredients of his success, including Ricci's cleverness in self-promotion, also at the expenses of his elder companion, Michele Ruggieri. We shall return to this point later.

Being an exercise in the art of biography, the book obviously focuses on its main character, Matteo Ricci, but tells the main episodes in the story of his life in connection with the places where they occurred and that may have exercised an influence on them. Thus, the book opens up with Macerata and Rome where Ricci was born and spent his youth. Macerata in 1552, the year of Ricci's birth, was an important city, situated in the Marche, a region so called because it stood at the margins of the Papal States.

Ricci had been sent to Rome by his father, a wealthy pharmacist, who had great plans for his son. He had Matteo enrolled at La Sapienza to study jurisprudence. Indeed, the study of law was not one of the faculties for which the university at Rome was renowned; it was "a significant second-line law school that produced a large number of graduates."² Although Hsia is right in pointing out that "we know next to nothing about Matteo at the university" (p. 5), we can still make a few conjectures that may help us get a better understanding of his intellectual background. In this review, attention will be paid to the chapters in which Hsia discusses Ricci's education in Rome and Lisbon, connecting it with the missionary's textual production in China, thereby providing a few integrations that hopefully will enrich our understanding of Ricci as a "visiting humanist."³

Indeed, the years spent at the University of Rome may have played a more significant role than it has been thought of so far in orienting Ricci's future attitude toward Chinese culture as it is reflected in his writings. In 1567, the year prior to Ricci's enrollment, La Sapienza was the first university in Italy to establish a Pandects professorship, a post that implied the explanation of the *Corpus juris civilis* or *Digest* (the main body of legal texts dealing with Roman law that, together with the *Corpus juris canonici*, constituted the basis of legal instruction), according to the humanistic tenets of historicity and philological accuracy. From 1567 to 1572, the position was held by the French humanist Marc-Antoine Muret who later moved to rhetoric.⁴ It is highly possible that Ricci attended at least three of Muret's annual prologues during which the eminent jurist extolled the virtues of eloquence and humanistic criticism of traditional jurisprudence. Muret's lectures may have represented Ricci's first encounter with *studia humanitatis* and may have played a role in shaping his decision to follow a path different from the one his father had foreseen for him. In spite of Muret's lectures, the study of law did not have a great appeal to Matteo who, in 1571, asked to be admitted to the Jesuit novitiate at Sant'Andrea at Monte Cavallo (now the Quirinale). Notwithstanding his father's wishes, Ricci was determined to change the course of his life. At the novitiate, he had his first encounter with Alessandro Valignano who, years later,

would play a key role in devising a strategy for the Jesuits' missionary presence in Asia and would be instrumental in Ricci's final assignment to the China mission. Having completed the period of novitiate, he was accepted as a scholastic at the Roman College in September 1572. Hsia makes a general reconstruction of Ricci's curriculum there and identifies a few of his professors,⁵ emphasizing the relevance of classical knowledge in line with the *studia humanitatis*—a tradition that was already consolidated in major Italian universities of the late Renaissance.⁶ Mastery of that tradition also contributed to shape Ricci's and other Jesuits' treatment of nonclassical philosophical traditions, mainly the Chinese one.⁷ Indeed, Hsia suggests that the Catholic notion of orthodoxy implied a conception of *Christianitas*, which, while hinting at the historical continuity from classical antiquity to the Christian present, at the same time meant the triumph of the present over the past (p. 19). To this end, eloquence acquired through the mastery of Cicero was made to serve a higher goal whenever it was used to demonstrate the truth of Revelation, as much as Aristotelian cosmology could be blended with the story of the creation narrated in the Biblical book of Genesis. Ricci would later give proof of his rhetorical flair in a slender book, the *Jiren shipian* 畸人十篇 (Ten discourses of the man of paradox), to which Hsia devotes much of the twelfth chapter. Conceived as a short pamphlet in the *arte della conversazione*,⁸ an early Renaissance new gentlemanly practice, it reported ten conversations, revised and embellished for editorial purposes, held by Ricci on the occasion of the triennial scrutiny in 1607—an event that had brought to Beijing thousands of scholars (p. 269). Taking advantage of such a large-scale gathering, Ricci hosted many acquaintances he had made while staying at Nanchang and Nanjing, escorting them to visit his church and library, therefore providing them with some relief from the fatigue of their bureaucratic duties.

Rome was the city that most of all epitomized the tension between *Christianitas* and classical antiquity. Hsia's remarkable description of Rome as “the monument of Christian triumph over pagan antiquity” (p. 19) reminds one of Piero della Francesca's *Resurrection*, with the glorified Christ emerging from a classical white-marbled sarcophagus.

Of all the courses attended by Ricci at the Roman College, the ones that he took from Christopher Clavius seem to have had the strongest impact on him. Clavius had been instrumental in implementing the calendrical reform during the reign of Pope Gregory XIII,⁹ in addition to being the mastermind of an Academy of Mathematics at the Roman College to which Ricci was admitted in 1575. The Academy did not outlive its founder, but the teaching of pure and mixed mathematics (*mathesis pura et mixta*) continued to be imparted in many Jesuit colleges, particularly the ones, such as the College of S. Antão in Lisbon, that were more directly concerned with training missionaries bound for East Asia.¹⁰ The quality of mathematical knowledge acquired by Ricci during the years spent with Clavius is testified by the number of works in Chinese that he produced in this field and that

are dealt with by Hsia in chapters 9, 10, and 11. Since the period spent under Clavius' tutorship is relatively short, it may be also possible that Ricci attended one of the *abbaco* schools during his youth. Typical of the Italian Renaissance, these were schools specialized in providing basic notions of practical arithmetic and were especially patronized by merchant families to ensure that their offspring acquired the competence needed to pursue the family business.¹¹

Some of the arithmetical texts composed by Ricci indeed show a high degree of skill in problem-solving, while others seem to be based on the "sequence of readings in mathematics" (*orden de la lectura en mathematicas*), which was the way the mathematical course was taught in Jesuit colleges. According to this schedule, the course began with the first three books of Euclid's *Elements*, followed by notions of practical mathematics, then the sphere and geography, then back to Euclid's books 5 and 6, the Astrolabes, the theory of planets, optics, horology, and ecclesiastic computation.¹²

The mathematical and astronomical books produced by Ricci, as well as any other text compiled by missionaries in China, regardless of the subject, were far from being lonesome enterprises, since they resulted from a complex process where various agencies came into play. Essential steps in this process were the transmission, mainly oral, of the main content of the text by the missionary to the Chinese convert, who was far from being a simple scribe. The Chinese collaborator might have been directly involved in the choice of the most appropriate terminology, as the texts show frequent borrowings from an earlier Chinese textual tradition, even if sometimes the convert was compelled to create neologisms or make use of semantic loans in order to achieve the best rendition of the original. Manuscripts eventually went through a series of revisions, edited both by missionaries and Chinese converts. This scrutiny was aimed at improving the style and, at the same time, expurgating the texts of whatever might contradict Church doctrine. By this token, the Chinese books composed by Ricci and his confreres are not true and proper translations of an identifiable source, but may be considered adaptations of a plurality of sources, among which are books missionaries had at their disposal while writing—certainly not very many in Ricci's time—as well as their own classroom notes, including various abridgments known as *summula* and *collectanea*, and commonplace books.¹³

Ricci's remarks about his selective use of different sources, delivered in a letter to the superior general of the Society of Jesus, Claudio Acquaviva, are enlightening in this regard. Also they lay bare the missionary's criticism of an often too rigid censorship:

Under all circumstances, books licensed by the Provincial, would have to be revised and approved only by those who know the Sinic script and language; secondarily because the books that we make here are not new items, for we take out of our [source] books all we need for our purposes in China and *solum interponimus iudicium in seligendo* [and we exert our judgment only in the selection of the sources].¹⁴

The majority of scientific texts were composed by Ricci in collaboration with the famous converts and intellectuals, Xu Guangqi 徐光啟 and Li Zhizao 李之藻. The most notable ones being:

- *Jihe yuanben* 幾何原本 (The origin of geometry, 1607). It is the translation, made by Ricci in collaboration with Xu Guangqi, of the first six books of Euclid's *Elements*, edited and annotated by Clavius: *Euclidis Elementorum libri XV* (Rome, 1574);
- *Hungai tongxian tushuo* 渾蓋通憲圖書 (Illustrated description of the sphere and the astrolabe, 1607). It is an adaptation, made by Ricci and Li Zhizao, of Clavius's treatise on *The Astrolabium* (Rome, 1593);
- *Qiankun tiyi* 乾坤體義 (The meaning of the terrestrial body, 1608), composed by Ricci and Li Zhizao, on the basis of Clavius' annotated version of the famous astronomical textbook by Sacrobosco, *Tractatus de Sphaera* (Rome, 1570). It includes a set of figures with annotations, translated as *Yuanrong jiaoyi* 圓容較義 (The meaning of compared [figures] inscribed in a circle). Ruan Yuan 阮元 in *Chouren zhuan* 籌人傳 gives a long explanation of this treatise which was also included in the *Siku Quanshu* 四庫全書。
- *Tongwen suanzhi* 同文算指 (Instructions for calculation in a common script, 1614). This is a collection of earlier texts compiled by Ricci with Li Zhizao, mainly based on Clavius' *Epitome Arithmeticae Practicae* (Rome, 1583)¹⁵

Ricci began to work on a Chinese rendition of Renaissance astronomy during his residence in the south capital, Nanjing (chapter 8). Fashioning himself as “another Ptolemy,” Ricci dismissed Chinese astronomy, not realizing, as Hsia points out, that Chinese astronomers had recorded observations of supernovae and comets many centuries before their European counterparts (p. 185).

From the excursus of Ricci's literary endeavors, provided by Hsia in chapters 7 through 12, we can see that most of his scientific production dates back to the periods spent in Nanjing and Beijing, thereby reflecting the kind of expertise that was mostly a response to Chinese interests. If, while residing in Nanchang, Ricci mainly devoted himself to writing theological and philosophical tracts—such as *Tianzhu shiyi* 天主實義 (*De Deo vera ratio*, a first version composed in Nanchang, it was later published in Beijing); *Jiaoyou lun* 交友論 (*De Amicitia*, Nanchang, 1595; second edition Beijing, 1603); and *Xiguo jifa* 西國記法 (*Mnemonotecnica*, Nanchang, 1595)—it is during the ascent to Beijing that he must have realized that the Christian message could be better conveyed through astronomy and mathematics, since these two disciplines could, better than any other, captivate the attention of the Chinese literati. Ricci gave proof of his skill in cartography, a field that implied the practical application of astronomical and mathematical knowledge. His map of the world, *Wanguo quantu* 萬國全圖, first drawn in Zhaoqing in 1584 and later revised in Nanjing in 1598, was reproduced several times. Its fame even reached the Wanli emperor who ordered that a copy be made for his perusal. Almost a century later, Ricci's confrere, Giambattista Riccioli, consecrated it to the honor of the press, having it engraved in his famous compendium of astronomy and mathematics, *Almagestum novum* (fol. 11, Bologna, 1651).

Ricci is mostly known for an apologetic tract on the Catholic religion, entitled *Tianzhu shiy*, in which, while refuting the Chinese notions of deity, he exposes the Biblical doctrine of creation and the immortality of human soul. Hsia, who engages in a detailed discussion of this text in chapter 10, is right in referring to it as a treatise on philosophy and theology (p. 184), and not as a catechism, as it has been thus far wrongly defined.

It is worth noting that the arrival of Ricci in Goa in 1578 is marked by the printing of the first edition of a *Doctrina Christiana* by the Jesuit press in Goa. The full title of the text reads: *DOCTRINA CHRISTIAM en Lingua Malauar Tamul/ Doctrina Cristaã treSladada em lingua Tamul pello padre Anrique Anriquez da Copanhia de IESU & pello padre Manoel de São Pedro*. Another edition of this religious compendium, printed at the Jesuit College in Cochin, followed in 1579: *Doctrina Christã, a maneira de Dialogo: feyta em portugal pello padre Marco Iorge da Companhia de IESV: Tresladada em lingual Malauar Tamul, pello padre Anrique Anriquez da mesma Cõpanhia*. Impressa . . . Em Cochim, no Collegio da Madre de Deus.¹⁶ This tract may have been a possible source also of Ruggieri's earlier religious compendium, the *Tianzhu shilu* 天主實錄, since they both have the same dialogical structure and apologetic tone. Hsia points out the paradoxical character of this text: it refutes Buddhism while, at the same time, it often employs a terminology pertaining to Buddhist discourse (p. 94). In spite of the fact that Michele Ruggieri was, in fact, the founder of the Jesuit mission in China and the first author of a Christian work published in Chinese, he is barely remembered as the old companion who paved the way for Ricci's more glorious enterprise. Thanks to Hsia's careful reconstruction, Ruggieri's character emerges as that of a gentle and sensible mediator between the ruthless and greedy Portuguese traders and the mandarins. His charismatic persona, combined with his knowledge of the language and rules of etiquette, did more to captivate the local Chinese authorities than did the exotic gifts presented by the Portuguese (p. 68).

Ruggieri should also be remembered as the author of the first translation into Latin of an excerpt from a Chinese classic ever published in Europe: the preface to the *Da Xue*, rendered as *humanae institutionis ratio*. Antonio Possevino, a well-known professor at the Roman College, later included it in his *Bibliotheca Selecta* (Book 9, c. 25, Padua, 1593). Possevino duly acknowledged his debt to Ruggieri, who had been sent back to Rome by Valignano to seek papal support in favor of the Ming dynasty, unaware of the fact that he would never return to China. During his stay in Rome, Ruggieri had long meetings with Possevino who acquired from him sufficient material to devote two chapters of his work (chapters 25 and 26), to Chinese philosophy and history. Given the early date and broad circulation of the *Bibliotheca selecta*, Ruggieri's contribution should not pass unnoticed for it made available to an extensive readership in Europe one of the texts that most of all epitomized the essence of Confucianism.

On April 20, 2012, a celebration in support of the canonization of Matteo Ricci took place at the Diocese of Macerata. It was a culminating event of a two-year program during which a large number of books devoted to Ricci appeared. It is difficult to ascertain to what extent such publications contributed to gather evidence of Ricci's sanctity and if *A Jesuit in the Forbidden City* was ever considered by the committee for this purpose.

Indeed, in Hsia's view, "the patron of the Jesuit Mission was not quite a saint: wily in the ways of power, Ricci acted more like a minister" (p. 268), receiving the visits of a carefully established network of influent acquaintances, without ever setting foot outside the imperial capital. In the course of this review, I have highlighted several of the book's merits, among which is that of having done justice to Michele Ruggieri, the true pioneer of the Jesuitical mission in China. It was the growing tension between the two missionaries in Zhaoqing that caused Ruggieri's dismissal, and not, as Valignano reported to the General Acquaviva in 1588, his mediocly spoken Chinese. Feeling the challenge posed by Ruggieri's profound knowledge of the Chinese classics and, consequently, his appeal to the literati, Ricci—quite unexpectedly for a candidate to the honor of the altars—may have yielded to human weakness. Insinuating in Valignano's mind the idea that Ruggieri was unfit for the mission on account of his health and age and linguistic limitations, Ricci secured himself the leadership of the China mission. "Among the thunderous applause for Ricci"—Hsia writes at the beginning of the fifth chapter—"it is time to remember the achievements of the older man" (p. 97). For the Roman Catholic establishment, unfortunately, this time has not yet arrived.

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NOTES

1. "La escritura biográfica cercana a ese movimiento hacia el otro y a la alteración del yo hacia la construcción de un sí-mismo que se ha convertido en otro. Evidentemente, una aventura así no deja de ser riesgosa: entre la pérdida de su identidad y el hecho de carecer de la singularidad del sujeto de la biografía, el biógrafo debe saber mantener la distancia justa, lo que no es nada sencillo, puesto que el barco puede irse a pique muchas veces y los arrebatos pasionales o las tomas de distancia que objetivan son tan necesarias para su investigación como la preocupación permanente por no perder el rumbo." Francois Dosse, *El arte de la biografía* (L'art de la biographie. Entre histoire et fiction) (México: Universidad Iberoamericana, 2007), p. 19.

2. P. Grendler, *The Universities of the Italian Renaissance* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), p. 460. References provided in the footnotes are not included in the bibliography of the book being reviewed.

3. I borrow this expression from H. L. Goodman and A. Grafton, "Ricci, the Chinese, and the Toolkits of Textualists," *Asia Major* 3, no. 2 (1990–1991): 96.

4. P. Grendler, *The Universities of the Italian Renaissance* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), p. 459. On the humanists' criticism of traditional jurisprudence, see pp. 430–473.
5. So far the most thorough reconstruction of Ricci's curriculum at the Roman College is provided by F. Bortone, *P. Matteo Ricci S.I., il "Saggio d'Occidente." Un grande italiano nella Cina impenetrabile (1552–1610)* (Roma: Desclée & C.-Editori Pontifici, 1965).
6. On this topic, see P. Grendler, *The Universities*, especially pp. 199–248.
7. On this problem, see Goodrich and Grafton, "Ricci, the Chinese," p. 96.
8. On the *conversazione*, see A. Quondam, *La conversazione. Un modello italiano* (Rome: Donzelli Editore, 2007).
9. A remarkable synthesis of the complex problem of the papal reform of the calendar and the protests by Protestants it brought about, is offered by J. L. Heilbron, *The Sun in the Church: Cathedrals as Solar Observatories* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 24–46.
10. The most important scholarly contributions in this field are by Ugo Baldini. See his fundamental essay, "*Legem impone subactis: teologia, filosofia e scienze matematiche nella didattica e nella dottrina della Compagnia di Gesù (1550–1630)*," in *id.*, *Legem impone subactis. Studi su filosofia e scienza dei gesuiti in Italia. 1540–1632* (Roma: Bulzoni Editore, 1992), pp. 19–73; as well as "*L'insegnamento della matematica nel collegio di S. Antão a Lisbona (1590–1640)*," in *id.*, *Saggi sulla cultura della Compagnia di Gesù (secoli XVI–XVIII)* (Padova: CLEUP Editrice, 2000), pp. 129–167.
11. On the abaco school, see P. Grendler, *Schooling in Renaissance Italy: Literacy and Learning 1300–1600* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), mainly pp. 311–319; E. Ulivi, "Scuole d'abaco e insegnamento della matematica," in *Il Rinascimento italiano e l'Europa*, vol. 5: *Le scienze*, ed. A. Clericuzio, G. Ernst, and M. Conforti (Treviso-Costabissara: Angelo Colla Editore, 2008), pp. 403–442.
12. Ms. by Hieronimus Torres, *Orden de la lectura de mathematicas*, Codices Romani Stud. 2, f. 200, in Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale "Vittorio Emanuele," *Mss Ges.* 1433; also in *Monumenta Paedagogica*, ed. Cecilio Gomex Rodeles et al. (Madrid: Agustín Avrial, 1901), p. 478. On Ricci's mathematical books in Chinese, see C. Jami, *The Emperor's New Mathematics: Western Learning and Imperial Authority During the Kangxi Reign (1662–1722)* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 25–26.
13. On this problem, see M. Redaelli, *Il mappamondo con la Cina al centro. Fonti antiche e mediazione culturale nell'opera di Matteo Ricci, S.J.* (Pisa: Edizioni ETS), pp. 94–95.
14. "Poiché in ogni modo i libri che il Provinciale avesse da dar licentia, avriano d'esser revisti e approvati solo da quei che sanno le lettere e la lingua cinica; secondariamente perché i libri che qua facciamo non sono nove cose, ma tutto pigliamo di nostri libri quello che ci viene qui a proposito per la Cina e *solum interponimus iudicium in seligendo*." Epistle dated August 15, 1606, in Matteo Ricci, *Lettere. 1580–1609* (Macerata: Quodlibet, 2001), p. 429.
15. See Kiyoshi Yabuuti, *Une histoire des mathématiques chinoises*, trans. by C. Jami (Paris: Belin, 2000), pp. 124–130.
16. Georg Schurhammer, *Die Zeitgenössischen Quellen zur Geschichte Portugiesisch-Asiens und seiner Nachbarländer* (Rome: IHSI, 1962), p. 322. See also Manuel Cadafaz de Matos, "Humanismo e evangelização no Oriente no século XVI," *Revista ICALP*, 7–8, 1987, pp. 67–69 (41–72).