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Jesuit Missionary Matteo Ricci: Bridge Between Faith and Culture^{*}

Jezuicki misjonarz Matteo Ricci – pomost między wiarą a kulturą

ABSTRACT: This article aims to explore the dynamic relationship between faith and culture, through the example of Jesuit missionary Fr. Matteo Ricci. The research topic centres on how Ricci's method exemplifies the potential for harmonizing the Christian faith with Chinese culture, which in turn fosters mutual enrichment. This article tries to answer the question of the encounter between faith and culture, what drives their integration, and what creates resistance between them. Again, facing both the integration and obstacles, how did Ricci manage to maximize strengths and minimize weaknesses? Following this *fil rouge*, the first part of the article presents Ricci's testimony on the complex interplay and mutual enrichment between faith and culture. The second part describes his missionary method of *accomodatio*, including learning Chinese languages, dressing as Confucian literates, making Chinese friends, and so on. The conclusion summarizes Ricci's transformative role in demonstrating how faith can elevate culture while culture, in turn, enriches the expression of faith. Despite the limitations, Ricci's missionary success is credited to his deep understanding of and respect for Chinese culture, which allowed the Chinese to accept Christianity as a harmonious addition to their identity.

KEYWORDS: Matteo Ricci, faith, culture, China; cultural accommodation, inculturation, Jesuit missionary, missionary methods

ABSTRAKT: Niniejszy artykuł ma na celu zbadanie dynamicznej relacji między wiarą a kulturą na przykładzie działalności jezuickiego misjonarza o. Matteo Ricciego. Temat badawczy koncentruje się na tym, w jaki sposób metoda Ricciego stanowi przykład potencjału harmonizacji wiary chrześcijańskiej z kulturą chińską, co z kolei sprzyja

^{*} I express my deep gratitude to Fr. James Corkery SJ, and Fr. Janusz Kowal SJ, for taking their precious time and energy to discuss and correct this article. I also wish to acknowledge Fr. Matteo Ricci SJ, whose efforts to establish connections between faith and culture encouraged my new life journey in Poland.

ich wzajemnemu ubogaceniu. Niniejszy artykuł stara się odpowiedzieć na pytanie o spotkanie wiary i kultury oraz o elementy wzmacniające i hamujące ich integrację. Kolejnym zagadnieniem postawionym w artykule jest, w jaki sposób Ricci zdołał zmaksymalizować strony mocne i zminimalizować elementy hamujące integrację. Realizując zasadniczy cel artykułu, autorka przedstawia w pierwszej części świadectwo Ricciego na temat złożonej interakcji i wzajemnego wzbogacania się wiary i kultury. Druga część opisuje jego misyjną metodę akomodacji, w tym naukę języków chińskich, ubieranie się jak konfucjańscy literaci, nawiązywanie chińskich przyjaźni. Część końcowa podsumowuje transformacyjną rolę Ricciego w pokazaniu, w jaki sposób wiara podnosi kulturę na wyższy poziom, podczas gdy kultura wzbogaca wyrażanie wiary. Pomimo ograniczeń, sukces misyjny Ricciego przypisuje się jego głębokiemu zrozumieniu i szacunkowi dla chińskiej kultury, co pozwoliło Chińczykom zaakceptować chrześcijaństwo jako harmonijne uzupełnienie ich tożsamości kulturowej.

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE: Matteo Ricci, wiara, kultura, Chiny, akomodacja kulturowa, inkulturacja, jezuicki misjonarz, metody misyjne

Introduction

Christianity has always engaged in a dynamic relationship with various cultures. From its earliest days in Jewish settings, through its encounters with the Greek and Roman worlds, the faith has continuously adapted and interacted with the cultural landscapes it entered. When Jesus commanded his disciples to spread the Gospel to all nations, they faced the ongoing and urgent challenge of making the faith understood and accepted within diverse cultural settings — a process known as the inculturation of faith, which remains vital today.

This article focuses on Jesuit missionary Matteo Ricci as a prime example of how faith and culture can not only coexist but also enrich one another. Specifically, it will explore how Ricci preached the Christian faith within a completely heterogeneous culture in China's Ming dynasty. It will also analyze the dynamic interplay between faith and culture revealed by Ricci's evangelical effort. By studying Ricci's approach, we can better understand how to communicate the Christian faith effectively in a diverse and secular world. The findings of this research can enhance the development of new apologetics and theological approaches that are relevant and engaging for contemporary audiences.

While a considerable body of research on Ricci exists, particularly in areas such as his missionary life (e.g., Jonathan Spence's *The Memory Palace of Matteo Ricci* and Michela Fontana's *Matteo Ricci: A Jesuit in the Ming Court*) and his cultural accommodation strategies (e.g. Nicolas Standaert's various works), the intersection of faith and culture remains a rich field for further exploration.

This article builds on previous studies by examining Ricci's legacy within his historical context and considering how his methods can add value to contemporary challenges. Through the lens of Pope John Paul II's reflections on Ricci, we will address the following questions:

- a) What challenges did Matteo Ricci face during his mission in China?
- b) How did he resolve the obstacles preventing the acceptance of Christianity among the Chinese?
- c) What methods did he employ in his missionary work, and how effective were they?
- d) What lessons can we learn from Ricci for transmitting the Christian faith in increasingly secular societies?

Matteo Ricci's testimony on faith and culture

Fr. Matteo Ricci, SJ, was born on October 6, 1556, in Macerata, a beautiful small city in central Italy. Ricci entered China as a Jesuit missionary during the Ming dynasty. There he spent the remainder of his life, never returning to his homeland. Known to the Chinese as Li Madou (利玛窦), he died in Beijing on May 11, 1610. Ricci's mission to spread the Christian faith shows how faith and culture interact. Immersing himself in the study of ancient classics of the Middle Kingdom, Ricci recognized that Chinese moral teaching aligned with reason and natural law. This profound realization shaped his approach to evangelization. It also led him to appreciate the inherent inclination of the Chinese people toward goodness. The more he learned Chinese philosophy and explored the Chinese mind-set, the more he grew convinced that the Chinese people had already embraced the Divine Mercy and found salvation, guided by both natural law and Chinese moral teachings.¹ These observations echo the intuition expressed by John Paul II:

From his first contacts with the Chinese, Father Ricci based his entire scientific and apostolic methodology upon two pillars, to which he remained faithful until his death, despite many difficulties and misunderstandings, both internal and external: *first*, Chinese neophytes, in embracing Christianity, did not in any way

¹ Cf. Matteo Ricci, "Lettera al p. Francesco Pasio vice provinciale (15 febbraio, 1609)," in *Le lettere dalla Cina, 1580-1610, con appendice di documenti inediti*, vol. 2 of *Opere storiche del P. Matteo Ricci S.I.* Matteo Ricci, ed. Pietro Tacchi Venturi (Macerata: Filippo Giorgetti, 1913), 385.

have to renounce loyalty to their country; *second*, the Christian revelation of the mystery of God in no way destroyed but in fact enriched and complemented everything beautiful and good, just and holy, in what had been produced and handed down by the ancient Chinese tradition.²

Faith enriches and elevates culture

Matteo Ricci recognized the mutually beneficial relationship between the Christian faith and Chinese culture. Immersing in Chinese culture, Ricci dedicated much time to engage with his Chinese interlocutors. Through his remarkable command of the Chinese language and his cultivated manner of interacting with others, Ricci earned the esteemed title of “Western Literates (泰西儒士 *Tai Xi Ru Shi*) — 西泰 (Xi Tai).”³ His virtue and gentle communication style endeared him to many Chinese people, particularly the literati. Even the Chinese Emperor of that era acknowledged Ricci’s knowledge and virtue, and upon the latter’s passing, he allocated a plot of land in Beijing for the construction of Ricci’s tomb. The imperial decision astounded a chancellor, who remarked, “Nor has it ever happened in the history of China that a foreigner, so eminent in science and virtue as Father Ricci, has come here.”⁴ Furthermore, thanks to Ricci’s influence, the Emperor bestowed on the Jesuits a residence and a place of worship, concurrently offering protection of the Catholic Church in China,

² John Paul II, “Message of Pope John Paul II to the Participants in the International Conference Commemorating the Fourth Centenary of the Arrival in Beijing of Father Matteo Ricci,” 2001, no. 3, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/speeches/2001/october/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_20011024_matteo-ricci.html.

³ “Xi Tai- Sage of the West” means an excellent Master from the West, which was an honoured name that the Chinese offered to Ricci mainly due to his cultural contributions. Later, Ricci identified this name as the name of the sign (号, hao). Pasquale M. D’Elia recognized Xitai as a nickname. See: Pasquale M. D’Elia, ed., *Fonti ricciane: Documenti originali concernenti Matteo Ricci e la storia delle prime relazioni tra l’Europa e la Cina (1579–1615)*, vol. 1 (Roma: Libreria dello Stato, 1942), 227–28; Giulio Aleni recognized it as a “polite name.” According to Aleni, in ancient China, personal excellence was reflected in receiving a new name. See Giulio Aleni, *Vita del Maestro Ricci, xitai del Grande Occidente*, ed. Gianni Criveller, trans. Stanislaus Lee, Savio Hon, and Gianni Criveller (Brescia: Fondazione Civiltà Bresciana: Centro Giulio Aleni, 2010), 39, n. 27.

⁴ John Paul II, “Pope John Paul II’s Address on the Work of Father Ricci in China,” in *International Symposium on Chinese-Western Cultural Interchange in Commemoration of the 400th Anniversary of the Arrival of Matteo Ricci, S. J. in China* (Taipei: Fu Jen Catholic University, 1983), 7.

which facilitated its serene and successful operation.⁵ Had the Christian faith been at odds with Chinese culture, Ricci would not have earned the respect of the Chinese people, nor would he have received honours from the Emperor. Since the very beginning of his missionary journey in China, Ricci had openly embraced his identity as a Catholic missionary and openly declared his purpose of sharing the Gospel. He immersed himself in the rich Chinese culture and developed an approach to evangelization that was characterised by due regard for the unique context of China. Consequently, John Paul II firmly believed that “the Church can orientate itself without fear along this path with her gaze turned toward the future,”⁶ as Ricci “succeeded in establishing a bridge between the Church and Chinese culture, a bridge that still appears firm and secure notwithstanding the incomprehension and the difficulties that arose in the past and that are again reasserting themselves.”⁷

For instance, Ricci sought to revive the value of friendship in Chinese culture by infusing it with transcendent elements and biblical principles. In the 56th section of *De Amicitia*, he suggested that God had fitted humans out with two eyes, two ears, two hands, and two feet because it was God’s intention that success be achieved by friends. Furthermore, in the 16th section, Ricci wrote that since individuals cannot accomplish everything by themselves, God commands people to form friendships for mutual assistance and protection against misfortune. Ricci thus introduced the idea of a benevolent and friendly God to the Chinese, in contrast to their perception of a punishing deity.

While Chinese intellectuals often overlooked the transcendental or divine dimension of reality, Ricci encouraged them to recognize that God grants everything as grace, including the gift of friendship.⁸ In Chinese tradition, friendship is one of the five principal relationships, but it is considered to be less significant than the relationships between father and son, husband and wife, or elder brother and younger brother. That is why the Chinese often solidify their friendships by becoming sworn brothers or sisters. When Ricci defined a friend as a “second self”, the Chinese scholar of Ricci’s time, Jiao Hong (in Chinese: 焦竑) (1540–1620) commented that, “a friend as a second self: Ricci’s

⁵ Cf. John Paul II, 7.

⁶ John Paul II, 7.

⁷ John Paul II, 7.

⁸ Cf. David W. Y. Dai, “Matteo Ricci and Hsu Kuang-Chi,” in *International Symposium on Chinese-Western Cultural Interchange in Commemoration of the 400th Anniversary of the Arrival of Matteo Ricci, S. J. in China* (Taipei: Fu Jen Catholic University, 1983), 183–94.

words are indeed remarkable and very appropriate” [“西域利君言：友者，乃第二我也，其言甚当”⁹].

Another noteworthy example is the presence of the Ten Commandments in Christianity, which emphasize the love for God and one's neighbours. In ancient Chinese culture, there were also beliefs and teachings related to the reverence of heaven, sacrificial rituals, emulation of heavenly virtues, and the fear of punitive consequences resulting from failure to live by these principles. For instance, *The Book of Chow* 尚书, one of China's oldest political texts, illustrates the ancient belief in the heavenly mandate and the perception that the governance of the Shang 商 and Yin 殷 dynasties stemmed from the will of heaven: “The destiny of Heaven has its virtue, and the Heaven punished the sin (天命有德，天讨有罪).” In this book, the term ‘Heaven’ appears 107 times, often accompanied by the term ‘King’ which occurs 34 times. For the Chinese, the concept of God was embodied in Heaven or the King of Heaven. Consequently, the first three commandments of Christianity enriched ancient Chinese culture and introduced the term ‘God’ into the Chinese lexicon. When Matteo Ricci attempted to translate this term into Chinese, he drew inspiration from *The Book of Chow* and creatively rendered “God” as the “Lord of Heaven 天主.” In addition, the remaining seven commandments primarily concern human relationships, such as honouring parents, refraining from killing, committing adultery, stealing, bearing false witness, and coveting someone's wife or property. Filial piety is prominent in Chinese culture, occupying the highest level among all interpersonal relationships. The Ten Commandments reinforced the importance of filial piety at a transcendental level.¹⁰

Conveyance of the concept of life after death to the Chinese is problematic as they appear to have limited interest in these profound existential questions. In a recorded dialogue, Confucius, when questioned about death, responded, “So long as you don't understand life, how can you comprehend death 未知生，焉知死？”¹¹ This shows the typical Chinese mindset: contemplating life is more meaningful than thinking about death. In the same way, when Emperor Kangxi 康熙 (1661–1772) discussed such an issue with the court Jesuits, he showed little enthusiasm for the kingdom of God or the afterlife.

⁹ Jiao Hong, *Dan yuan Ji*, A Collection of Danyuan 2 (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1999), 735.

¹⁰ Cf. Aloysius Chang, “Father Matteo Ricci and the Enculturation of The Catholic Church in China,” in *International Symposium on Chinese-Western Cultural Interchange in Commemoration of the 400th Anniversary of the Arrival of Matteo Ricci, S. J. in China* (Taipei: Fu Jen Catholic University, 1983), 79–83.

¹¹ Confucius, *The Analects of Confucius*, trans. William Edward Soothill (Yokohama: The Fukuin Printing Company, 1910), 523.

Kangxi questioned the Jesuits' interest in a remote world: he urged them to value the world in which they lived. His advice was to use better the opportunities Heaven bestowed upon them in this life and postpone the concerns about the afterlife till those concerns became truly relevant.¹²

To better understand this discrepancy of opinion, we can turn to Ricci's dialogue with his Confucian literate friend, Feng Yingjing 冯应京. When Feng Yingjing, a minister of the rites, asked Ricci for his views on human beings, Ricci replied that humanity is born with tears and experiences a life filled with fatigue and suffering. "Those who work with their mind struggle with the mind, and those who work with their labour struggle with their labour."¹³ Although there are moments of joy in this life, they are fleeting and unstable. Time passes swiftly, and death is everyone's destiny. No one can escape death. Ricci asked, "If we constantly worry about this inevitable fate, when can we find peace in our hearts?"¹⁴ Humans are plagued by four emotions—love, hate, anger, and worry—much like a tree on a hill is buffeted by winds from all directions. Chinese traditional religions such as Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism developed numerous branches, leading to confusion among the people. In Christianity, the God of Heaven allows human beings to strengthen their souls in this world after enduring tests. This world is not the eternal home of humans, and if one considers this world as the permanent abode, one is no different from animals. The exceptionalism of humans resides in their eternal home—paradise.¹⁵ Upon listening to Ricci's discourse, Minister Feng remarked,

If this doctrine were to spread throughout China, there would be no grievances against Heaven! Yet, what is the fault of Heaven?... If the Creator were to let human bodies decay after death, like herbs and trees, rather than prepare a paradise of eternal life and happiness, what would be the reward for the toils and hardships they have endured?¹⁶

¹² Cf. Jacques Gernet, *China and the Christian Impact: A Conflict of Cultures*, trans. Janet Lloyd (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 72.

¹³ Matteo Ricci, *Dieci capitoli di un uomo strano: Seguito da Otto canzoni per manicordo occidentale*, ed. Filippo Mignini and Suna Wang (Macerata: Quodlibet, 2010), 19.

¹⁴ Ricci, 21. (My translation).

¹⁵ Cf. Ricci, 17–29.

¹⁶ Ricci, 31. (My translation).

Thus, faith not only enriches culture but also saves it. As Pope John Paul II stated, “Since culture is a human creation and is therefore marked by sin, it too needs to be healed, ennobled, and perfected.”¹⁷

Ricci and his successors’ most significant contribution to Chinese heritage was to articulate their faith experience and comprehension of Biblical events, by defining senses and meanings that the Chinese did not readily understand due to different cultural perspective. The main method Ricci applied was humanity’s way.

As Fr. Adolfo Nicolás said,

A true child of his time, Matteo Ricci was a humanist from the West. The sphere of human and natural sciences thus constituted the meeting point with Chinese culture and the terrain for spreading the Gospel. This never took place in a functional or tactical way, however, as though seeking to win the people over prior to evangelization, but rather in the conviction that the world was, and is, the place of God’s presence.¹⁸

This profound understanding of the evangelical message undoubtedly enriches both the missionaries and all who encounter it. One of Ricci’s well-known works, *Catechismus Sinicus*, also demonstrated this point – Ricci reinterpreted Saint Thomas Aquinas’ natural and cosmological arguments for the existence and meaning of God through a Sinicized lens.¹⁹ Consequently, culture emerges as an inexhaustible resource and fertile ground for faith, imbuing it with boundless vitality.

Nurturing faith: Culture as a transformative journey

Matteo Ricci’s influence extends beyond his role as a Jesuit missionary. He is celebrated for introducing advanced scientific knowledge to China and is hailed

¹⁷ John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Redemptoris Missio* (1990), no. 56, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_07121990_redemptoris-missio.html.

¹⁸ Adolfo Nicolás, “Father Matteo Ricci: A Son of the Society of Jesus,” in *Matteo Ricci: A Jesuit, Scientist and Humanist in China*, ed. Michela Fontana, trans. Paul Metcalfe (Roma: De Luca Editori D’Arte, 2010), 7.

¹⁹ See the modern Chinese version of *Catechismus Sinicus*: Matteo Ricci, *The True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven: A Modern Commentary*, ed. by Thierry Meynard, revised by Jie Tan (Beijing: Commercial Press, 2014).

as the pioneer of Chinese studies in the Western world and the harbinger of Christianity in China. As Cesare Romiti, the previous president of the Italy-China Foundation, mentioned,

The Jesuit Matteo Ricci is considered both the father of Chinese studies in the West and the father of Christianity in China. He arrived in China four centuries ago bearing not only the most advanced scientific and technological knowledge of the age but also and above all the experience of humanism and the Renaissance, which had enabled Europe to take the leap forward towards modernity after the tribulations of the Middle Ages. These cultural movements of immense value were focused on man and respectful of human rights.²⁰

Under the influence of St. Ignatius's *Spiritual Exercises*, the Jesuits firmly believed that this world is where God reveals Himself.²¹ Consequently, during Ricci's time, the Jesuits were trained to see God in everything and recognize the beauty of God in all aspects, such as science, art, mathematics, and nature. For them, studying nature was equivalent to studying God Himself because God manifests his Beauty in nature. In the late 16th and early 17th centuries, theological training included natural science studies. Jesuits like Matteo Ricci, influenced by Thomistic theology, believed that studying the natural world was a way to understand God's creation and strengthen their faith. For them, scientific exploration was not merely about discovering the physical universe but it was also a way to know more about God. That is why theology and science could be studied together at the Roman College.

They viewed science and the Christian faith as complementary forces, despite occasional conflicts. When Ricci chose to introduce science to China, he saw it as a parallel process to introducing God. As a Western humanist and a product of his time—the Renaissance—Ricci, like his fellow Jesuits, recognized that human and natural sciences were not pursued merely as a means to win people over before evangelization. Rather, they held the conviction that the world itself was and continues to be a manifestation of God's presence.²² Consequently, giving attention to both science and faith leads to a comprehensive understanding of the natural world and the divine. Just as Jerónimo Nadal, a collaborator of

²⁰ Cesare Romiti, "Father Matteo Ricci: A Bridge Between East and West," in *Matteo Ricci: A Jesuit, Scientist and Humanist in China*, ed. Michela Fontana, trans. Paul Metcalfe (Roma: De Luca Editori D'Arte, 2010), 13.

²¹ Cf. Nicolás, 7.

²² Cf. Nicolás, 7.

St. Ignatius, expressed, Jesuits were to be contemplative in action.²³ For them, work and prayer naturally converged, and no task was considered profane since, in their view, every form of work could be transformed into prayer. This attitude aligned with Christian Humanism, exemplified by statements like “The glory of God is a living man” (*Gloria Dei est vivens homo!*) and “The life of a man is the vision of God” (*Vita hominis visio Dei*), written by Irenaeus in the Third Century.²⁴ Thus, in the Roman College, students learned mathematics, observed the stars in an observatory, and created maps of uncharted regions.²⁵ Mathematics and science were in harmony with the Jesuits’ calling because their vocation was to “seek God in all things.”²⁶

Ricci’s mission in China indeed expanded well beyond cultural engagement. He consequently integrated science with faith. This approach can be attributed to his education at the Roman College, where Matteo Ricci enrolled on September 17, 1572 after a short stay at the Jesuit College in Florence.²⁷ At the time of Ricci’s enrolment, the Roman College boasted a student population of 920, distributed across various disciplines. Among them were 60 Jesuit and 100 non-Jesuit theology students, 215 philosophy students, and the remainder studying rhetoric, humanities, and grammar.²⁸ Alongside them were 26 scholastics, including Ricci,²⁹ under the guidance of Claudio Acquaviva, a future General of the Society.³⁰ At the Roman College, Ricci studied a variety of subjects, including mathematics, astronomy, mapmaking, and music.³¹ In 1572, Vincenzo Bonni was the Rector of the College to be later succeeded by Ludovico Maselli. Maselli held a doctorate in Civil Law and was Rector at the Jesuit College in Loreto prior to coming to Rome. Juan Ledesma, a Spaniard who passed away in 1575, was Prefect of Studies at the Roman College during Ricci’s time. Ledesma founded a Plan of Studies known as the *Ratio Studiorum*, which became an authoritative document in 1599, signed by General Superior

²³ Cf. Aldo Altamore and Sabino Maffeo, *Angelo Secchi: L'avventura scientifica del Collegio Romano* (Foligno: Quater, 2012), 17.

²⁴ Cf. Tsz Wong, “Matteo Ricci’s Xiqin Quyi – A Jesuit’s Expert Musicking in Ming China” (PhD diss., Georg-August-Universität, 2017), 77.

²⁵ Cf. Altamore and Maffeo, *Angelo Secchi*, 18.

²⁶ Altamore and Maffeo, 18.

²⁷ Wong, “Matteo Ricci’s Xiqin Quyi,” 71.

²⁸ Cf. Ronnie Po-Chia Hsia, *A Jesuit in the Forbidden City: Matteo Ricci 1552–1610* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 12.

²⁹ Cf. Hsia, 13.

³⁰ Cf. Hsia, 13.

³¹ Cf. Altamore and Maffeo, *Angelo Secchi*, 22–23.

Claudio Acquaviva (1543–1615).³² The *Ratio Studiorum* outlined six guiding educational principles. They read:

- 1) St. Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274) shall be the benchmark for professors in theology.
- 2) Professors shall consistently reinforce faith and piety in their teaching manner.
- 3) Teachers shall offer practical wisdom in education and encourage students to put knowledge into practice. St Ignatius of Loyola stated, “When they have experienced in themselves the effects thereof,” students “will be qualified for the rest, for understanding the plan itself on which they have been formed, and enjoying all the practical results of it.”³³
- 4) Principle of public expression of opinions shall be abided by; the legal defence of Jesuit values in the light of public opposition.
- 5) The method of discreet development shall be applied, the Prefect of Studies, is responsible for decision-making in Jesuit schools.
- 6) The two mainstays and supports of the Society of Jesus shall be an ardent pursuit of piety and an eminent degree of learning (*Ardens pietatis stadium et prastans rerum scientia*).³⁴

The aforementioned observations show without a shadow of a doubt that Ricci’s intellectual prowess was intricately intertwined with this disciplinary framework. In China, Ricci established connections and gained the support of the literati because he recognized the unifying power of science. Consequently, Ricci and other Jesuit missionaries broke new ground in a variety of scientific domains, including astronomy, mathematics, geography, and cartography, which turns out to be one of the most glorious chapters in Chinese history.

One notable achievement that significantly improved Chinese comprehension of the cosmos was Ricci’s introduction of Western astronomy instruments, such as the armillary sphere and the celestial globe. A momentous event occurred on December 15, 1610, when an astronomer at the imperial observatory made a grave error in predicting a solar eclipse. With the assistance of Matteo Ricci, Jesuit missionary Sabatino de Ursis flawlessly corrected the prediction, resulting in immense recognition for the Jesuits. As a result, in 1629, they were entrusted by the Chinese emperor with the responsibility of reforming the Chinese calendar.

³² Cf. Altamore and Maffeo, 14.

³³ Thomas Hughes, *Loyola and the Educational System of the Jesuits* (New York: C. Scribner, 1892), 149.

³⁴ Cf. Hughes, 148–53.

From 1634 to 1773, Jesuits consistently held the position of presidents of the astronomical office in China. Following that, from 1773 until 1949, a religious missionary consistently filled the role of president.³⁵ Ricci's creation of a World Map proved invaluable in providing the Chinese with a broader understanding of the world, rectifying misconceptions about the shape and size of various regions. By introducing Western scientific knowledge and instruments, Ricci and his fellow Jesuits facilitated a profound development of science in China.

Matteo Ricci's success as a scientist proved that culture is the vehicle leading to faith. It is not only a missionary method to enter into a dialogue with other cultures but also a theological approach: God ought to be sought in cultures and in everything, for God is present in this world and the cultures. What Matteo Ricci did was to bring the most advanced culture to China, even though he did not say the name of God explicitly so long as he passed himself for a scientist. Indeed, Ricci presented God to the Chinese by making them familiar with science. As a Jesuit, he believed that science was the manifestation of God's glory.

Ricci's influence in China transcended the scientific and academic realms. He also introduced European cultural practices such as mechanical theory, musical instruments, art, techniques, and customs. It was thanks to Ricci that Emperor Wanli 万历 (1573–1620) developed a fascination for mechanical devices. Struggling with the repair of clocks, he summoned Matteo Ricci and Diego de Pantoja to the Forbidden City for help. Their task was to instruct four eunuch mathematicians on how to properly tune and maintain the clocks.³⁶ Emperor Wanli also expressed a desire to listen to Western music played on the clavichord. Pantoja, prepared for this occasion, became the instructor of four eunuch musicians, while Ricci translated eight European songs into Chinese. These translated songs became known as the famous Xiqin Quyi Bazhang 西琴曲意八章 (*Eight Songs for a Western String Instruments*).³⁷

Jesuit colleges provided comprehensive education, encompassing not only mathematics, astronomy, and physics but also training in theatre, dance, and music.³⁸ Music held a significant role as it enhanced the solemnity of Christian worship.³⁹ From a cultural standpoint, music was not merely an object of study, but also a human activity. It reflected the creative capacity of individuals as the act of composing and performing music simultaneously involved self-expression and self-creation.

³⁵ Cf. Altamore and Maffeo, *Angelo Secchi*, 22.

³⁶ Cf. Hsia, *A Jesuit in the Forbidden City*, 207.

³⁷ Cf. Hsia, 207.

³⁸ Cf. Wong, "Matteo Ricci's Xiqin Quyi," 18.

³⁹ Cf. Wong, 101.

According to the teachings of Confucius, “Start (self-cultivation) with the inspiration of the Book of Poetry, gain a firm footing with the regulation of the rules of propriety and strive for perfection with the edification of music (兴于诗,立于礼,成于乐).”⁴⁰ There is a famous saying attributed to Confucius, “enjoying the music Shao in the State of Qi, the Master found meat tasteless in those three months, and said, ‘Never expected that music playing should be charming to that extent.’”⁴¹ (子在韶闻乐, 三月不知肉味, 曰: “不图为乐之至于斯也”). In Confucian cultivation, poetry serves as the language of instruction, rites as the daily practice, and music as the highest expression of virtue.⁴²

Music played a significant role in Chinese daily life and may have served as a bridge for Ricci to embark on his mission. Ricci’s mastery of Chinese and literature allowed him to translate Xiqin Quyi Bazhang, bringing the Christian faith into the local language. The collection includes songs such as “My Wish Above (吾愿在上),” “A Young Shepherd Wandering over the Hills (牧童游山),” “Better Plan for a Longer Life (善计寿修),” “The Valiant Art of Virtue (德之勇巧),” “Regretting an Old Age without Virtue (悔老无德),” “Inner Balance (胸中中庸平),” “Shouldering Two Sacks (肩负双囊),” and “Destiny Reaches in All Directions (定命四达).” The theme of “time and death” is particularly prominent among these eight songs,⁴³ especially in “A Young Shepherd Wandering over the Hills (牧童游山),” “Regretting of an Old Age Without Virtue (悔老无德),” and “Destiny reaches in all directions (定命四达).” Spence even compares Ricci’s most of the eight songs with Horace’s poems.⁴⁴ In this way, Ricci transferred the message of Christian eschatology to the Chinese.

According to the former Superior General of the Society of Jesus, A. Nicolás, Matteo Ricci’s actions marked a turning point in the dissemination of the Gospel through cultural adaptation.⁴⁵ While Ricci did not construct a comprehensive theory, his methodology attempted to recognize the intrinsic worth of every human civilization and make use of the positive characteristics found in them without sacrificing any fundamental parts but promoting their full growth:

⁴⁰ Confucius, *A New Annotated English Version of the Analects of Confucius*, trans. Guozhen Wu (Fuzhou: Fujian Education Press, 2015), 216.

⁴¹ Confucius, 189.

⁴² Cf. Guoping Zhao and Zongyi Deng, eds., *Re-envisioning Chinese Education: The Meaning of Person-Making in a New Age* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 97. Quoted in Wong, “Matteo Ricci’s Xiqin Quyi,” 80.

⁴³ Cf. Wong, “Matteo Ricci’s Xiqin Quyi,” 118.

⁴⁴ Cf. Wong, 118. Cf. Jonathan D. Spence, “Matteo Ricci and the Ascent to Peking,” in *Chinese Roundabout: Essays in History and Culture*, Jonathan D. Spence (New York: Norton, 1992), 49.

⁴⁵ Cf. Nicolás, “Father Matteo Ricci,” 7.

The discovery made by Matteo Ricci and his successors was therefore the ability to express their experience of faith and understanding of Biblical events through the identification of senses and meanings that westerners cannot “read and write” precisely because they express themselves in a different way. This is the still awaited fulfilment of cultural accommodation: a culture that receives the Gospel, understand it and communicates it in a way that may be different from another culture but is equally true at the same time. The ever-deeper understanding of the evangelical message is certainly enrichment for all but first and foremost for the missionary involved, who is evangelized in turn. This is the true sense of working together in the common endeavour to serve the Word.⁴⁶

This perspective aligns with the sentiments expressed by John Paul II:

For four centuries, China has highly esteemed Li Madou, “the Sage of the West”, the name by which Father Matteo Ricci was known and continues to be known today. Historically and culturally, he was a pioneer, a precious connecting link between West and East, between European Renaissance culture and Chinese culture, and between the ancient and magnificent Chinese civilization and the world of Europe.⁴⁷

Matteo’s testimony illustrates how culture can serve as a path toward faith. However, it is crucial to discern the specific instances when the culture was intentionally employed to prepare individuals for embracing faith. The humanities and natural sciences intersected with Chinese culture, which provided fertile ground for the dissemination of the Gospel.

Matteo Ricci made a conscious effort to avoid imposing on the East Western systems of oppression or a bellicose spirit. He was flabbergasted that Chinese society viewed the military as having a lower social status. As noted by Spence, “The side of Ricci that admired martial display and had been impressed by the military prowess of European armies could never accept the ultimate fact that the elite Chinese civil bureaucrats seemed to despise both the military officers and their troops.”⁴⁸ In his own words, Ricci observed, “Whereas amongst our people the noblest and bravest become soldiers, in China it is the vilest and most cowardly who attend to matters of war.”⁴⁹

⁴⁶ Cf. Nicolás, 8.

⁴⁷ John Paul II, “Message of Pope John Paul II.”

⁴⁸ Jonathan D. Spence, *The Memory Palace of Matteo Ricci* (London: Faber & Faber, 1985), 46.

⁴⁹ Spence, *The Memory Palace of Matteo Ricci*, 46.

Ricci made deliberate efforts to learn the Chinese language and chose Chinese philosophy and literature as conduits for conveying Christian beliefs. This approach highlights that not all cultures naturally incline towards faith; instead, it is when a culture has already revealed glimpses of God's beauty that faith can be effectively grafted. Matteo Ricci, exemplified the discernment necessary to differentiate among cultures before engaging in cultural accommodation.

The “accomodatio” approach of Matteo Ricci: Bridging cultures for the spread of faith

Cultural accommodation refers to the process of receiving, understanding, and communicating the Gospel in a culturally relevant and authentic manner.⁵⁰ Faced with significant obstacles such as unfriendliness towards foreigners, in order to gain acceptance, Ricci had to immerse himself in Chinese culture and internalise a Chinese identity. This profound act of cultural accommodation demonstrated his exceptional intelligence and humility. As noted by Nicolás, who recognized Ricci as a pioneering figure of *accommodation*:⁵¹

Matteo Ricci. No longer the name you were known by in Macerata and Rome or on arriving in Macao, but Li Madou, not only a new name but also a new man, becoming another in order to be yourself: a Jesuit, scientist, and humanist come all the way from a small town in the Marche region of Italy to live in the capital of the Chinese empire.⁵²

Accommodation meant that he learnt the Chinese language, spoke and wrote in Chinese, wore Chinese clothes, adopted Chinese names, and made Chinese friends. As Nicolás said, “He was not concerned primarily with preaching but with incarnating the Gospel and entering into relations with people so that its seeds might grow.”⁵³ In this way, “His ability to adapt and a keen interest in the culture and the people constituted the key ingredients in this.”⁵⁴

⁵⁰ Cf. Nicolás, “Father Matteo Ricci,” 8.

⁵¹ Cf. Nicolás, 7.

⁵² Franco Imoda, “Father Matteo Ricci: Jesuit, Scientist, Humanist,” in *Matteo Ricci: A Jesuit, Scientist and Humanist in China*, ed. Michela Fontana, trans. Paul Metcalfe (Roma: De Luca Editori D'Arte, 2010), 9.

⁵³ Nicolás, “Father Matteo Ricci,” 7.

⁵⁴ Nicolás, 7.

Adapting external attire: A practice of cultural accommodation

For the first twelve years Matteo Ricci dressed like a Buddhist monk or wore Eastern clothes. He did this to better fit in and to effectively carry out his missionary work. Wearing native clothes as a means of cultural accommodation was not unique to Ricci. Historical accounts of Jesuit missionaries reveal that they all chose to wear Chinese garments, which were by the way similar to their own religious habits. These were long robes with voluminous sleeves.⁵⁵ In a letter to Claudio Acquaviva, the general of his order, dated February 13th, 1583, Ricci mentioned a historical context: when his colleague, Fr. Michele Ruggieri, was seeking to gain the trust of the Chinese by explaining that he had come to China as vassals seeking a place to rest of the world under the Emperor's protection, the superior of the provinces Guang Dong 广东 and Guang Xi 广西 encouraged him and his Jesuit brothers to adopt the attire of Buddhist monks, even promising to order such clothing from Peking.⁵⁶ As a result, Jesuit missionaries in China became known and recognized as Buddhist monks, embracing this external adaptation as part of their cultural integration efforts.

During Ricci's time in China, Buddhist monks were not revered or held in high regard. Ricci was aware of the challenges posed by his attire resembling that of a Buddhist monk, and tended to align his clothing with Confucian tradition. He understood that the Chinese people deeply respected intellectuals known as the "Confucian literati."⁵⁷ Ricci also knew that the Temple of Confucius served as the prestigious gathering place for the esteemed and exclusive literati class.⁵⁸

The law demands that a temple be built to the Prince of Chinese Philosophers in every city, and in that particular part of the city which has been described as the center of learning. These temples are sumptuously built and adjoining them is the palace of the magistrate who presides over those who have acquired their first literary degree. In the most conspicuous place in the temple, there will be a statue of Confucius, or if not a statue, a plaque with his name carved in large

⁵⁵ Cf. Matteo Ricci and Nicolas Trigault, *China in the Sixteenth Century: The Journals of Matthew Ricci: 1583–1610*, trans. Louis J. Gallagher (New York: Random House, 1953), 154.

⁵⁶ Matteo Ricci, "Lettera al P. Claudio Acquaviva a Roma," Macao 13 febbraio 1583," in *Le lettere dalla Cina, 1580–1610, con appendice di documenti inediti*, vol. 2 of *Opere storiche del P. Matteo Ricci S.I.* Matteo Ricci, ed. Pietro Tacchi Venturi (Macerata: Filippo Giorgetti, 1913), 33.

⁵⁷ Cf. Ricci and Trigault, *China in the Sixteenth Century*, 260.

⁵⁸ Cf. Ricci and Trigault, 96.

letters of gold. Near to this are placed the statues of certain of his disciples whom the Chinese revere as saints, but of an inferior order.⁵⁹

That is why Ricci found it imperative to adopt a new strategy: he embraced the attire associated with Confucius, as noted by Fr. Franco Imoda,

A Jesuit. The word conjures up a background of evocative images and recalls the names and faces of exceptional men, the roots of a mission running through the centuries: Ignatius Loyola, the Basque convert, a brilliant strategist and mystic innovator but also a faithful and obedient servant; Francis Xavier from Navarre, who explored new territories and wore himself out in the zealous pursuit of the mission in the Asian continent; Roberto De Nobili, who went to live with the sages in India; Alessandro Valignano, the great visionary who dreamed of the meeting of worlds and cultures previously considered remote; and now you, Li Madou, increasingly integrated into the reality of a new world and dressed as a Confucian sage.⁶⁰

Nadine Amsler indicated that abundant facial hair was barely accepted by Chinese mentality; it was bushy beards that were seen as symbols of a man's social standing and biological seniority. In Chinese mythology, beards represented supernatural power (ling), a trait reserved for divine figures such as Taoist immortals or Confucian sage kings. Thus, men's beards imply sagacity and reflect ultimate moral cultivation.⁶¹

Matteo Ricci not only adopted the attire of the literati but also grew a long beard, which contributed to the high regard in which he was held by the Chinese, who referred to him as "a sage from the West (泰西儒士, 西泰 *Xi Tai*).” Even non-Catholic literati admired the Jesuits for their gentlemanly demeanour. “The late Ming eccentric Li Zhi lauded Matteo Ricci as a ‘most urbane person,’ who was ‘most intricate and refined in his interior, and very plain and modest in his exterior.’”⁶²

⁵⁹ Ricci and Trigault, 96.

⁶⁰ Imoda, “Father Matteo Ricci: Jesuit, Scientist, Humanist,” 9.

⁶¹ Cf. Nadine Amsler, *Jesuits and Matriarchs: Domestic Worship in Early Modern China* (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2018), 26.

⁶² Amsler, *Jesuits and Matriarchs*, 26.

Matteo Ricci's linguistic adaptation: Learning the Chinese language

One significant aspect of Ricci's cultural acclimatisation in China was his dedication to learning the Chinese language. He not only aimed to speak the language but also to make himself heard and gain acceptance among the Chinese people.⁶³

Progress was slow. Ricci was stunned when he first saw Chinese characters in Macao in 1582. He was "similarly struck by their incredible potentiality for serving as universal forms that could transcend the differences in pronunciation that inhered in language."⁶⁴ Based on this observation, it is possible that Ricci recognized that the Chinese language could serve as a potential tool to transmit the Christian faith, given that the truth of faith is universal and shared across all cultures. Similar to the Chinese language, where one singular ideograph might have different pronunciations depending on the vernacular usage, its written form remains consistent.

In a letter to Fr. Martino de Fornari S.J. on February 13th, 1583, Ricci discussed his discovery and expressed his strong desire to learn the Chinese language:

This language resembles neither Greek nor German; it is absolutely another language: The pronunciation of the vocabulary is ambiguous. One pronunciation yields more than one meaning, and these meanings have one thousand sub-meanings. Sometimes the difference between two words is in the tones. That is why even the Chinese prefer to write down what is in their mind when they communicate orally to make it clear.⁶⁵

Following his arrival in China in 1583, Ricci embarked on a continuous journey of learning the Chinese language.

In 1595, by which time he had become fluent in the Chinese language...At the very end of 1595, he gave expression to his newfound confidence in his own language skills by writing out, in Chinese ideographs, a book of maxims on friendship drawn from various classical authors and from the church fathers...

⁶³ Cf. Nicolás, "Father Matteo Ricci," 7.

⁶⁴ Spence, *The Memory Palace of Matteo Ricci*, 21.

⁶⁵ Matteo Ricci, "Lettera al Martino De Fornari S.J.," in *Le lettere dalla Cina, 1580-1610, con appendice di documenti inediti*, vol. 2 of *Opere storiche del P. Matteo Ricci S.I.* Matteo Ricci, ed. Pietro Tacchi Venturi (Macerata: Filippo Giorgetti, 1913), 27. (My translation).

At the same time, he was beginning to discuss his theories on memory with local Chinese scholars and to give lessons in mnemonic techniques. His description of the memory palace can be found in a short book on the art of memory which he wrote out in Chinese the following year and gave as a present to the governor of Jiangxi, Lu Wangai, and to Governor Lu's three sons.⁶⁶

When he had mastered Chinese and Confucianism, he was “immediately appreciated by the Chinese, with whom the Jesuit missionary entered into such deep communion as to become one of the very few Western figures considered worthy of the greatest respect and veneration.”⁶⁷ Evidently, Ricci never forgot his identity as a Jesuit missionary. His way of transmitting the Christian faith was not preaching or teaching in public; rather, he did it by “meeting, friendly conversion, and personal relations, seeking above all to see the other through his own culture, his way of looking at the world.”⁶⁸ After dedicating his time and efforts to learn Chinese philosophy and literature, he also reread the Gospel in Chinese: “not simply translating a text but rediscovering it through the symbolic categories of this millennial culture.”⁶⁹ Just like St. Paul the Apostle, “Although I am free in regard to all, I have made myself a slave to all so as to win over as many as possible” (1 Cor 9:19).

Ricci translated *The Four Books* 四书⁷⁰ into Latin for his European readers. His translation showed that these Chinese classics were capable of knowing the great origin of everything.⁷¹ That is to say, Chinese culture could be transformed into a Christian culture. Ricci's mastery of the Chinese language was enough to make him the precursor of sinology.

⁶⁶ Spence, *The Memory Palace of Matteo Ricci*, 3–4.

⁶⁷ Nicolás, “Father Matteo Ricci,” 7.

⁶⁸ Nicolás, 7.

⁶⁹ Nicolás, 8.

⁷⁰ The Four Books indicate the four classic Confucian texts/the Confucian canon: *The Analects of Confucius* 论语, *Mencius* 孟子, *The Great Learning* 大学 and *The Doctrine of the Mean* 中庸. The Confucian philosopher Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1130–1200) of the dynasty of Nan Song formed the name *The Four Books*.

⁷¹ Cf. Aleni, *Vita del Maestro Ricci*, 32.

Matteo Ricci's social accommodation: Building friendships with the Chinese

He would make friends with the Chinese. One of the first books that Ricci wrote in Chinese was the treatise on friendship *De Amicitia* 交友论 (Nanchang 南昌, 1595). This work includes a set of 100 maxims drawn from the ancient European classics. "He sought to show that the Chinese and European civilizations were in agreement on fundamental issues."⁷² He "understood that his mission and his attempt to establish a dialogue between East and West could only rest on the solid foundations of the mutual understanding and the human friendship."⁷³

While residing in Shao Zhou 韶州, he made friends with a Confucian scholar, Qu Taisu 瞿太素 (also named Qu Rukui 瞿汝夔). Qu Taisu was both a student of and teacher to Matteo Ricci. On the one hand, Qu learned mathematics, science, and the Catholic doctrine from Ricci. Sometimes, he showed a profound interest in the latter than the former. On the other hand, Qu was an unpaid and unacknowledged tutor in Ricci's study of Chinese philosophical and religious ideas.⁷⁴ Again, "Qu evidently helped him to select the standard Confucian texts prepared in the twelfth century by Zhu Xi and to discover in the process the possibility of dividing Confucianism into the early and later parts for his own purposes."⁷⁵ From then on, Ricci was inspired to take Confucianism as his standpoint to defend Christianity. Besides, "when Ricci and Ruggieri arrived in Zhaoqing in September 1583, they were tonsured and clad in the style of Buddhist priests (*Seng* 僧)."⁷⁶ When Ruggieri returned to Rome in 1588, Ricci kept the same visual and sartorial affiliation with Buddhism. He made a significant change in 1595 when he chose "the costume and the hairstyle of a Confucian scholar (*Rushi* 儒士)."⁷⁷ Though Ricci never mentioned the exact person who helped him to make this change exteriorly, "both Li Zhizao and Giulio Aleni (1582–1649) identified that pivotal person many years later as Qu Taisu."⁷⁸

What Ricci transmitted to the Chinese on friendship was "friendship as something beyond financial gain and other material considerations, a bond that

⁷² Nicolás, "Father Matteo Ricci," 8.

⁷³ Nicolás, 7.

⁷⁴ Cf. Yu Liu, *Harmonious Disagreement: Matteo Ricci and His Closest Chinese Friends* (New York: Peter Lang, 2015), 113.

⁷⁵ Liu, 113.

⁷⁶ Liu, 112.

⁷⁷ Liu, 112.

⁷⁸ Liu, 112.

united two discrete bodies in one heart.”⁷⁹ His friendship with Xu Guangqi 徐光启 should be placed in such a category, and he appreciated Xu as “the major pillar of Christianity in China.”⁸⁰

Xu Guangqi (1562–1633), hailing from Shanghai, was deeply impacted by the invasion of Japanese pirates in his hometown during childhood. As a result, he became very determined to learn how to protect his village. Notable for his bravery and boundless curiosity, Xu studied a broad spectrum of books, including military treatises in addition to the classics that were necessary for the imperial examinations. Although Wang Yangming 王阳明’s Study of Mind 心学 was the focus of his main academic pursuits, Xu Guangqi’s journey was not without difficulties. He failed official exams many times, so he had to spend many years tutoring private students in his hometown. In 1581, he participated again in the official examinations. Finally, he was granted the title “Xiu Cai 秀才,” and in the same year, he married Wu Xiaoxi 吴小溪, the daughter of a prosperous family.

Even with his talents and fortune, Xu Guangqi still had a long way to go before becoming a minister. He regretted that his mother passed away in 1592 and never got to see her son’s achievements. Finally, in 1597, Xu surprised everyone by passing the most challenging and deciding imperial exams, which made him realize his dream of being a minister, as almost all Chinese literates dreamed.⁸¹

In 1595, Xu Guangqi first encountered Jesuits while working in Shao Zho 韶州. By chance, he discovered and encountered a Catholic Church, where Ricci had lived before, which became a significant turning point in his life. There, he met Lazzaro Cattaneo and was captivated by the image of Jesus Christ. In 1600, Xu visited Matteo Ricci in Nanjin 南京, where he was introduced to Ricci’s remarkable World Map, a project that Ricci had worked on since 1584. This encounter further solidified Xu’s admiration for Ricci, whom he regarded as the most knowledgeable “Jun Zi 君子” (gentleman). Xu became so moved that night he vividly dreamed of three altars, two of which were empty and one of which held an image. Xu Guangqi kept an enduring memory of this particular event. Following his return to Nanjing in 1603, he engaged with Fr. João da Rocha (1587–1639) to further his knowledge of Christianity, which resulted in his baptism under the name “Paolo Xu.” In 1604, Xu was chosen to work at the National Academy (Han Lin an 翰林院) after receiving the esteemed “Jin Shi

⁷⁹ Spence, *The Memory Palace of Matteo Ricci*, 150.

⁸⁰ Matteo Ricci, *Della entrata della Compagnia di Giesù e Christianità nella Cina*, 3rd ed., ed. Maddalena Del Gatto and Piero Corradini (Macerata: Quodlibet, 2010), 458.

⁸¹ Cf. Shangyang Sun, *Li Madou and Xu Guangqi* (Beijing: Xinhua, 1993), 84–96.

进士” title. During his time in Beijing, Xu had the opportunity to reunite with Matteo Ricci, and their friendship flourished and grew deeper from then on.⁸²

As recounted by Philippe Couplet, Xu Guangqi initially had only one son and had considered taking another woman as his concubine in order to have more sons. According to Chinese culture, filial piety means to keep the family name alive by having more sons. After being baptized, he learned that having multiple wives went against the Christian faith. He gave up on his intention of living in polygamy. Surprisingly, Xu was granted a grandchild eventually, which satisfied his desire. He believed it was a gift from the Christian God, so this event strengthened his Christian faith.⁸³

Xu Guangqi was known as a man of discerning intellect because of his critical thinking abilities. His conversion to Catholicism was a result of his profound questioning and an earnest quest for understanding. In Ricci's work, *The Ten Chapters of a Strange Man*, two chapters highlight the thought-provoking dialogues between Ricci and Xu on themes such as death and the universal judgment that follows. Xu deeply admired Western science and collaborated closely with Ricci, contributing to the translation of Euclid's *Stoicheia*.

After Ricci's death, deprived of any support, Xu continued his journey of absorbing Western knowledge by collaborating with Sabatino de Ursis and Diego de Pantoja in that he learnt technologies to solve water-related challenges. This cooperation resulted in the publication of the book *Western Hydraulic Engineering* (*Taixi Shuifa*, 泰西水法), which had been Ricci's dream. Xu also devoted his life to agricultural studies until he had achieved significant progress in rice cultivation in China's northern areas. His extensive research results were collected in the book on agricultural operations written by Xu himself – *Encyclopedia of Agriculture* (*Nong Zheng Quan Shu*, 农政全书).⁸⁴

The friendship between Xu Guangqi and Matteo Ricci has already become a landmark of cross-cultural communication. Their friendship is evergreen and everlasting; they were again honoured together on May 9, 2023, during a ceremony at the Cathedral St. John of Macerata. The Vatican Secretary of State, Cardinal Pietro Parolin, said their friendship developed naturally because it was grounded in mutual respect and admiration. Together they dealt with the task of enculturating the Christian faith in Chinese culture. In the modern

⁸² Cf. Sun, *Li Madou and Xu Guangqi*, 84–96; Cf. Fabrizio Lombardi, “Xu Guangqi. Un grande cinese cattolico al servizio del suo popolo e del suo paese,” April 3, 2021, accessed July 6, 2023, <https://www.laciviltacattolica.it/articolo/xu-guangqi-un-grande-cinese-cattolico-al-servizio-del-suo-popolo-e-del-suo-paese/>.

⁸³ Cf. Sun, *Li Madou and Xu Guangqi*, 93–94.

⁸⁴ Cf. Sun, 84–106; Cf. Lombardi, “Xu Guangqi.”

era, the Church faces the same difficulty,⁸⁵ balancing faith with modernity. Ricci's experience of "cultural accommodation" continues to be a guideline in the complexities of our contemporary world, which is why it is worthwhile to keep Ricci's legacy alive even today.

Conclusion

By examining Matteo Ricci's testimony left in China and his missionary strategy of cultural accommodation, we can confirm that the Christian faith can be integrated into Chinese culture. Rather than being in conflict, faith and culture can mutually enrich and promote each other. Drawing from *Dei Verbum*, we can see that "God, who through the Word creates all things (see John 1:3) and keeps them in existence, gives men an enduring witness to Himself in created realities (see Rom. 1:19–20)." (no. 3). God communicates Himself in a natural way that humans can understand. If faith is not rooted in culture, it risks dying. As John Paul II noted: "A faith which does not become culture is a faith which has not been fully received, not thoroughly thought through, not fully lived out."⁸⁶ Authentic culture, therefore, is inseparable from a vibrant faith, as it moulds the human voice that responds to the call of Christ. Culture is an effort to contemplate the world's mysteries, particularly of the human person: "It is a way of giving expression to the transcendent dimension of human life."⁸⁷

Immersed in rich and authentic Chinese culture, Ricci repeatedly confirmed that Chinese Culture has the inherent seeds of Christianity. Guided by this belief, Ricci dedicated himself to mastering the Chinese language, adopting the dress of a Confucian scholar, while making friends with the Chinese. Ultimately, he successfully became "a Chinese for Chinese," much like Saint Paul the Apostle, who said, "To the weak I became weak, to win over the weak. I have become all things to all, to save at least some." (1 Cor 9:22).

⁸⁵ Cf. Alessandro Di Bussolo, "Parolin: Matteo Ricci e Xu Guangqi, due scintille di luce, portatori della pace di Dio," May 9, 2003, <https://www.vaticannews.va/it/vaticano/news/2023-05/parolin-macerata-inaugurazione-statue-matteo-ricci-xu-guangqi.html>.

⁸⁶ Giovanni Paolo II, "Discorso di Giovanni Paolo II ai partecipanti al Congresso Nazionale del Movimento ecclesiale di impegno culturale (16 gennaio 1982)," January 16, 1982, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/it/speeches/1982/january/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_19820116_impegno-culturale.html

⁸⁷ Cf. Michael Paul Gallagher, *Clashing Symbols: An Introduction to Faith and Culture*, New and rev. ed (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2003), 55.

Ricci's life and experiences have already become a testament to the fruitful exchange between faith and culture, while also highlighting the complexities and risks involved in such encounters. He expanded the transcendental dimension of Chinese culture by introducing the concept of life after death. He brought the most advanced science and technology of his time to Chinese scholars, encouraging them to explore mathematics, astronomy, and other fields. He also reinterpreted the ideas of friendship in *De Amicitia* for the Chinese, gaining many true friends, such as Xu Guangqi (徐光启). For Ricci, everything shines with the glory of God. Also the transmission of the natural sciences and the humanities is a transmission of the Gospel. His identity as a scientist and humanist harmonized with his identity as a Jesuit missionary. Divine contemplation does not run counter to secular action. One could be contemplative in action and experience Heaven on Earth. Ricci's method was successful; the measure of success is not only the number of baptisms, but also the level of civilisational promotion. It is Ricci who introduced to China a fresh perspective on Christian eschatology, morality, and ethics, as well as Christian views on friendship and cosmology, along with the most advanced technologies grounded in the Christian faith. Again, it is Ricci who opened the Chinese mind to the glory of God, the Christian God, through his profound knowledge of astronomy, mathematics, and the humanities. Ricci, through his modest, gentle, and open-minded attitude of love and acceptance towards others, demonstrated to the Chinese what it meant to embody the qualities of a Christian—someone shaped and guided by the Christian faith. He is attractive because of his deep faith in God. Believing in God leads to becoming a more integrated and whole person, which overlaps with the teachings of Confucianism.

Despite its innovative nature, Ricci's method of accommodation inevitably had its limitations, as evidenced by the Chinese Rites Controversy that arose from the "Rule of Matteo Ricci." Ricci allowed Chinese Catholics to honour heaven, their ancestors, and Confucius, viewing these Chinese traditional customs as philosophical matters rather than religious practices. Fung Yu-lan 冯友兰, the modern Chinese philosopher, also noted that "the place which philosophy has occupied in Chinese civilization has been comparable to that of religion in other civilizations."⁸⁸

Other religious orders did not accept the "Rule of Matteo Ricci" and reported the Jesuit approval for the Chinese veneration of the ancestors to the Vatican. This prompted the Vatican to engage in negotiations with Emperor Kangxi 康熙,

⁸⁸ Yu-lan Fung, *A Short History of Chinese Philosophy*, ed. Derk Bodde (New York: The Free Press, 1948), 1.

which directly angered the Chinese emperor. According to Chinese tradition, it is not allowed for Chinese Catholics to worship their ancestors, which is seen as disloyal and unfilial, completely contradicting Confucian teachings. This resulted in a deterioration of relations between the Qing Dynasty and the Vatican, and the expulsion of missionaries from China, which ultimately put an end to Catholic missionary efforts. Whether or not the “Rule of Matteo Ricci” is correct still requires a dedicated study. It is clear that if the “Rule of Matteo Ricci” had not been interrupted by the Vatican, Catholicism would likely have been more popular and accepted among the Chinese, much like Buddhism was during its historical spread in China.⁸⁹ Perhaps, the key question posed by Ricci is how to integrate faith and culture. This involves absorbing cultural nourishment to enrich the expression of faith while maintaining its purity and orthodoxy. The challenge lies in preserving a pure faith while also remaining open to cultural influences, rather than obstructing the process of evangelization, as occurred in China after the Chinese Rites Controversy.⁹⁰

Pope Francis, in his Apostolic Letter “*Motu Proprio*” *Ad Theologiam Promovendam*, indicates that theology must be contextualized with culture, being able to apply the Gospel to daily life (no. 4). Faith needs to become culture (no. 8). Therefore, theology should not be self-referential; instead, it should adopt a transdisciplinary approach. It must integrate all forms of knowledge within the framework of divine revelation (no. 5). Theology must maintain its scientific stature and strive to expand theological reason toward wisdom, thus avoiding dehumanization and impoverishment (no. 7).⁹¹ This shift in theological thinking aligns with the historical example set by figures like Matteo Ricci, who demonstrated that the gospel’s message can transform diverse cultures and undergo mutual enrichment through these encounters.

Ricci found, in certain aspects of Chinese culture and tradition, a pathway for proclaiming the Gospel while also enriching his own understanding of faith. During his pontificate, Pope John Paul II recognized the significance of this Jesuit missionary and the value of keeping Ricci’s legacy alive. The pope indicated,

⁸⁹ For further reading on the historical proliferation of Buddhism in China, see Erik Zürcher, *The Buddhist Conquest of China: the Spread and Adaptation of Buddhism in Early Medieval China* (Leiden: Brill, 2007).

⁹⁰ For an in-depth discussion of the Chinese Rites Controversy, I recommend Tiangang Li, *The Chinese Rites Controversy: History, Documents, and Significance* (Beijing: Renmin University Press, 2019).

⁹¹ Cf. Francis, *Ad theologiam promovendam*, Lettera Apostolica in forma di «*Motu Proprio*» del Sommo Pontefice (2023), https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/es/motu_proprio/documents/20231101-motu-proprio-ad-theologiam-promovendam.html.

historically and culturally, that “Father Matteo Ricci made himself so ‘Chinese with the Chinese’ that he became an expert Sinologist, in the deepest cultural and spiritual sense of the term, for he achieved in himself an extraordinary inner harmony between priest and scholar, between Catholic and orientalist, between Italian and Chinese.”⁹²

John Paul II also noted that faith could be accommodated within culture, while culture could be elevated by faith. Ricci’s legacy still stands as a great example to prove that Chinese culture itself has the seeds of Christianity. As a bridge between faith and culture, Ricci’s importance has only grown more evident as the Church faces contemporary challenges in transmitting the Christian faith in increasingly secular societies. His importance has also grown more significant for the Chinese population. In 2000, Matteo Ricci, together with Marco Polo, turned out to be the only two Westerners who were honoured at the China Millennium Monument (中华世纪坛) in Beijing. His missionary life deserves to be read and revisited by generations of both Europeans and Chinese, offering valuable lessons on the integration of faith and culture.

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⁹² John Paul II, “Message of Pope John Paul II,” no. 2.

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