Yu Liu

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“A gentleman harmonizes, but does not conform. A mean man conforms, but does not harmonize,” Confucius so contrasts the quality of relationships among the superior and inferior men (*The Analects*, BK XIII, ch. 23). Yu Liu, author of this well-constructed and competently executed volume, characterizes the relationships between Matteo Ricci and his closest Chinese friends as those among superior men. *Harmonious Disagreement* problematizes what has been paraded through much of previous literature on the subject as a single unit of analysis—“Ricci and his Chinese collaborators”—by putting at the front and center the distances between Ricci and some of his closest Chinese friends in terms of their conceptual understanding, spiritual inclinations, and practical agendas. It demonstrates that both Ricci and his Chinese partners exerted their full agency in shaping a relationship that was fraught with tensions and disagreements but nonetheless remained amicable and mutually beneficial.

The book consists of an introduction, conclusion, and eight brisk chapters. Chapters 1–4 explore the formation of Ricci’s missionary approach and apologetic strategy within his evolving social network by presenting a close reading of some of his most influential Chinese works. Chapters 1 and 4 delve into Ricci’s tactful adaptation of European aphorisms about friendship in his *Jiaoyou lun* (交友論, On friendship, 1599) and of Epictetus’s Stoic philosophy in his *Ershiwu yan* (二十五言 Twenty-five paragraphs, 1604 or 1605), respectively. Chapters 2 and 3 zoom in on Ricci’s core Chinese texts that bear out his apologetic strategy, especially his *Tianzhu shiyi* (天主實義, The true meaning of the Lord of Heaven, first drafted in 1595). This strategy contains two major components, to present Catholicism as fundamentally compatible with but complementary to classical Confucianism and to reject all contemporary forms of Chinese spirituality as heterodoxy. The latter included, in particular, Buddhism and neo-Confucianism, which Ricci construed as a perverted doctrine due to Buddhist influence. Chapter 2 probes into Ricci’s ambiguous embrace of the Confucian tradition, and chapter 3 turns to the “all-out war” that he fought against Buddhism (64). Liu points out that while Ricci derived from his Chinese friends critical information about the Confucian canon, the teachings of Zhu Xi and other neo-Confucian philosophers, and the influence of Buddhism on them, these friends could not have suggested to him or even full-heartedly countenanced the key points of his apologetic strategy, such as

the severing of Confucianism into an “authentic,” classical version and a modern, degenerated version. In other words, Ricci engineered that strategy largely of his own accord. Liu’s analysis of these texts highlights the rhetorical and hermeneutic maneuvering Ricci orchestrated to reach his social and religious goals. For example, Ricci stressed friendship as a situation of two people learning from each other in his *Jiaoyou lun*, a point that served to carve out a teacher-pupil relationship for him vis-à-vis his Chinese friends, “in which he was always able to criticize and cajole his Chinese friends into change” (39). Similarly, Ricci explicated classical Confucian texts in light of Christian monotheism in his *Tianzhu shiyi* in order to persuade his Chinese readers that their ancients had already known about God, immortality of soul, heaven, and hell, even though in his personal reflections on the subject he correctly noted the profoundly this-worldly concerns of classical Confucianism. Thus Liu observes that today “Ricci is and deserves to be celebrated as a great hero of peaceful cross-cultural interaction, but it is important for us to realize that he turned out to be such inadvertently. In his day, he was first and foremost a Christian missionary who braved innumerable hardships to go from Europe to China for the purpose of helping put into effect not only the triumph of his faith but also the destruction of native philosophical and religious traditions. Since he could only go about his mission indirectly, it was inevitable for him to be motivated instrumentally in everything he did” (24).

How did Ricci’s best friends conduct their relationships with him? Liu presents four case studies (chapters 5–8) on this issue featuring, respectively, Qu Taisu 瞿太素 (Qu Rukui 瞿汝夔), Xu Guangqi (徐光启 1562–1633), Li Zhizao (李之藻 c.1565–1630), and Yang Tingyun (楊廷筠 c.1557–1628). Xu, Li, and Yang met Ricci at different points in their lives, led illustrious careers as late Ming statesmen, and all eventually converted to Catholicism and became vocal advocates for the Jesuits and the nascent Catholic community, making them known collectively as “the Three Pillars of the Chinese Catholic Church.” In comparison, Qu’s life remains relatively obscure; however, as Liu and earlier scholars such as Huang Yinong and Ronnie Hsia pointed out, he played a pivotal role in facilitating Ricci’s metamorphosis from a Buddhist monk into a “scholar of the Far West.” Liu’s chapter 5 offers, to my knowledge, the most elaborate biographical account of Qu available in Western languages. Liu’s studies of the above and several other intimate friends of Ricci’s (such as Feng Yingjing 馮應京 1555–1606) shed interesting new light on many old questions, such as why it took Qu sixteen years, Feng ten years, and Li over nine years, to decide to convert? Previous historians have largely accepted the answer Ricci gave in his chronicles of the Jesuit mission written shortly before his death, that is, because, until then, they could not end their polygamous situation

without causing serious consequences for their concubines. We have learned that this was only an excuse invented by these friends of Ricci's or even by Ricci himself to mask their deeper disagreement with the exclusivist claim demanded of them by this new religion. Similarly, Yang did not undergo three clear-cut stages of religious transformation from Confucianism to Buddhism to Catholicism as previous scholars have argued, but rather, after his conversion to Catholicism, he continued to maintain a complex ideological commitment to both Confucianism and Buddhism. Xu Guangqi, on the other hand, exemplified those Chinese scholars who were attracted to the Jesuits and their religion for the practical benefits they promised in remedying the social ills of their time, and his studies with the Jesuits in the sciences and mathematics also boosted his social prestige and official career (136). Here, Liu makes a fine point that can be juxtaposed with the argument advanced by Roger Hart in his recent book, *Imagined Civilizations: China, the West, and Their First Encounter* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 2013). Ultimately, what Liu shows us is how Ricci and his closest Chinese friends constructed a fluid, energizing, and productive relationship through negotiating their different and oftentimes conflictual intellectual positions, religious attitudes, and motivations.

Solidly researched and elegantly written, this book contributes unique insights to our understanding of the dynamics of Sino-Western cultural encounters of both the early modern period and our own time. That being said, I wish the text supplies Chinese characters to go along with the Pinyin transliteration, or at least in a glossary. Also, while all direct quotes are meticulously referenced, I would have liked to see some more endnotes on the sources consulted for the critical historical events narrated in the text. There are also occasional repetitions in the book that may have been due to the fact that parts of the book had been previously published as independent journal articles. But these are minor flaws that do not at all detract from the important accomplishment it has achieved.

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