In the anthropological study of the relationship between Gospel and culture, an understanding of the Gospel is culturally conditioned in every particular context. In the discussion of the Gospel and inculturation in the missiological field, Matteo Ricci, an Italian Jesuit missionary, has become a central figure of debate and investigation among scholars.

Ricci arrived in China in 1582 and remained there until his death in 1610. When the Jesuits went to China it was the time of the high Renaissance in Europe. The Counter Reformation was initiated and energized by the Society of Jesus, founded in 1540 by the Spaniard, Ignatius of Loyola. The Society of Jesus was eager to spread Roman Catholicism to both India and China. Aided by Portuguese travelers and traders who were already in Japan in 1543, Francis Xavier (1506–1552), the father of the Jesuit Oriental mission, preached in India and Japan even without really knowing the native languages.

One of his successors in the Society of Jesus, Matteo Ricci, was born in Macerata, Italy on 16 October, 1552. His father sent him to Rome to study law at the age of 17. However, drawing upon the feeling of a religious vocation, Ricci entered into the Order of the Feast of the Assumption on 15 August, 1571. Interested in foreign mission in the Society, Ricci was given the opportunity to join the India mission. Ricci arrived in Goa on 13 September, 1578 and worked in India for four years.

Alessandro Valignano, Xavier’s successor, was successful in breaking free from the conquistador mission system. His model of mission, based on *il modo soave* (the sweet or gentle way), became the guideline for the Jesuit missionaries’ profound study of the language, culture, and politics of China. This study became instrumental in defending against the conquistador and *tabula rasa* mentalities of Catholic mission.
Ricci arrived in the capital of China in 1601. He served as a repairman of clocks and entered the emperor’s palace at least four times each year. Placing himself in the role of a barbarian, Li Ma-tou (the Chinese name for Matteo Ricci) presented himself very humbly to the imperial court. In 1591 he was able to begin a translation of the four classical books of Confucianism (*The Confucian Analects, The Book of Mencius, The Great Learning, and The Doctrine of the Mean*) into Latin and transliterated the Chinese name Kong Fuzi as Confucius.\(^3\)

He is referred to by some Chinese historians as the “wise man from the West.” With integrity, humility, and respect, his missionary goals lay in linking Chinese culture, especially Confucian culture, with Roman Catholicism. He developed an intensive knowledge of that culture and recognized its positive value in connection with Christianity. Therefore, his missionary legacy raises an important issue of theology and inculturation in the history of mission and interfaith relation. Ricci approached this agenda by adopting a positive attitude toward the Confucian culture in terms of his creative appropriation of the “natural theology” of Roman Catholicism.

**Ricci’s Life in the Religious Context of the Ming Dynasty**

After arriving in the southern Chinese town of Zhaoqing in 1583, Ricci believed that shrouding himself in the robes of a Buddhist monk would be deemed as holy. He saw a parallel between Christianity and Buddhism regarding the priestly robes, the chanting in their service, the espousal of celibacy and poverty, the temples, statues, and even some of the painted images.\(^4\) Ricci and his colleagues were equipped with missionary ways of accommodation. Ricci changed his soutanes

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\(^3\) Cronin, *The Wise Man From the West*, 103, 107.

\(^4\) In a letter to his friend Fuligatti (24 November, 1585) he wrote, “Would that you could see me as I am now: I have become a Chinaman. In our clothing, in our looks, in our manners and in everything external we have made ourselves Chinese.” Cited in Jonathan D. Spence, *The Memory of Palace of Matteo Ricci* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1984), 114.