
Rarely in what we today study as ‘global history’ do we find an intercultural encounter that has captured the imagination of so many generations over the centuries as that of Matteo Ricci (1552-1610) and his Chinese interlocutors during the final decades of the Ming dynasty. The arrival of the Italian Jesuit and his confrères in the Middle Kingdom renewed direct contact between Europe and China at a very personal level. Not since the time of his fellow Italians, Marco Polo (1254-1324) and the Franciscan Friar, Giovanni da Montecorvino (1246-1328), who had made their separate ways to the Yuan court of the Great Khan three centuries earlier, had there been a European presence—albeit a tiny one—at the center of the Chinese empire or ‘Cathay’, as it was thereafter known to Europeans.

While the story of Ricci has been told many times, the four hundredth anniversary in 2010 of his death in Beijing renewed interest among both scholars and the general public in his struggles and accomplishments. The distinguished historian of China’s contacts with the West, David E. Mungello, has recently observed that a reconceptualization and re-evaluation of the role of Christianity in Chinese history has now been underway for several decades.¹ The growing presence of believers in contemporary China has stimulated further interest in local Christian ‘histories’, in the plural. This may perhaps explain in part why the efforts and motivations of men like Ricci are now viewed with less suspicion than before; and why Christianity itself is no longer judged to be simply a foreign and unwelcome ‘graft’ unto Chinese civilization.

It is in this context that one must place the biography of Ricci by Michela Fontana, who is well-known in the field of science journalism. The present volume is an English translation of the original Italian version of the work, which was first published by Mondadori in 2005, followed in 2010 by a French edition. Fontana’s book, while not the only book on Ricci to appear in the last five or six years, is a welcome addition to the growing library of works on the Jesuits in China.

The author applies her knowledge and interest in the history of science—and therein lies the most original contribution of this volume—to

the work of Ricci. The result is a lively and engaging narrative that traces the more widely studied work of later generations of Jesuit scientists at both the Ming and Qing courts to its origins, namely Ricci’s intuition that scientific knowledge and its pursuit could serve as a way to engage intellectually with the Chinese literati and for the Jesuits to make themselves useful to their hosts. She shows how Ricci soon came to understand that without such an acknowledgement from the Chinese that the foreign ‘barbarians’ had something of value to offer, it was highly unlikely that they would listen to any religious arguments. In what one might call an ‘indirect’ approach to proclaiming the Christian faith, Ricci was fully supported and inspired by his Jesuit mentor, Alessandro Valignano (1539-1606), the head of the Japanese and Chinese missions, whom Ricci would later call the ‘father of the Chinese mission’.

The main areas of Jesuit scientific endeavour outlined in greater detail throughout the volume are mathematics, geography, and astronomy. Fontana illustrates how Ricci realised the key importance of this knowledge for the realm, especially with regard to the legitimacy of the ruling dynasty. Should the Son of Heaven lose his ability to read the signs of heaven and perform the proper rites associated with them, he would be seen to have forfeited the heaven-given mandate to reign over the Middle Kingdom. Thus, the ability to predict the exact time and length of solar eclipses was directly linked to the court’s need to compile an accurate calendar for rituals purposes—the reform of which would be carried out by Ricci’s Jesuit successors (282ff). Mathematics was indispensable in making these calculations and, independently of Western developments, constituted an important area of Chinese scientific achievement during previous ages such as the Song dynasty.

While in Shaozhou in 1590, Ricci was able, however, to help the eminent scholar Qu Rukui or Taisu (1549-1611), who later became a Christian in 1605, to advance his mathematical skills by learning how to perform ‘calculations with the brush’ (88ff) rather than simply with an abacus. He then proceeded to introduce him to principles of Euclidean geometry. More than a decade and a half thereafter, in 1606-1607, Ricci would undertake the translation of Euclid’s Elements based on Clavius’s Latin translation with the help of another illustrious scholar and convert, Paul Xu Guangqi (1562-1633). Xu would later occupy the highest echelons of the imperial bureaucracy (230ff). Considered by Ricci as a ‘pillar’ of the fledgling Christian community in China, he was arguably the greatest among the mission’s patrons.