

# MATTEO RICCI'S UNDERTAKINGS IN CULTURAL DIPLOMACY: STRATEGIC MISSIOLOGIST, SCIENTIFIC APOSTLE, AND FRIEND

Gabriel C. Gherasim\* 

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## Abstract

*The present reflective notes on Matteo Ricci's cultural and scientific posterity in China stress more upon the role of Ricci as a genuine cultural diplomat than as a militant figure of Catholic missiology in China. Regardless of Ricci's own intentions and sometimes probably against his will, the acknowledgement of his prominent undertakings in cultural diplomacy as a friendly mate, strategic missiologist and scientific apostle prevails over widespread interpretations of his compromising accommodationism and opportunistic syncretism. In other words, depicting Ricci as an outstanding cultural diplomat could stand as an alternative reading of sweeping apperceptions regarding the overall Jesuit mentality associated with political conspiracies, intransigence and lust. A plausible alternative reading inspired by Ricci's own life and deeds aptly reveals that (at least) some Jesuit missionaries and defenders of the Christian Catholic faith took a pious posture in their daily lives, and*

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\* **Gabriel C. Gherasim** is lecturer within the Department of International Relations and German Studies, Faculty of European Studies, Babeş-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania. Contact: gabriel.gherasim@ubbcluj.ro.

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*shared unrelentless beliefs in reason, erudition, education and rhetoric excellence. Reading Ricci through such lenses would not only do justice to his posterity but would also elevate his personality to the forefront of early modern cultural diplomacy.*

**Keywords.** Matteo Ricci, Catholicism, Confucianism, missiology, scientific apostolate, friendship.

### **Geopolitics, Catholic politics and Jesuitism in the age of Matteo Ricci**

The large circular sculpture surrounding the round room of the Chinese Millenium Monument includes the most notorious figures associated with the growth of Chinese civilization for the past 5000 years of historical evolution. Inaugurated by the Chinese government at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the collection of frescoes pays tribute to only two influential European personalities who decisively contributed to the progress of Chinese culture and civilization, Marco Polo and Matteo Ricci. Beyond perennial controversies regarding the impact of European civilization on the religious, cultural and scientific emancipation of China, paying homage to Polo and Ricci as civilizational figures surpasses the more narrow-sided outlooks on the (real) political and evangelic goals of European missionary ventures worldwide. The present reflective notes on Matteo Ricci's cultural and scientific posterity in China stress more upon the agency of Ricci as a genuine cultural diplomat than as a militant figure of Catholic missiology in China. Regardless of Ricci's own intentions and sometimes probably against his will, the acknowledgement of his prominent undertakings in cultural diplomacy as a friendly mate, strategic missiologist and scientific apostle prevails over widespread interpretations of his compromising accommodationism and opportunistic syncretism. In other words, depicting Ricci as an outstanding cultural diplomat could stand as an alternative reading of sweeping apperceptions regarding the overall Jesuit mentality associated with political conspiracies, intransigence and lust. At odds with this kind of derogatory assessment, many Jesuit missionaries and defenders of the Christian Catholic faith took a pious posture in their daily lives, and shared unrelentless beliefs

in reason, erudition, education and rhetoric excellence.<sup>1</sup> Reading Ricci through such lenses would not only do justice to his posterity but would also elevate his personality at the forefront of early modern cultural diplomacy.

Considering the rather inimical and unfavorable contexts of the Jesuit missions abroad and the relative “tactical diversity”<sup>2</sup> assumed by the missionaries themselves, there is little evidence that Jesuit Matteo Ricci’s approach to evangelization in China had been massively impacted by the political intricacies which had involved the Catholic Church after the creation of the Jesuit Order of the *Society of Jesus* in 1540. Following the destabilizing maneuvers of Lutheran Protestantism after 1517, Carol Quintul’s assault on Rome in 1527, and the Council of Trent’s (1545-1563) decisions, the Jesuit Order was called to restore and defend the Christian spirituality by a long-term commitment to *propaganda fide*, i.e., ecumenical actions with a view to promoting Christian (Catholic) evangelization, proselytization, and ultimately conversion of pagan and/ or erethic peoples, communities and individuals. In response to inner crisis and Protestant Reformation, the “Christian Reformation” aimed to transform the Catholic faith into a global religion,<sup>3</sup> largely with the commitment of the Jesuit friers of the Society of Jesus. After 1582, the Jesuit missionary Matteo Ricci spent the last half of his life in China – died in Beijing, 1610 - as a loyal soldier of the intractable Catholic cause, more or less directly affected by the geopolitical context of the age and the internal disputes and conflicts between several factions of the Catholic Church. Geopolitically, the Jesuit missions in Asia had to submit to competitive economic interests of Spain and Portugal despite the provisions of the bilateral Treaty of Tordesillas (1494). Moreover, the political domination systems of the “Portuguese Padroado” and the “Spanish Patronato” effectively subdued the Jesuit missions in Asia.<sup>4</sup> More than three decades after the establishment of the Portuguese Jesuit mission in India (1541), Matteo Ricci landed for the first time in the Portuguese-

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<sup>1</sup> See, for instance, Jonathan Wright, *Iezuiții: Misiune, Mituri și Istorie*, translated by M. G. Gavrilciuc and D. G. Arșinel, București: Curtea Veche, 2010, p. 45.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 85.

<sup>3</sup> Sijie Xie, “The Interaction and Clash of Ideas between Matteo Ricci and the Taizhou School” in *Religions* 14: 1512, 2023, p. 3; Shiron Qi, *World History*, Beijing: Higher Education Press, 2007, p. 75.

<sup>4</sup> Jean-Paul Wiest, “Matteo Ricci: Pioneer of Chinese-Western Dialogue and Cultural Exchanges” in *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, vol. 36, no. 1, 2012, p. 17.

controlled city of Goa (1577) and lived there until he moved to Macao in 1582; in 1585, encouraged by Ricci's success in establishing his first permanent residence and church in mainland China – in the city of Zhaoqing - the Spanish colonial authorities of the Philippines envisaged the opportunity of opening a permanent embassy in China and prompted the Portuguese authorities of Macao to take a stand against the Spanish economic expansionism in Asia.<sup>5</sup> By and large, the Jesuit mission in China had to be vigilant about both the geopolitical competition between Spain and Portugal and their clashes with the Asian powers, on the one hand, and the inimical reactions of the Ming dynasty in China and the competing Catholic circles in Rome, especially on the controversy of rites issue. Within such a complicated geopolitical and religious environment, the Jesuit missionaries – Ricci included – had to adopt vacillatory strategies of evangelization, compromising tactical moves, and camouflaged actions of Christian proselytization in the form of humanistic and scientific apostolate and eclectic cultural exchanges.

The doctrinal politics of the Catholic Church was further challenged by certain intellectual movements in Europe. Five years after Matteo Ricci's death, in 1615, his disciple and Jesuit collaborator Nicolas Trigault published a slight critique of Ricci's missionary approach in China, urging for a less accommodative strategy towards Confucianism and stirring sympathetic attitudes of deist philosophers, such as Voltaire and Hume,<sup>6</sup> in their anti-propaganda diatribes against the Jesuit zealots. Alongside the Protestant dissidence of the Lutherans and Calvinists, the intellectual triad against Jesuitism was composed of the anti-theist and anti-dogmatic deist movement of natural religion, the moral theology of the Jansenist thought,<sup>7</sup> and the secular rationalism of the Enlightenment. However, less vehement interpretations of Jesuitism and their commitment to defend the Catholic

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<sup>5</sup> Michela Fontana, *Matteo Ricci: A Jesuit in the Ming Court*, Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2011, pp. 70-71.

<sup>6</sup> See Adam Bohnet, "Matteo Ricci and Nicolas Trigault's Descriptions of the Literati of China" in *Quaderni D'Italianistica*, vol. XXI, no. 2, 2000, pp. 77-79. Nicolas Trigault's work title is *De Christiana Expeditione apud Sinas Suscepta ab Societate Jesu* (1615).

<sup>7</sup> The Jansenist thought had emerged with the post-humous work of the Dutch theologian Cornelius Jansen, published in 1640, and reached its most notorious assault of the Jesuit lax and concupiscent morality with Blaise Pascal's *Lettres Provinciales* (1657).

faith have argued that the doctrinal rift between the Jesuits and their anti-clerical detractors was not so divisive as it was championed.<sup>8</sup>

It goes without saying that the apostolic career of Matteo Ricci could not bypass the (geo)political interests of European powers, the doctrinal intricacies and inner conflicts within the Catholic Church, and the controversial Jesuit pledge to defend the Catholic faith between 1540 and 1773.<sup>9</sup> The present investigation arguably advocates the idea that, despite critical allegations of overtly accommodationism and irresolute syncretism, Matteo Ricci's endeavors as a Jesuit missionary is more ecumenical than apodictic, more transactional than militant, and more culturally than politically oriented. In other words, his Jesuit activism should be rendered to a compelling agency in cultural diplomacy rather than to a more assertive posture of a dogmatic gladiator in the service of the Catholic faith. From the very beginning of his apostolic mission in China, Alessandro Valignano (1539-1606), the Visitor of all Jesuit missions in Asia, wisely instructed Ruggieri and Ricci to assimilate the cultural habits of the Chinese literati and to act diligently as cultural diplomats; Valignano's guidance was specifically commendable in the case of Matteo Ricci who internalized his apostolic duties as a "cultural imperative".<sup>10</sup> Educated at Collegio Romano in the spirit of ancient rationalism, Catholic gospel of the Christian faith, and cultural and scientific humanism, Matteo Ricci embarked on his apostolic journey with the best arsenal of European culture and civilization; once in China, approximately one year after establishing residence in the country, it is said

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<sup>8</sup> More lucid criticism of Jesuitism noticed similarities rather than disparities between the Jesuits and the modern intellectual movements of the Enlightenment regarding an overall optimistic view on the future of humankind, an unyielding belief in rationality and education, and a commonly shared trust in emancipation through scientific progress (see Mario Gongora, *Studies in the Colonial History of Spanish America*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975, pp. 228-229).

<sup>9</sup> Pope Clement XIV issued *Dominus ac Redemptor* document on July 21, 1773, officially disbanding the Society of Jesus.

<sup>10</sup> Yu Liu, *Harmonious Disagreement: Matteo Ricci and His Closest Chinese Friends*, New York: Peter Lang, 2015, p. 6. In line with the sageness of European humanistic culture, Matteo Ricci understood his role as a cultural diplomat in terms of binding agency to promote the "cultural wealth of the humankind" (see Michael Lackner, "Lessons from Matteo Ricci: Reflection on the Chinese-Western Transfer of Ideas by Matteo Ricci and Its Implications for the Chinese-European Encounter" in *Religions & Christianity in Today's China*, vol. II, no. 4, 2012, p. 41).

that Ricci could speak Chinese without an interpreter and was already familiar with the four books of classical Confucianism. Two years later, in 1585, Ricci adopted Chinese honorifics for his name (i.e., 'Li' for Ricci, 'Madou' for Matteo, and 'Xitai' with the meaning 'the man from the Far West').<sup>11</sup> The last two sections of the present study further exemplify how and to what extent the Jesuit missionary Matteo Ricci intelligently wrapped the difficult task of Christian missiology within the ecumenical, collaborative and transactional practices of cultural diplomacy, specifically cultivating his magisterial skillfulness of scientific apostolate and moral humanism. Not only did Ricci acknowledge that tactical cultural diplomacy could work as the best tool of his missionary strategy, but he also strongly perceived that acting as a cultural mediator would be (his own) the most effective way of achieving the best results in inauspicious circumstances.

The present investigation does not stand for a careful analysis of Matteo Ricci's works<sup>12</sup> in attempting to convincingly argue for his agency as a genuine cultural diplomat; instead, the examination of secondary literature dedicated to Ricci's deeds and writings reveals that – beyond a few comprehensive biographic books<sup>13</sup> – both defenders and critics either insist

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<sup>11</sup> Fontana, *op. cit.*, pp. 54, 68.

<sup>12</sup> Ricci's first book in Chinese and probably one of the most important when it comes to understand his agency as a cultural diplomat was *On Friendship* (1595). Other significant works were completed and published in the last decade of his life: *Map of the World* (1602), *The True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven* (1603), *The Twenty-Five Words* (1605), *The First Six Books of Euclid* (1607), *The Ten Paradoxes* (1608), and his autobiography *Della Entrata de la Compagnia di Gesu e Christianita nella China* (1609-1610).

<sup>13</sup> The literature dedicated to the life and works of the Jesuit missionary Matteo Ricci includes, alongside dozens of scholarly articles and reviews, a significant number of comprehensive treaties and monographs. Firstly, a series of both appraisals and critical works were published during or immediately after Ricci's death, of which Zhang Weishu's *Life of Xitai Ricci of the Great West* (1609), Nicolas Trigault's *De Christiana Expeditione apud Sinas Suscepta ab Societate Jesu* (1615), and Giorgio Aleni's *The Life of Master Ricci, Xitai from the Great West* (1630) are preeminent. Secondly, there is an outstanding Italian scholarship on Ricci in the 20<sup>th</sup> century dominated by Pasquale d'Elia's regnant account based on Ricci's own autobiography, *Fonti Ricciane* (1942-1949), compellingly including works of Pietro T. Venturi, Francesco d'Arelli and Filippo Mignini (see Joan-Pau Rubies, "Missionary Encounters in China and Tibet: From Matteo Ricci to Ippolito Desideri" in *History of Religions*, vol. 52, no. 3, 2013, pp. 267-282). Thirdly, the 20<sup>th</sup> century growing interest for the multifaceted contributions of Matteo Ricci to the cultural exchanges between Europe and China includes Henri Bernard's *Matteo Ricci's Scientific Contribution to China* (1935), Jonathan Spence's *The Memory Palace of Matteo Ricci*

for a scholarly clarification and interpretation of his conjunctural actions and terminological vocabulary, or stand for unilateral assessments of his achievements in various fields (e.g., religious, scientific, cultural). The purpose of the present study is to call for a synthetic evaluation of his commendable efforts under the more encompassing umbrella of cultural diplomacy. The remaining three sections purportedly aim to illustrate three specific instantiations of Matteo Ricci as an outstanding cultural diplomat.

### **The strategic missiologist**

The strategic undertakings of Jesuit missiology in China were composed of two basic ingredients: a general outlook to accomplish the doctrinal renewal of the Catholic faith, and the taming of Confucianism, respectively. The present section aims to recapitulate the fundamental meanings and tenets of the strategic missiology of Jesuitism and Matteo Ricci in China, and to provide an interpretation of how this strategic outlook was incorporated in the doctrinal reform and accommodation of the Catholic mission, on the one hand, and in the ideological exchanges with Chinese Confucianism, on the other.

In a nutshell, the strategic approach of the Jesuit missionaries in China was aptly characterized as the apostolic accommodation of the Catholic dogmatics and European humanistic culture in order to achieve the evangelization of China. According to still ongoing debates regarding the theological catechism of the Catholic missions worldwide, the Jesuits rooted

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(1984), Mary Laven's *Mission to China: Matteo Ricci and the Jesuit Encounter with the East* (2011), Liam Brockey's *Journey to the East: The Jesuit Mission to China, 1579-1724* (2007), and Po-Chia Hsia's *A Jesuit in the Forbidden City: Matteo Ricci 1552-1610* (2010). At the crossroads between biographical investigation, historical narrativism and intellectual history, all the abovementioned books are perspectivist accounts of the life and achievements of Matteo Ricci, within the troublesome context of more than two centuries of Catholic turmoil. For the purpose of the present study, Mary Laven's *Mission to China: Matteo Ricci and the Jesuit Encounter with the East* stands as a remarkably speculative and symbolic reading of Ricci, mostly instructive for the reconstruction of his posterity as an outstanding cultural diplomat. The book consistently explores cultural politics and the policy of cultural accommodationism in China, science and culture as relevant tools of evangelization, the gift policy, the cultural encounters and exchanges between Ricci and "unconventional intellectuals and marginalized officials", and, last but not least, friendship as a prerequisite of cultural mediation. Ultimately, Mary Laven's book is a convincing narrative about soft power politics in early modern China.

their proselytizing maneuvers and tactics in the hermeneutical method of *accommodatio Christi* and *demonstratio Christiana* according to the magisterial canon and teachings of Thomas Aquinas' *Summa Theologica* and Erasmus of Rotterdam's *Ratio Vera Theologiae*. In other words, the Jesuit missiology in China resorted to apologetic and dogmatic expositions (i.e., in line with the doctrines of natural and positive revelation, respectively) of the Catholic faith with a view to inculcate the Christian morality and determine the Chinese to understand and live their lives according to Christian precepts. Largely appraised and/ or criticized in terms of accommodationism, the evangelization method used by the Jesuit missionaries was based upon the acknowledgement of commonalities and weaker parts of the Chinese religious and cultural environment, in the footsteps of Raimundus Lullus and his efforts to inculcate the Catholic faith in the Arab world mainly by recourse to Aristotle's logic and the European ancient deductive rationality.<sup>14</sup> According to one of the most competent scholars on Matteo Ricci, the Jesuits foresaw the probability of their strategic success based on seizing the contextual opportunity of religious and spiritual revivalism in late Ming China.<sup>15</sup>

Matteo Ricci undertook his missionary duty in China along the lines of the abovementioned strategic approach, plunging into utterly flexible, vacillatory and accommodationist actions dictated by contextual and circumstantial state of affairs during almost three decades of uninterrupted missiology. At least in the eyes of Chinese (intellectual and cultural) historians, Matteo Ricci was the most representative figure of missionary Catholicism in China, roughly in the period 1550-1750, alongside a cohort of missionary zealots he met during his apostolate in China, including Sebastiano de Ursis, Diego de Pantoja, Lazzaro Cattaneo, Gaspar Ferreira, Joao da Rocha.<sup>16</sup> However, the Catholic Jesuits who exerted the most substantial influence on Matteo Ricci's activity in China were Alessandro Valignano (the visitor of the Catholic mission in China), his predecessor and

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<sup>14</sup> Lackner, *art. cit.*, pp. 34-35.

<sup>15</sup> Po-Chia Hsia, *A Jesuit in the Forbidden City: Matteo Ricci 1552-1610*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010.

<sup>16</sup> Gianni Criveller, "Matteo Ricci and Giulio Aleni in Late Ming China" in *Bulletin of Portuguese and Japanese Studies*, vol. II, no. 2, 2016, p. 33.



close collaborator in China Michele Ruggieri, and his successor Niccolò Longobardo. While Ruggieri took the strategic step of establishing the first Catholic legation in China – a plan which failed mainly because of the instability of the Catholic Church (five popes in two years, 1590-1592) –, Longobardo continued and enlarged Ruggieri and Ricci's strategic efforts in China by endorsing "liturgical inculturation, promotion of Chinese clergy, independence of the Chinese mission from Macao and scientific apostolate".<sup>17</sup> Moreover, Longobardo sent Nicolas Trigault to Rome to recruit more missionary scientists, bring more books to China, and get permission from Pope Paul V to use Chinese as liturgical language.<sup>18</sup> In the early stage of the Catholic missiology in China, Ruggieri and Ricci had to confront harsher realities and a general atmosphere of disbelief and reluctance was dominant among the Chinese officials and intellectuals. Ruggieri and Ricci started to disseminate the Catholic teachings dressed like Buddhist monks; later, seizing the incompatibility between Chinese Buddhism and the Catholic doctrine, they tactically adopted more scholarly-like outfits and habits specific to Confucian literati. Cautiously and circumspectly planned, especially Ricci's two-steps strategic missiology had prioritized proselytization and looked for good will of the Chinese regarding Christianity; mass conversions were to be achieved in the second step, after the gradual and gentle familiarization and catechization of carefully selected Chinese officials and literati. By and large, Matteo Ricci's strategic missiology and method of evangelization were criticized either for their over compromising approach or for the concealment of their real goals.<sup>19</sup> Ricci's prudent strategy of accommodationism and compromise have led to allegations of paganism and flawed methodology;<sup>20</sup> accusing Ricci of concealing the real target of his missiological commitment raise legitimate questions about the systematic character, consistency of actions and coherence of methods within the overall strategy. Further failures of Ricci's strategic missiology would include the non-fulfillment of the papal embassy, the misstep in meeting the Chinese

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<sup>17</sup> *Idem*, "The Missionary Method of Matteo Ricci" in *Tripod*, vol. XXX, no. 158, 2010, p. 20.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>19</sup> Jacques Gernet, *Cina e Cristianesimo: Azione e Reazione*, Bologna: Marietti, 1982.

<sup>20</sup> Paula Esguerra, "Pragmatic Cultural Accommodation: A Study of Matteo Ricci's Chinese Works" in *ICU Comparative Culture*, no. 47, 2015, p. 49.

emperor Wan-li, non-admission of young Chinese converts to priesthood, and non-permission for Christian preaching in China. In the eyes of Ricci's missiology detractors, his successful scientific apostolate and fruitful cultural exchanges is the equivalent of investing too much (effort) to achieve too little (results).<sup>21</sup>

Notwithstanding all controversies and irresoluteness surrounding his missionary agency in China, Matteo Ricci has been mostly attacked for what he failed to achieve, with little consideration for his risky and uneasy ventures in an utterly unreliable and idiosyncratic religious and cultural environment. The present study allegedly contends that the assessment of Matteo Ricci as a hardline missiologist is a flawed one, and that a relevant restoration of his cogent posterity would have to revisit both his missionary achievements and failures through the focal point of his agency in the field of cultural diplomacy. First and foremost, it is probably more accurate to render his strategic missiology to catechetical and cultural indoctrination rather than to blatant militancy of a zealot. Matteo Ricci had undeniably contributed to the "Sinification of Catholicism"<sup>22</sup> precisely through his catechetical endeavor to 'export' the Catholic terminology to Chinese culture; this effort led to the emergence of new religious terms and the formation of a cutting-edge Catholic vocabulary in Chinese. Ricci strikingly managed to infuse the Chinese language with canonical terms through the cultural techniques of paraphrasing (i.e., discovering new meanings of existing terms) and/ or transliteration (i.e., direct translation of words). The hidden strategy of such endeavors was the subtle and gradual change of meanings associated with Chinese (Confucian) symbols in order to 'Catholicize' them.<sup>23</sup> In line with the previous considerations, his most ecumenical work

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<sup>21</sup> More equitable criticism of Matteo Ricci recognizes certain benefits of his missionary strategy in China: a successful policy of accommodation to Chinese culture, the top-down approach on evangelization, the successful dissemination of European cultural values and civilization, and genuine openness to Chinese culture and values (see Nicolas Standaert, "Matteo Ricci: Shaped by the Chinese" in *Thinking Faith: The Online Journal of the British Jesuits*, 21 May 2010, pp. 1-8).

<sup>22</sup> Zhao Ming, *Matteo Ricci and the Missionary Role in the Evolution of Chinese Lexicon*, London and New York: Routledge, 2024, p. 37.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 47. For a detailed understanding of the strategic translation of the Catholic vocabulary in Chinese, see especially chapter 2, pp. 35-53.

*The True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven* (1603) stands both as (religious/doctrinal) Catholic catechism and (cultural/rational) apologetics. Moreover, at the intersection between the spiritual and cultural in China, the Jesuit missionaries published hagiographic works (e.g., lives of Christian saints) in the form of moralizing stories appraised by the Chinese literati.<sup>24</sup> The apex of this intrusive strategy of 'tarnishing' the Chinese language with doctrinal terms of the Catholic faith was the defamatory 'Chinese Rites Controversy' which started at the turn of the 18<sup>th</sup> century and which aimed to reverse the less assertive and compromising strategic missiology of the Jesuits in favor of a more aggressive and uncompromising approach of the Mendicant friars.<sup>25</sup> Against all odds, Ricci's disciples continued his struggle of "perils and labors" by translating the Chinese classics in foreign languages.<sup>26</sup>

Another tactical move in the service of Ricci's strategic missiology was consistent with taking advantage of the Chinese literati's discontent with the spiritual disenfranchisement of classical Confucian sagesse by the movement of neo-Confucianism permeated by Buddhist and Daoist teachings. Ricci aptly seized the opportunity of interpreting Confucianism as a monotheistic tradition corrupted by Buddhism and, fully aware of the decreasing social status and prestige of the Buddhist monks which had gradually evolved after the 845 Buddhist persecutions, he committed to a proselytizing strategy that could be rendered to a form of "Christian/Confucian syncretism".<sup>27</sup> Because Ricci understood Confucianism as a

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<sup>24</sup> See the genre of 'Shanshu' – books on morality and goodness (Criveller, *art. cit.*, pp. 34-35).

<sup>25</sup> Noticing the slow progress of the Jesuit missionaries in achieving notable progress of evangelization in China, the Catholic Church sent Mendicant Franciscan and Dominican friars to China in the 1630s to combat both Jesuitism and Confucianism; the bellicose rhetoric and actions of the Mendicants led to the official forbiddance of Christianity by the Chinese emperor in 1721 (see Sarah C. Hinds, "The Model of Missionaries: Matteo Ricci and the Chinese Rites Controversy" in *Aletheia - The Alpha Chi Journal of Undergraduate Scholarship*, vol. 1, issue 1, 2016, pp. 8-9).

<sup>26</sup> Yves Camus, "Matteo Ricci's legacy: a loving patience" in *Thinking Faith: The Online Journal of the British Jesuits*, 11 May 2010.

<sup>27</sup> Liu, *op. cit.*, p. 12. For further details regarding Matteo Ricci's eulogy of Confucianism to the detriment of Buddhism and Daoism, see Jacob J. Andrews and Robert A. Andrews, "Bringing 'the True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven' to Unreached People" in *Journal of the Evangelical Missiological Society*, vol. 4, no. 1, 2024, pp. 17-28 and Ana C. Hosne, "Friendship among Literati. Matteo Ricci SJ (1552–1610) in Late Ming China" in *Transcultural Studies*, no. 1, 2014, pp. 190-214.

system of moral philosophy rather than a religion, it seemed strategically less problematic to search for spiritual compatibilities<sup>28</sup> between the Catholic dogmatism and the Confucian civil and moral precepts than to domesticate what he understood as idolatrous Buddhism. Consequently, Ricci took the strategic responsibility of catholicizing Confucianism in two steps: firstly, he excoriated Buddhism by rejecting the worshipping practices and the doctrine of reincarnation;<sup>29</sup> secondly, Ricci eulogized Confucius as a great philosopher, alongside the most prolific thinkers of the European tradition in philosophy (Socrates, Epictetus, Seneca) and saluted the moral and civic ideals of self-cultivation, familial and political harmony, peacefulness, and virtuous conduct in the public service.<sup>30</sup>

Considering the overall strategic stances of the Jesuit missions roughly in the timespan of two centuries, 1550-1750, the Asian missiologists diligently committed themselves to Catholic evangelization in two ways: on the one hand, the hard-power strategic approach utilized missiology as a tool of political and economic expansionism and was specific to imperial competition - between Spain and Portugal – and to these states’ attempts to win the support of Catholic believers;<sup>31</sup> on the other, the soft-power strategic approach equated successful missiology with cultural and scientific apostolate and adopted less assertive tactical moves in terms of cultural accommodationism and/ or inculturation.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Bohnet, *art. cit.*, p. 80.

<sup>29</sup> Andrews and Andrews, *art. cit.*, p. 21; Hinds, *art. cit.*, pp. 6-7.

<sup>30</sup> Chen Hong, “On Matteo Ricci’s Interpretations of Chinese Culture” in *Coolabah*, no.16, 2015, p. 93.

<sup>31</sup> The Jesuits who undertook a hardline approach on missiology were called the first modern geopolitical strategists (see, for instance, Luke Clossey, *Salvation and Globalization in the Early Jesuit Missions*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

<sup>32</sup> Gerard J. Hughes, “Matteo Ricci in Post-Christian Europe” in *The Way*, vol. 44, no. 2, 2005, p. 71. The strategy of cultural accommodationism undertaken by soft-power Jesuit missiologists – Ricci included – had a three-folded approach: doctrinal (i.e., adaptation of Christianity and preaching), cultural (i.e., adoption of habits, dress, etiquette, manners, and language) and educational (i.e., scientific apostolate) (Esguerra, *art. cit.*, p. 32). It goes without saying that the soft-power Jesuit missiologists genuinely acted as cultural diplomats.

## The scientific apostle

Scientific apostolate was no less strategic than missiology per se: strategically, it consisted of an indirect maneuver to promote the Christian faith, first and foremost by 'winning the hearts and minds' of the Chinese social and intellectual elites as a prerequisite of increasing the missionaries' prestige and admiration.<sup>33</sup> In this way, by cultivating cultural encounters and exchanges, the Jesuit missionaries hoped to gain trust and ultimately support for their delicate duties of proselytization and evangelization. Three factors were consequential for the dissemination of European soft-power politics in China through the agency of Jesuit scientific apostles: the existence of printed culture in China, the Jesuit's self-awareness of the superiority of European rationalistic and humanistic culture, and a certain propensity of Chinese intellectual elites to improve their practical knowledge. Firstly, xylography and woodblock printing were widespread available techniques of printed culture in 16<sup>th</sup> century China and this fact decisively impacted upon the dissemination of education, humanistic values and sciences through the virtuous commitment to self-cultivation.<sup>34</sup> Secondly, the Jesuit missionaries in China strongly opposed the ritualistic culture of Chinese Confucianism and Buddhism to the Western standard of rationality, and the Chinese pictographic way of thinking to the deductive Western logicism of Aristotle and Euclid, respectively.<sup>35</sup> Equally important for the possibility of disseminating the Western religious and cultural values in China was the so-called 'library policy' of Matteo Ricci's follower Nicola Longobardo.<sup>36</sup> Thirdly, the Chinese literati were interested in refining the Western wisdom into practical and utilitarian knowledge by assimilating the scientific progress of European civilization.<sup>37</sup> The scientific apostolate of Matteo Ricci points to the opportunities opened by the power of Western knowledge on Chinese intelligentsia and purportedly explains how the Jesuit missionary

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<sup>33</sup> Criveller, "The Missionary Method of Matteo Ricci", *art. cit.*

<sup>34</sup> See Rubies, *art. cit.* and Fontana, "Matteo Ricci sets out to conquer the Middle Country!" in *Perini Journal*, no. 37, 2011. According to biographer Michela Fontana, Matteo Ricci strenuously endorsed the crucial importance of written culture for future generations.

<sup>35</sup> Lackner, *art. cit.*, p. 40; Wiest, *art. cit.*, p. 18.

<sup>36</sup> Noël Golvers, "The Western library of Matteo Ricci and its aftermath: some critical observations" in *Bulletin of Portuguese and Japanese Studies*, vol. II, no. 2, 2016, p. 70.

<sup>37</sup> Lackner, *art. cit.*, p. 36.

commendably used cultural diplomacy in attempting to reach the ultimate goal of his mission, the Catholicization of China. Even if he failed in the last respect, his outstanding mastery in disseminating the Western science in the Middle Kingdom is undisputable. The present section illustrates Ricci's skillfulness and proficiency in translation and the art of memory, geography and cartography, mathematics, cosmology and music.

One paragraph of the previous section aimed to depict how, through the linguistic stratagems of paraphrasing and transliteration, Matteo Ricci contributed to the catholicization of Chinese culture as an embedded strategy of his missiology.<sup>38</sup> In addition – and in reverse – he also translated the Confucian classics and published *The Chinese Character Table* introducing, in these ways, the Chinese sagesse and language in the West, and marking the debut of Sinology in European culture.<sup>39</sup> By 1594, Ricci had already translated the classical thinking of Confucianism (Confucius, Mencius, Great Learning, Zhongyong) into Latin;<sup>40</sup> moreover, in the art of translation, beyond the techniques of paraphrasing and transliteration, Ricci introduced the methods of word-making (i.e., combining two or more Chinese characters to create a new word) and analogy (i.e., identifying patterns of word creation and inventing new words through semantic analogy) – unique contributions to the emergence of new scientific and specialized terms.<sup>41</sup> Ricci's excellence in the art of translation was doubled by rhetorical finesse and commendable manipulation of the art of memory. Ricci perfected his mnemonic technique – alternatively called 'the memory palace technique' – based on the ancient 'method of loci' that goes back to Simonides of Ceos, Pliny, Quintilian, Aquinas, and his fellow and contemporary Jesuit Cypriano

<sup>38</sup> See *infra*, pp. 9-10.

<sup>39</sup> Henri Bernard, *Critical Biography of Matteo Ricci*, translated into Chinese by Guan Zhenhu, Beijing: The Commercial Press, 1993, p. 158.

<sup>40</sup> Hong, *art. cit.*, p. 89.

<sup>41</sup> Ming, *op. cit.*, pp. 187-188, 198. With Matteo Ricci, some critics advocate the idea of the "translational turn" of culture (see Michaela Kästl, "Mapping the Ambiguous – Intercultural Encounters in Matteo Ricci's World Map Kunyu Wanguo Quantu" in Antje Fluchter, Andreas Gipper, Susanne Greilich and Hans-Jürgen Lüsebrink (eds.), *Übersetzungspolitik in der Frühen Neuzeit/ Translation Policy and the Politics of Translation in the Early Modern Period*, Berlin: J. B. Metzler, 2024, p. 228) or of his magisterial agency in the "space of in-between" (Nicolas Standaert, "Matteo Ricci and the Chinese: Spaces of Encounter between the Self and the Other" in *Euntes Docete*, vol. 63, no. 1, 2010, pp. 120–121).

Soarez.<sup>42</sup> Starting by developing a personal imaginary memory palace and logically ordering knowledge by associating powerful images acquired in the process of learning with their locations (i.e., the rooms of the imaginary palace), Ricci's 'memory palace technique' became instrumental for educating the art of memory among his Chinese disciples and effectively functioned as his very method of memorizing the Bible, Confucius' writings and the Chinese pictographs by heart. Nowadays, the mnemonic technique has developed into useful applications in the fields of cognitive and behavioral psychology.<sup>43</sup>

In the case of Ricci's scientific apostolate in geography and cartography, it is quite probable that Ricci's world map not only stirred the practical curiosity of the Chinese literati but was also meant to impress the Chinese emperor in order to get the permit for a permanent residence in Beijing alongside with getting the right of legal preaching in mainland China.<sup>44</sup> His maps were designed to meet two additional goals: firstly, the Sinocentric cartographic plan – i.e., placing China (the Middle Kingdom) at the center of his cartographic representation, Europe on the far left, and the Americas on the far right of the two-dimensional design – stood as a tactical endeavor to satisfy the ego of the Chinese; secondly, Ricci's cartographic representation aimed to replace the horizontally flat-type of Chinese symbolic maps with a cosmological and theologically-loaded significance of the spherical shape of the earth.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Jonathan Spence, *The Memory Palace of Matteo Ricci*, New York: Viking Books, 1984, p. 13.

<sup>43</sup> Barli Bram, Aditya A. Sutono and Tabita Hermayani, "Applying the principles of Matteo Ricci's memory palace technique" in *Journal of Applied Studies in Language*, vol. 4, issue 1, 2020, p. 11.

<sup>44</sup> The attempt to arouse the Chinese emperor's admiration and to benefit of privileged treatment stood at the basis of Ricci's "cartographic politics" (see Cheng Fangyi, "Pleasing the Emperor: Revisiting the Figured Chinese Manuscript of Matteo Ricci's Maps" in *Journal of Jesuit Studies*, no. 6, 2019, pp. 31-43). Another commentator identified other three – rather cultural – purposes of Ricci's cartography: to offer maps as gifts to influential individuals, to exhibit the Jesuit erudition, and to advance the concept of the Westerner, respectively (Florin S. Morar, "The Westerner: Matteo Ricci's World Map and the Quandaries of European Identity in the Late Ming Dynasty" in *Journal of Jesuit Studies*, no. 6, 2019, p. 16).

<sup>45</sup> Kästl, *art. cit.*, pp. 237-242.

No less significant was the dissemination of Western scientific rationality and innovations within the overall evangelization strategy of Jesuit missiology in China. Centered upon the Aristotelian paradigm of scientific discovery and the deductive model of logical reasoning, the scientific apostolate of the Jesuits in China aimed to increase the intellectual prestige of the missionaries, to gradually change the peculiarities of Chinese intelligentsia mindset, and to be the container of the Western understanding of both the mundane world and the universe according to the Christian faith. The unity of exact and practical sciences, endorsed by the Quadrivium medieval tradition (i.e., arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, music) became the pattern of scientific education and popularization of natural sciences and aimed to exploit the Chinese intellectuals' interest and curiosity for practical discoveries and innovations. The fact that Matteo Ricci strived to achieve the translation of Euclid's *Elements* into Chinese,<sup>46</sup> to integrate notions of astronomy and cosmology into a comprehensive, coherent and systematic view of the universe, and even to educate the musical sensibility of the Chinese literati<sup>47</sup> speaks volumes not only about his commitment to enculturate sciences within the system of Christian beliefs in China but also about his eagerness to commit himself to long-term cultural dialogue, exchanges and mediation as characteristic marks of cultural diplomacy.

### **Ricci's understanding of friendship as a cultural diplomacy gadget**

Considering the relative freedom of the Jesuit missionaries to select the most appropriate strategies of evangelization, according to circumstantial and contextual conditions, personal inclinations, talents and matter of course

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<sup>46</sup> Matteo Ricci published the translation of the first six books of Euclid's *Elements* into Chinese language in 1607, three years before his death. His endeavor was completed only in 1857, due to the cooperation between the British missionary Alexander Wylie and the Chinese mathematician Li Shanlan (see Chuanming Zong, "The Journey of Euclid's *Elements* to China" in *Notices of the American Mathematical Society*, vol. 70, no. 6, 2023, p. 953).

<sup>47</sup> In 1601, Matteo Ricci finished his operetta *Eight Songs for a Western Harpsichord*. The Chinese intelligentsia was fascinated with practical knowledge about tools and devices – "maps, books, astrolabes, quadrants, globes" (Hsia, *op. cit.*, p. 268) - from various scientific domains, such as "military, agricultural, and artisanal techniques, drugs and medicine, botany, geology, geography, and hydraulic engineering" (Fontana, *op. cit.*, p. 187). Moreover, emperor Wan-li himself was fascinated with two mechanical clocks and a harpsichord - among other things and curiosities - Matteo Ricci had prepared as gifts, hoping to meet the emperor.



interpersonal relations, Matteo Ricci highly valued the virtue of friendship as an inexhaustible resource of his sensibility, out of petty interests and calculations and sometimes overestimating friendship's effective force in reaching his ultimate missionary agenda. The present section argues that the cultivation of friendship as a more or less impactful tactic of his missionary goals exceeds the realm of political and Catholic interests and becomes (one of) the most explanatory confirmation of his excellent agency in the field of cultural diplomacy. The unobtrusive perspective on cultivating pragmatic friendship only, stands for a pejorative understanding of its opportunistic and submissive stance for two reasons: to replace the Chinese utilitarian views on friendship with its loftier Western version and to use friendship as an instrument of proselytization in practice.<sup>48</sup> Roughly understood in terms of manipulation of Confucianism,<sup>49</sup> procedural maneuver to gain influence, and/or behavioral cultural accommodationism, pragmatic friendship poorly reflects the essential *modus vivendi* of Matteo Ricci. Contrary to this reductionist rendering, Ricci cultivated virtuous friendship as a kind of a *summum bonum* of the five public virtues of the Chinese moral system: "etiquette, righteousness, benevolence, wisdom, credibility"<sup>50</sup> and took a rather anti-pragmatic stance by understanding its virtuousness in terms of self-cultivation, charity, and anti-flattery.<sup>51</sup> His treaty *On Friendship* (1595) is much more than a simple collection of philosophical Western aphorisms or simply a didactic attempt to win the Chinese elites - under the influence of Cicero's dialogue on friendship *Laelius* - considering that, as Ricci's first major work, it could be grasped as a propaedeutic approach to his entire missionary strategies and actions in China. Friendship as a virtue could not be enacted apart from self-cultivation and erudite conversations: it is worth mentioning that Ricci's Chinese friends and interlocutors were well-educated officials and literati, and, regardless of his many resident places in mainland China, Ricci frequently met members of the most famous academic schools (e.g., Hanlin Academy, Dongling Academy, Bailudong Academy,

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<sup>48</sup> Maximilian C. Weiher, "A Friend Who Does Me No Good: Aphorism in Matteo Ricci's *on Friendship*" in *Asian Languages and Cultures Honors Projects*, no. 3, 2023.

<sup>49</sup> Hosne, "Shaping Virtuous Friendship: the Jesuit Matteo Ricci (1552-1610) in Late Ming China", in *European University Institute Working Paper MWP* 25, 2011, p. 5.

<sup>50</sup> Hong, *art. cit.*, p. 91.

<sup>51</sup> Hosne, "Friendship Among Literati...", *art. cit.*, p. 196.

Taizhou School, Cheng-Zhu School) as well as literati associations, literary clubs, assemblies for philosophical debates, and Buddhist Laymen Groups.<sup>52</sup> Ultimately, to win the Chinese literati's friendship, admiration, benevolence and trust, Matteo Ricci had to put to work the entire paraphernalia of diplomatic skills: piety, modesty, calmness, composure, patience, prudence, tact, discretion, politeness, courtesy.<sup>53</sup>

Since there is no evidence that the life and missionary activity of Ricci was imbued by zealotism and assertive militancy in upholding the Catholic creed in China, Matteo Ricci kept a rather low profile as a (geo)political figure within the Jesuit missionary order. Moreover, considering both his inappetence for a unilateral approach to proselytization and his overall preference for mutuality and partnership in the catholicization process of the Chinese, one could accurately render his missiology and scientific apostolate to an unambiguous signature in the field of cultural diplomacy.<sup>54</sup> Two intrinsic traits of his agency as a cultural diplomat in China are quintessential: cultural mediation and negotiation, and cultural accommodation and integration, respectively.

Firstly, cultural mediation and negotiation are consistent outlooks of Ricci's scientific apostolate. Both defenders and detractors of Ricci's missionary career in China appreciate in positive terms the Jesuit's general conduct as a cultural mediator and negotiator. Ricci's proficiency in Mandarin Chinese, his translational tour de force (books, scientific works, dictionaries), the subtle handling and taming of Confucian masters for evangelization purposes, the cultural exchanges with the Chinese literati and more or less marginalized officials through friendly liaisons stand for

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<sup>52</sup> Criveller, "Matteo Ricci and Giulio Aleni...", *art. cit.*, p. 31; Hosne, "Shaping Virtuous Friendship...", *art. cit.*; Xie, *art. cit.* In 1607, Matteo Ricci published a codicil to his 1595 treaty *On Friendship* entitled *Ten Discourses of the Man of Paradox* which stands as a guide for the popularization of virtuous friendship based on the art of erudite conversations (Hsia, *op. cit.*).

<sup>53</sup> Hsia, *op. cit.*, delineates a comprehensive portrait – both moral and psychological - of Matteo Ricci by comparison with his fellow Jesuits from the standpoint of diplomatic aptitudes.

<sup>54</sup> Hsia, *op. cit.*, p. 246, remarks that during the last nine years of his life (1601-1610) in Beijing, Ricci founded a small Catholic community and converted about 70 souls, a small number from the standpoint of quantitative expectations of his missiology. The total number of converts baptized by Ricci in all the places of his missionary residence in China was a little over 2000 individuals.

illustrative postures of a genuine cultural mediator and negotiator.<sup>55</sup> By and large, Ricci's respect for the diversity of cultures, mutual understanding and the possibility of translational and transactional cultures renders him as an outstanding personality of early modern cultural diplomacy.

Secondly, the cultural accommodationism of Matteo Ricci's missiology in China has been received rather critically neither because of a necessarily inadequate approach of cultural exchanges nor because of rigid Eurocentric stances of criticism per se. The main focus of most critical perspectives addresses the issue of purportedly compromising, opportunistic and hesitating conduct of Ricci that had eventually led to poor results of his missionary activity in China. In other words, critics have assessed Ricci's accommodationist strategy as futile and onerous, and his cooperative efforts as an ancillary attitude towards the Chinese. Accordingly, Matteo Ricci's commitment as a Catholic missionary has been deemed to a general reactive positioning instead of a more assertive/proactive one.<sup>56</sup> However, alternatively assessed as inculturation, Ricci's undertaking of accommodationism from the viewpoint of cultural integration has undisputable merits and has fomented notable developments in the fields of culture, linguistics and intellectual history. The most far-reaching achievement of Ricci's integrative outlook on culture has been quintessential for a two-way street paradigm of intercultural communication and exchanges: in one direction, one could acknowledge the 'Sinification' of Western culture and the emergence of Western Sinology; inversely, the popularization of Christianity, Western rationality, humanism and scientific inventions – alongside assiduous efforts in the adaptation of Confucianism – has effectively contributed to the

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<sup>55</sup> Ricci's pioneering activism as a cultural mediator could be illustrated by his (metaphoric) dictum: "I am leaving you on the threshold of an open door, that leads to a great reward, but only after labors endured and dangers encountered" (Matteo Ricci, *China in the Sixteenth Century: The Journals of Matthew Ricci: 1583-1610*, translated by Louis J. Gallagher, New York: Random House, 1953, p. 563). For further instructive references to his cardinal role as a cultural mediator, negotiator of cultural differences (Rubies, *art. cit.*, p. 275) and promoter of cultural exchanges, see Liu Enming, *Matteo Riccio - Cross Cultural Angel between China and the West*, Zhengzhou: Henan Literature and Art Publishing House, 2000 and Luther Carrington-Goodrich and Chaoying Fang (eds.), *Dictionary of Ming Biography (1368-1644)*, New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1976, p. 1144.

<sup>56</sup> Standaert, *art. cit.*, uses the expression "shaped by the Other" to define the meaning of cultural integration in Matteo Ricci.

Westernization of the Chinese intellectual mindset.<sup>57</sup> More recent research has also signaled that Ricci's treatise *On Friendship* and the diffuse circulation of Western knowledge in Asia have contributed to the emergence of Koreanology.<sup>58</sup> The long-range reputation of Matteo Ricci in China was lucidly summarized by one his most competent Chinese researchers: "His was a world of *Christianitas*: a measured world of humanistic learning, moral virtue, a synthesis of Christian doctrines and Confucian ethics, and devotion to the afterlife".<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Xie, *art. cit.*, p. 6; Wiest, *art. cit.*, p. 19.

<sup>58</sup> Kim Kihoon, "A Short Introduction to the Codices of Matteo Ricci's *Jiaoyoulun*" in *Journal of Humanities*, vol. 81, no. 3, 2024, pp. 249-270.

<sup>59</sup> Hsia, *op. cit.*, p. 248.

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