

THE METAMORPHOSES OF MATTEO RICCI: A CASE STUDY ON RELIGIOUS VISUAL COMMUNICATION

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ABSTRACT. *The Metamorphoses of Matteo Ricci: A Case Study On Religious Visual Communication.* The Jesuit missionary Matteo Ricci's consecutive adoption of three different Chinese attires was crucial to the establishment of the Catholic Church in Late Ming China. An appropriate cultural contextualization suggests its nature and contributes to a better understanding of its consequences and relevance to the Church in our times.

Keywords: Catholicism in Late Ming China, Jesuit Missions in the Far East, Catholic-Confucian Dialogue, Catholic-Buddhist Dialogue, Inculturation, Matteo Ricci, Michele Ruggieri, Alessandro Valignano.

In nature, the appearance of an animal – its color, its pattern, its body shape, the form of its fur and hair, etc. often transmits a message to its fellow herd and potential threats. The appearance may also be a disguise. This also applies to human society since its very early stages. Unlike in the realm of animals, humans, as self-staging and self-reflecting beings, strive to imitate models – which are generally established by the society in which they live, and the imitation of the model's appearance, especially their clothing, is an essential part of human's effort to be

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“better”¹. Consequently, the appearance of a society’s “countermodels” could cause its imitators’ ignorance and marginalization by mainstream society, becoming an obstacle that negatively affects their communication.

This was particularly true in pre-modern Chinese society. In traditional Chinese philology, there is even an interpretation that equates the term “China (华夏)” with “The land of solemn rites and refined clothes”². In addition to its practical function, clothing had at least three functions in pre-modern Chinese society: The political function, which separates the Chinese and the “Barbarians”; The social function, indicating the social hierarchy of its bearer; and the cultural function, which testifies one’s adherence to Chinese cultural practices³.

Considering these aspects, we could expect that any foreign element introduced to pre-modern Chinese society to be accepted by the general population should have passed through a Sinicizing process, not only in the content but also in the appearance; Christianity wouldn’t have been an exception. Early examples of Sinicized Christianity include the “Nestorian” texts from the Tang Dynasty (618-690, 705-907), which adopted the Sinicized Buddhist religious terminology⁴. We can also find the Chinese-Buddhist-styled Manichaeic icon of the “Buddha Jesus” realized during the Southern Song Dynasty (960-1279)⁵.

Although the first Catholic Church in China was built in Beijing in 1299, during the time of the Yuan Dynasty (1271-1368), by the Franciscan missionary and later Archbishop of Beijing Giovanni da Montecorvino⁶. As a consequence of the

¹ R. Meinhold, *Fashion Myths, A Cultural Critique*, Bielefeld, Transcript Verlag, 2013, pp. 37-38.

² The Orthodox Exposition of the Commentary of Zuo on the Spring and Autumn Annals [春秋左传正义], vol. 56, v. 17. <<https://ctext.org/wiki.pl?if=gb&chapter=398740&remap=gb#p18>>

³ This culminated at its apex during the early period of the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644) when the three functions were codified, and punitive measures were instituted for those who dared to dress in an “improper manner”. History of Ming [明史], vol. 41-44.
<<https://ctext.org/wiki.pl?if=gb&chapter=144164&remap=gb>;
<https://ctext.org/wiki.pl?if=gb&chapter=450806&remap=gb>;
<https://ctext.org/wiki.pl?if=gb&chapter=758293&remap=gb>;
<https://ctext.org/wiki.pl?if=gb&chapter=602372&remap=gb>>

⁴ H. Chen, “The Connection Between *Jingjiao* and Buddhist Texts in Late Tang China”, R. Malek, P. Hofrichter (eds.), *Jingjiao: the Church of the East in China and Central Asia*, Sankt Augustin, Institut Monumenta Serica, 2006, pp. 93-113.

⁵ Z. Gulácsi, “A Song Dynasty Manichaeic Painting of the Buddha Jesus”, *The Study of Art History*, vol. 10 (2008), Center for the Study of Art History at the Sun Yat-Sen University, pp. 139-189.

⁶ J. Charbonnier, *Histoire des chrétiens de Chine*, Paris, Desclée, 1992, pp. 61-67.

religious intolerance and the purge campaign against the foreign elements conducted by the Ming rulers during the transitional period between the Yuan and the Ming Dynasties, the origins of the existent Catholic Church in China could be traced only to the Jesuit missionary works of the late period of the Ming Dynasty⁷.

The establishment of new contacts between the West and the East during the Age of Discovery resuscitated the Catholic Church's ambitious plan to convert China to Christianity. Well-known Francis Xavier intended to evangelize in China, although he could not reach the Chinese Mainland and died on its shores on 3 December 1552 while waiting for a boat that would have sailed to the Mainland. In 1557 the Portuguese were permitted by the Ming authorities to establish their commercial colony in Macau - which was the first permanent contact point between Europe and China since the end of the Yuan Dynasty. Thenceforth the Jesuits from Macau and the Augustinians and Franciscans from Manila attempted to obtain residence permits in the Chinese Mainland. But they were expelled and, in many cases, maltreated by the authorities⁸.

Their failure could be attributed to their ignorance of the Chinese culture and language, which practically made their communication with the general local population impossible⁹. The personage who observed this barrier and intervened with proposals for solutions was Alessandro Valignano, who in 1572 was appointed Visitor of East India by Everard Mercurian, the Superior General of the Jesuits. During his mandate, the policy of inculturation of Catholic missions in the Far East was promulgated: Firstly, Valignano required that the new coming missionaries from Europe should have spent at least eight months learning the local language¹⁰; He founded the Saint Paul's College of Macau after the model of the University of Coimbra and dedicated it to the study and research of the Far Eastern Civilizations¹¹;

⁷ J. Motte [穆启蒙], *History of the Catholic Church in China* [中国天主教史], Taipei [台北], Kuangchi Cultural Group [光启文化事业], 1971, pp. 26-27.

⁸ *ibidem.*, pp. 32-41.

⁹ For example, in Macau, the Chinese Catholics were required to have a Portuguese name and to adopt European attire and customs. J. Sebes, "The predecessors of Matteo Ricci [利玛窦的前辈]", *Cultural Magazine of Macau* [澳门文化杂志], vol. 21 (1994), pp. 54-55.

¹⁰ K. Keulman, *Critical Moments in Religious History*, Mercer University Press, 1994, pp. 78-88.

¹¹ Li Xiangyu [李向玉], "The Role of the College of Saint Paul in the Cultural Dialogue between China and the West and its influence in our modern education [圣保禄学院在中西文化交流中的作用及其对我国近代教育的影响]", *Studies on Qing History* [清史研究], vol. 4 of 2000, p. 48.

He cultivated the formation of local clergy and admitted the first Chinese Novices into the Company of Jesus¹².

In this context, Valignano entrusted the objective of establishing a permanent mission in the Chinese Mainland to Michele Ruggieri and Matteo Ricci. The first was an Apulian Jesuit born in 1543, a laureate *in utroque iure* from the University of Naples, who served in the Court of Philip the Prudent. The second was born in 1552 in Macerata, a graduate of the Roman College, where he dedicated his studies not only to Philosophy and Theology; but as a pupil of Christopher Clavius, he learned mathematics and astronomy; later, such knowledge helped him to integrate into the Late Ming intellectual circles. Both were willing to learn about foreign cultures; they served in the Indian Mission before being assigned to the Chinese Mission and spent time learning the Chinese language in Macau¹³.

After three failed attempts from 9 March 1582 to 10 August 1583¹⁴, on 22-26 August of the same year, Ruggieri and Ricci were received into an audience with the Prefect (知府) of Zhaoqing (肇庆) Wang Pan (王泮); in which occasion, the Jesuits expressed their intention to live in China. The Prefect was benevolent and promised to intercede for their cause in front of the Viceroy (总督) of Liangguang (两广)¹⁵. On 14 September 1583, Feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross, they were granted permission to reside in the city, and on the following day, the Prefect indicated where they were going to build their mission¹⁶.

The Jesuit Mission in Zhaoqing was the first permanent Catholic mission in Ming China; this success was due to Ruggieri and Ricci's knowledge of Chinese culture and language and their adoption of Chinese costumes. At the very beginning (before they were granted permission to reside in Zhaoqing), when they first entered into contact with the locals, they most probably dressed in the ceremonial attire of the ordinary Chinese: "Quello con che mostrorno i Cinesi tutti molto contento, fu

¹² L. Pfister [费赖之], *Notices biographiques et bibliographiques sur les Jésuites de l'ancienne mission de Chine. 1552-1773* [明清在华耶稣会士列传及书目], Beijing [北京], Zhonghua Book Company [中华书局], 1995, p. 70.

¹³ Regarding the early life of Ruggieri: F. A. Gisondi, *Michele Ruggieri, Missionario in Cina e primo sinologo europeo e poeta cinese*, Milano, Jaca Book, 1999, pp. 19-42; Regarding the early life of Ricci: R. P.-C. Hsia, *A Jesuit in the Forbidden City, Matteo Ricci 1552-1610*, Oxford University Press, 2010, pp. 1-50.

¹⁴ Fonti Ricciane, vol. 1, pp. 159-175.

¹⁵ *ibidem.*, pp. 180-182

¹⁶ *ibidem.*, pp. 187

il vestirsi i Padri, con tutta la gente di sua casa, a guisa delle persone più oneste di questa nazione, per esser la veste loro modesta e lunga con le maniche anche lunghe, non molto diversa dalla nostra.”¹⁷

This passage indicates the Jesuits’ first metamorphosis and is often underestimated in the secondary sources, which emphasize their second (Buddhist monk’s attire) and third metamorphoses (Confucian scholar’s attire) because no other primary source mentions it. The term “persone più oneste di questa nazione”¹⁸ may erroneously lead us to interpret it as referring to the Confucian scholars, but if that was the case, why they later adopted the Buddhist monk’s attire? And why no primary source mentions this passage after they later officially adopted the Confucian scholar’s attire? It also can’t refer to the Buddhist monk’s attire, for in the same source, Ricci lamented the immoral lifestyle of the Chinese Buddhist monks.”¹⁹

“A guisa delle persone più oneste di questa nazione” most probably refers to *Shenyi* (深衣), the ceremonial attire of the ordinary Chinese. The *Shenyi* was intended to be worn during ceremonies, universally and indiscriminately, both by men and women of any social status, from the Emperor to the most humble person. It reflects the Confucian spirit of solemnity, restraint, and steadiness, and since its origins can be traced to the “Book of Rites”²⁰ and was devoid of any foreign element, it enjoyed extraordinarily high esteem during the Ming Dynasty, of which the cultural policy of its first decades was quite hostile toward foreign elements²¹. The universal and identitarian characters of the *Shenyi* explain the phrase “i Cinesi tutti molto contento”. But this was probably also one of the reasons behind the Jesuits’ second metamorphosis. They sought an elitist approach to evangelizing, and since *Shenyi* was a popular attire, it should have been substituted with an attire capable of demonstrating its bearers’ social status.

For the elitist approach to be fruitful, the Jesuits had at least two aspects to consider: Namely, who were the elite of Chinese society, and what could have provoked their attention? The Pre-Modern Indo-European social stratification was

¹⁷ *ibidem.*, pp. 192

¹⁸ In one of the Chinese translations, “persone più oneste di questa nazione” was erroneously translated as “ordinary Chinese people”. 利玛窦 [M. Ricci], *Della entrata della Compagnia di Giesù e della Christianità nella Cina* [耶稣会与天主教进入中国史], Beijing [北京], The Commercial Press [商务印书馆], 2017, p. 111.

¹⁹ *Fonti Ricciane*, vol. 1, pp. 125-126.

²⁰ The Classic of Rites: *Shenyi* [礼记: 深衣], *passim*. < <https://ctext.org/liji/shen-yi/zhs> >

²¹ Hu Minghui, “The Scholar’s Robe: Material Culture and Political Power in Early Modern China”, *Frontiers of History in China*, vol. 11 (3), 2016, pp. 339-375.

almost identical: In Medieval Europe, it consisted of *oratores*, *bellatores*, and *laboratores*; in India, it was divided into *Brahmins* (priests), *Kshatriyas* (warriors), *Vaishyas* (merchants), and *Shudras* (laborers). Both societies had an admiration for ascetical practices and contemplative lifestyles. Accordingly, the Jesuits in India appropriated the lifestyle of the *Brahmins*; the most prominent figure of this attempt was Roberto de Nobili, who lived among the *Brahmins* and learned Sanskrit, Hindu rituals, and ascetical practices²².

In Japan, the situation was different but similar. Francis Xavier arrived in Japan in August 1549. After a year, he realized that the Japanese despised his black cassock and mantle – the symbol of poverty that the Jesuits professed to assume; for in the Japanese culture, poverty is not an evangelical counsel for those willing to be perfect, but a lack of respect to the others and a proof of being marginalized by mainstream society. Because of this, Xavier decided to dress in a more solemn way²³, thereupon he got dressed in his liturgical vestment when he was received into an audience with Ōuchi Yoshitaka (大内義隆), the *daimyō* (大名) of Suō Province (周防國); who was enchanted by the beauty of the Catholic vestment of the epoch of the Counter-Reformation; he applauded and considered Xavier as “a living image of the gods in which we believe”²⁴.

Since the Buddhist monasteries were also lords of feudal estates in Pre-Modern Japan, the Buddhist monks enjoyed high prestige, although it was usually below the one enjoyed by the Japanese *bellatores*²⁵. Likewise, the Japanese had a cultural sensibility toward solemn rituals and decorated temples²⁶. Xavier observed it and began to dress in a silk Buddhist monastic robe named *kesa* (袈裟). This practice was followed by other Jesuits in Japan but was contested and forbidden by

²² R. P-C, Hsia, *A Jesuit in the Forbidden City*, p. 50.

²³ According to the Portuguese Jesuit and interpreter João Rodrigues “Tçuzu”, Francis Xavier was maltreated by the Japanese in Yamaguchi (山口) because of his humble appearance. “As he despised all the things of the world, the Japanese despised him as despising the wandering beggars. So he decided to follow the Japanese costumes, as long as they were not sinful.” J. Rodrigues Tçuzu [ジョアン・ロドリゲス], *Ecclesiastical History of Japan* [日本教會史], vol. 2, Tokyo [東京], Iwanami Shoten [岩波書店], 1979, pp. 447-448.

²⁴ L. Fróis [ルイス・フロイス], *History of Japan* [日本史], Tokyo [東京], Heibonsha [平凡社], 1987, p. 101.

²⁵ K. Toshio, S. Gay, “Buddhism and Society in the Medieval Estate System”, *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies*, vol. 23 (1996), no. 3/4, pp. 287-319.

²⁶ J. Rodrigues Tçuzu [ジョアン・ロドリゲス], *Ecclesiastical History of Japan* [日本教會史], vol. 2, Tokyo [東京], Iwanami Shoten [岩波書店], 1979, pp. 447-448.

Francisco Cabral, who arrived in Japan in the spring of 1570 as the Superior of the mission; for the reason that he considered it to be in contradiction with the vow of poverty and ordered the Jesuit missionaries in Japan to re-adopt their black cassock and mantle; but with the exception of the Portuguese Jesuit Baltasar Lopes, all the missionaries were against his decision²⁷. This situation lasted until 1579 when Alessandro Valignano came to the Japanese mission and decided to adopt a compromised way; the Jesuits in Japan were to dress in black *kesa*, which was not made with silk; he also emphasized that since the Japanese highly appreciated physical cleanliness and the Buddhist monks observed it, the Jesuits should have the same behavior²⁸.

Being unaware of the cultural differences between China and Japan, Valignano applied this rule also to the Jesuit Mission in the Chinese Mainland²⁹. Actually, the Chinese were also unaware of the religious differences between the Catholics and the Buddhists, they observed many apparent similarities between the Jesuits and the Buddhist monks: both of them renounced the world to adopt a spiritual lifestyle, both were celibates and had tonsure on their head, etc; Catholics believe in the Holy Trinity, and Buddhists believe in the *Triratna* (Three Jewels, the enlightened person as *Buddha*, his teachings as *Dharma* and his disciples as *Sangha*), both Catholics and Buddhists believe in the *post-mortem* heaven and hell, Catholics practice asceticism and almsgiving, have commandments and common prayers, so do the Buddhists³⁰.

²⁷ K. Takase [高瀬弘一郎], *The Company of Jesus and Japan* [イエズス会と日本], Tokyo [東京], Iwanami Shoten [岩波書店], 1988, pp. 124-125.

²⁸ A. Valignano [ヴァリニャーノ], *Memories of the visit to Japan* [日本巡察記], Heibonsha [平凡社], 1985, p. 121.

²⁹ Huang Zhengqian [黄正谦], *The Prologue of the Introduction of the Western Science in the East - A New Study on the History of the Company of Jesus during the Late Ming and Early Qing period* [西学东渐之序幕——明末清初耶稣会史新编], Hong Kong [香港], Chung Hwa Book Company [中华书局有限公司], 2010, p. 8. There is no direct primary source that confirms the Jesuits' Japanese experience as the origin of Ruggieri and Ricci's adoption of the Buddhist monk's attire. But it was obvious since Valignano's jurisdiction included China, and he always instructed the Jesuits in China through letters. Zhang Fengzhen (张奉箴), "The Predecessors of Matteo Ricci's entrance to China [利玛窦来华前驱]", *Theological Studies of the Fu Jen Catholic University* [辅仁大学神学论集], vol. 56 (1983), pp. 159-160. Augusto Luca considers Valignano's decisions on the Japanese Mission as the source of inspiration for Ricci and other Jesuit missionaries in the Far East. A. Luca, *Alessandro Valignano (1539-1606), La missione come dialogo con i popoli e le culture*, Bolgona, Editrice Missionaria Italiana, 2005, p. 6.

³⁰ J. Gernet [谢和耐], *Chine et christianisme: La première confrontation* [中国与基督教: 中西文化的首次撞击], Beijing [北京], The Commercial Press [商务印书馆], 2013, pp. 110-111.

Another reason behind the second metamorphosis was the urge of the Ming authorities. In addition to the aforementioned similarities, it was easier for the Chinese officials to incorporate the Jesuits into existent categories of Chinese society than to create new categories and new rules especially made for them. In a letter dated 7 February 1583 addressed to Claudio Acquaviva, the Superior General of the Jesuits, Ruggieri mentioned that Chen Rui (陈瑞) the Viceroy of Liangguang urged the Jesuits to adopt the attire of the Chinese Buddhist monks, a proposal which he accepted enthusiastically in order to “*Ut Christo Sinas lucrifaciamus*”³¹. When this happened, Ricci was in Macau, and he appreciated Ruggieri’s acceptance to adopt the Buddhist monk’s attire, considering it “the best attire that he (the Viceroy) could have granted to the fathers”³².

However, the effects of this adoption were totally contrary to their intentions and adverse to their mission. In contradistinction to Japanese society, where the official religion was Shintoism, the official ideology of Chinese society was Confucianism. Indigenous Shintoism is a nature religion with a non-exclusivistic approach to other religions and lifestyles because it does not possess clear and well-defined dogmas and ethics. While Confucianism was rather a political ideology and ethical code than a religion. Consequently, the Buddhist monks were not part of the Chinese ruling class, as they were in Japan; actually, they were a marginalized social category in Chinese society.

From the Confucianist perspective, the ideal ruler of a state should be, above all, the ideal head of his own family³³; for the state is seen as an extension of the family³⁴, this is called Family-State Isomorphism (家国同构) in Chinese political tradition. Also, many practices of the Buddhist monks are seen as directly confrontational with Confucianist familial ethics: The Buddhist monks are hairless, and long hair and beard

³¹ Complete Works of Fr. Matteo Ricci, S. J. (Kuangchi Cultural Group Edition) [利玛窦全集 (光启文化事业版)], vol. 4, p. 451.

³² *ibidem.*, vol. 3, p. 40

³³ “The ancients who wished to illustrate illustrious virtue throughout the kingdom, first ordered well their own states. Wishing to order well their states, they first regulated their families. Wishing to regulate their families, they first cultivated their persons... Their persons being cultivated, their families were regulated. Their families being regulated, their states were rightly governed. Their states being rightly governed, the whole kingdom was made tranquil and happy.” The Classic of Rites: The Great Learning [礼记: 大学], v. 2. <<https://ctext.org/liji/da-xue/zhs?en=on>>

³⁴ “Mencius said, ‘People have this common saying, “The kingdom, the State, the family.” The root of the kingdom is in the State. The root of the State is in the family. The root of the family is in the person of its Head.’” The Works of Mencius: Li Lou I [孟子: 离娄上], v. 5. <<https://ctext.org/mengzi/li-lou-i/zh?en=on>>

were symbols of filial piety, which is an essential virtue according to the Confucianist political teaching³⁵; the Buddhist monks are celibates, and absence of descendants was seen as the greatest confrontation to filial piety³⁶. That is to say, the Buddhist monks were marginalized by mainstream Chinese society because they didn't follow the greatest precepts of its official ideology; although, throughout history, the Chinese Buddhists adapted many of their teachings to the Confucianist teachings³⁷. But the essential message of Buddhism, the search for *post-mortem* liberation, remained the same and incompatible with Confucianism.

On the other hand, due to the drastic transformations of the Late Ming Society, which was two-dimensional – the “traditional” social collapse of the late period of the Chinese Dynasties and the proliferation of commercial activities which threatened the traditional agricultural lifestyle; Buddhism became a more “secularized” religion, consolidating its influence in the lower categories of Chinese society; this “secularization” was the cause of many of its problems that affected their reputation in the higher categories of the society. The situation was observed by Ricci: “Questi ministri sono, e sono tenuti, per la più bassa e vitiosa gente della Cina... E così nè sanno lettere, nè politia... E, sebene non hanno moglie, sono quegli che manco guardano la castità; sebene, quanto tocca a cosa di donne, lo fanno quanto più nascostamente possono...”³⁸

Ruggieri and Ricci observed that their Buddhist monk-liked appearance was not beneficial at all to the promotion of Catholicism among the Chinese, and the hostility of the locals toward them was at least partially caused by this appearance. In a letter dated 30 May 1584 to Claudio Acquaviva, Ruggieri complained that “The

³⁵ “Our bodies - to every hair and bit of skin - are received by us from our parents, and we must not presume to injure or wound them. This is the beginning of filial piety. When we have established our character by the practice of the (filial) course, so as to make our name famous in future ages and thereby glorify our parents, this is the end of filial piety. It commences with the service of parents; it proceeds to the service of the ruler; it is completed by the establishment of character.” The Classic of Filial Piety [孝经], v. 1. <<https://ctext.org/xiao-jing/zh?en=on>>

³⁶ “There are three things which are unfilial, and to have no posterity is the greatest of them.” The Works of Mencius: Li Lou I [孟子: 离娄上], v. 26. <<https://ctext.org/mengzi/li-lou-i/zh?en=on#n1696>>

³⁷ Chen Deng [陈登], “A Comparative Study of the Confucianization of Buddhism and Christianity [基督教与佛教的儒学化比较]”, Journal of Hunan University (Social Science Edition) [湖南大学学报 (社会科学版)], vol. 15, no. 3, 2001, pp. 76-77.

³⁸ Fonti Ricciane, vol. 1, pp. 125-126. These were very accurate descriptions, confirmed even by Buddhist sources. 卍Xu Zang Jing [卍续藏经], vol. 114, Taipei [台北], Shin Wen Feng Print co. [新文丰出版公司] 1983, pp. 726-741.

locals have no idea about our identity and status and didn't sympathize with us. They thought we were just some lustful avaricious people.³⁹ In another letter dated 29 October 1586, Ricci complained to Ludovico Maselli that: "The Buddhist monks are so vile and unrespected in this country, that is why despite all the honor rendered to us, we are still despised by all. The injuries we endure are indescribable and should not be written in this letter."⁴⁰ This situation was observed also by Valignano⁴¹.

Even before their third metamorphosis, the missionaries attempted to demonstrate their distinctions with the Buddhist monks. In August-October 1589, when Ricci and António de Almeida were introduced by a servant of Lv Liangzuo (吕良佐), the *locum tenens* of the Prefect of Shaozhou (韶州) to the Nanhua Temple (南华寺) near Shaozhou, they refused to venerate the statues, neither to stay there overnight. Ricci later explained to Lv Liangzuo the difference between them and the Buddhist monks, the latter was astonished since he didn't even know the existence of other religions than Buddhism⁴².

Finding himself in these circumstances, Ricci felt the clamant necessity of a re-stylization. There were at least two sources that inspired him to adopt the Confucian scholar's attire, in addition to his personal observation of the reverence the Chinese had for their *literati*⁴³.

In 1584, one year after Ruggieri and Ricci obtained the residence permit in Zhaoqing, the new Prefect of the city Zheng Yilin (郑一麟), suggested that they adopt the attire of the Confucian scholars. This was recorded and submitted to Valignano paradoxically by Francisco Cabral⁴⁴, who objected to Xavier's practices of inculturation and asserted the primacy of the Jesuit identity in the Far Eastern missions⁴⁵. He wrote a letter to Valignano on 5 December 1584: "The Chinese are suspicious... The fathers should be like the Chinese, dressed with the Chinese robe

³⁹ Complete Works of Fr. Matteo Ricci, S. J., vol. 4, pp. 460-461.

⁴⁰ P. d'Elia, "I Primordi delle Missioni Cattoliche in Cina", *Civiltà Cattolica*, vol. 4 (1935), pp. 29-37.

⁴¹ S. De Ursis, *P. Matheus S.J., Relação escripta pelo seu companheiro P. Sabatino de Ursis: publicação commemorativa terceiro centenário da sua morte (11 de maio de 1910) mandada fazer pela missão portuguesa de Macau*, Roma, Tipografia Enrico Voghera, 1910, pp. 20-21.

⁴² Fonti Ricciane, vol. 1, pp. 283-284

⁴³ Complete Works of Fr. Matteo Ricci, S. J., vol. 3, p. 153.

⁴⁴ Cabral may have obtained confirmation of this information (the relevance of the Confucian scholar's attire in Chinese society) from some Chinese converts to Catholicism in Macau.

⁴⁵ P. Correia, "Francisco Cabral and Lourenço Mexia in Macao (1582-1584): Two different perspectives of evangelization in Japan", *Bulletin of Portuguese-Japanese Studies*, vol. 15 (2007), pp. 47-77.

and the high quadrate headgear⁴⁶, in order to dissipate the suspicion of the Chinese. This was what they were told by the Prefect⁴⁷.” His suggestion was declined and ignored by Valignano, probably because this could have been seen as a confrontation with the Visitor’s authority.

At the end of 1590, Ricci received a new disciple, who decisively influenced his third metamorphosis, named Qu Taisu (瞿太素), a young Confucian scholar and son of Qu Jingchun (瞿景淳), Vice-Minister of Rites (礼部侍郎), who was very influential in the Chinese intellectual circles due to the connections of his defunct father. Qu Taisu was “the most intelligent son of Qu Jingchun” but followed an unorthodox lifestyle and didn’t participate in the Imperial Examinations (科举). When he noticed that Ricci settled in Zhaoqing, he came to the Jesuit with precious gifts such as silk and jewelry, and following the Chinese costume, he did a triple prostration in front of Ricci, asking to be a disciple because he initially believed that Ricci possessed the mysteries of alchemy. Later Qu Taisu got baptized and learned European science and even translated the first volume of Euclid’s Elements into Chinese. He noted everything he learned from Ricci and promoted it among the Chinese intellectuals; consequently, he constructed Ricci’s reputation as “The Scholar from the Far West (泰西儒士)”, which was extremely beneficial to the Jesuits’ mission because it placed the missionaries into the category of the Scholars (士人), instead of the monks (僧人)⁴⁸.

On the Chinese New Year (18 February) of 1592, with the occasion of a festival visit to the residence of the *locum tenens* of the Prefect, Qu Taisu proposed to Ricci: “Since you keep the moral purity and strive yourself on the road of perfection, serving the true Lord of Heaven, there is an abysmal difference between you and the Buddhist and Taoist monks who worship idols made from earth and wood. Why don’t you dress as a Confucian scholar, letting your hair and beard grow, to distinguish yourself from the band of monks?⁴⁹”

⁴⁶ “The high quadrate headgear” certainly can’t be referring to any Buddhist monastic headgear, but the *Si Fang Ping Ding Jin* (四方平定巾), the headgear of the Ming *literati*.

⁴⁷ Complete Works of Fr. Matteo Ricci, S. J., vol. 4, p. 471.

⁴⁸ Fonti Ricciane, vol. 1, pp. 295-303; Complete Works of Fr. Matteo Ricci, S. J., vol. 3, pp. 187, 205-206; Ricci was appreciated even by Zhang Benqing (章本清), rector of the White Deer Grotto Academy (白鹿洞书院), extremely influential among the Late Ming *literati*. Complete Works of Fr. Matteo Ricci, S. J., vol. 3, pp. 178, 210-212.

⁴⁹ K. Takase [高瀬弘一郎], *Culture and Diverse Aspects of the Christian Era* [キリシタン時代の文化と諸相], Tokyo [東京], Yagi Bookstore [八木書店], 2002, p. 116.

According to a biographer of Ricci, Giulio Aleni, Qu Taisu proposed it because he wanted to join the mission of Ricci⁵⁰. This explains his personal motivation because Qu Taisu was financially dependent on the connections with Chinese intellectuals, which he inherited from his father or constructed by himself⁵¹. Since he already had a bad reputation due to his unorthodox lifestyle, if he was found in constant company with a “barbarian monk (番僧)”, this would have aroused the risk of losing those vital connections. However, if Ricci had adopted the Confucian scholar’s attire, their relationship not only wouldn’t have been reproved but appreciated by the others⁵².

Ricci accepted his disciple’s proposal; in a letter dated 15 November of the same year to Claudio Acquaviva, he described the courtesy with which he and Qu Taisu were treated during the visit to the *locum tenens* of the Prefect and stressed the relevance of this type of treatment in their missionary activities in China; he argued that: “Since foreigners, Buddhist and Taoist monks are not respected in this country, so we can’t afford to appear like them anymore.”⁵³

Sometime after 24 October 1592⁵⁴, when Ricci went to Macau to treat the wounds he suffered on his hands and feet from the anti-Christian thugs in June of that year⁵⁵, he explained to Valignano the necessity of the third metamorphosis, which the Visitor accepted and submitted to the Superior General of the Jesuits and to the Pope: “Per questo avisò il P. Valignano che pareva totalmente necessario lasciarsi i Nostri crescer la barba et anco i capelli; posciachè quel modo che usavano allora i Nostri gli avviliava molto e dava occasione a molti di pensare che erano idolatri; perciocchè il radersi la barba e i capelli nella Cina è segno della setta degli idoli, e nessuno si rade se non *osciano* (和尚) che adora gli idoli. Oltre di questo,

⁵⁰ G. Aleni [艾儒略], *The Deeds of Master Li from the Far West* [大西西泰利先生行迹]. <<https://zh.m.wikisource.org/wiki/%E5%88%A9%E7%91%AA%E7%AB%87%E8%A1%8C%E5%AF%A6/%E5%A4%A7%E8%A5%BF%E8%A5%BF%E6%B3%B0%E5%88%A9%E5%85%88%E7%94%9F%E8%A1%8C%E8%B9%9F>>

⁵¹ *Fonti Ricciane*, vol. 1, p. 296.

⁵² Ji Xiangxiang [计翔翔], “The definition of the time when Matteo Ricci wore Confucian clothes [关于利玛窦衣儒服的研究]”, *Studies on World Religions* [世界宗教研究], no. 3, 2001, p. 78.

⁵³ *Complete Works of Fr. Matteo Ricci*, S. J., vol. 3, p. 124.

⁵⁴ The date when Valignano arrived in Macau from Japan. J. Dehergne [荣振华], *Répertoire des Jésuites de Chine de 1552 à 1800* [在华耶稣会士列传及书目补编], vol. 2, Beijing [北京], Zhonghua Book Company [中华书局], p. 695. We don’t know if their meeting happened before or after the letter to Acquaviva.

⁵⁵ *Complete Works of Fr. Matteo Ricci*, S. J., vol. 3, p. 127, vol. 4, p. 510.

avvisò che era necessario avere I Nostri un vestito proprio, di seta⁵⁶, per le visite de' magistrati et altre persone principali, che vengono a casa a visitar con vestito di cortesia⁵⁷, con la sua propria berretta⁵⁸... Tutte queste cose erano sì bene fondate in ragioni e tanto necessarie che il P. Valignano diede ai Padri ampla facoltà di farlo, pigliando sopra suo carico scriver sopra ciò al P. Generale et al Papa, poichè tutto si faceva per magior servitio di Iddio⁵⁹."

Although Valignano "diede ai Padri ampla facoltà di farlo" and on 7 July 1594, Lazzaro Cattaneo announced to Ricci Rome's approval on the matter of adopting the Confucian scholar's attire⁶⁰, the third metamorphosis didn't happen too soon. Firstly Ricci's status as established by the Viceroy of Liangguang was that of a monk, and the corresponding attire was conceded by the Viceroy himself. If Ricci had changed it without further approval, the gesture might have been seen as an affront to the Ming Authorities. Also, in the province of Guangdong (广东), the Jesuits were known as Buddhist monks, and a change of appearance may have provoked the risk of aggravating the suspicions of the locals⁶¹. Secondly, as Ricci has observed, the people of Guangdong were particularly hostile to foreigners due to the frequent pirate attacks they suffered⁶². In fact, the local *literati* were the main xenophobic factor⁶³. Being conscious of the vestimentary rules of Ming society and its symbolic function in the social hierarchy⁶⁴; Ricci didn't know what to expect from the local *literati* if he adopted their attire, and consequently, he wouldn't have dared to proceed imprudently in that matter. Our protagonist needed a special circumstance

⁵⁶ At the beginning of the Ming Dynasty, silk clothes were reserved for those who had passed the Imperial Examinations. Its usage was extended to most people during the late period of the Dynasty, but the silk material remains the textile of excellence to demonstrate solemnity and respect.

⁵⁷ The Ming officials had at least five types of attires: the court dress (朝服), the sacrificial dress (祭服), the official dress (公服), the ordinary dress (常服), and the conceded dress (赐服). "Vestito di cortesia" probably refers to the official dress (公服), proper for the occasions as described by Ricci.

⁵⁸ The Ming official headgear (官帽), similar to a berretta.

⁵⁹ Fonti Ricciane, vol. 1, pp. 336-337.

⁶⁰ S. De Ursis, P. Matheus S.J., *Relação escripta pelo seu companheiro P. Sabatino de Ursis: publicação commemorativa terceiro centenário da sua morte (11 de maio de 1910) mandada fazer pela missão portuguesa de Macau*, Roma, Tipografia Enrico Voghera, 1910, p. 26.

⁶¹ This was what happened to Lazzaro Cattaneo in Shaozhou. Complete Works of Fr. Matteo Ricci, S. J., vol. 3, p. 202.

⁶² Fonti Ricciane, vol. 1, p. 202.

⁶³ Complete Works of Fr. Matteo Ricci, S. J., vol. 4, p. 409.

⁶⁴ *ibidem.*, vol. 3, p. 202.

that would have allowed him to legally leave Guangdong and a safe scene to test the possible reactions of the Confucian scholars to his proposed third metamorphosis.

The opportunity occurred in May 1595 when a retired Vice-Minister of War (兵部侍郎) named Shi Xing (石星) came to Ricci at Shaozhou, asking the Jesuit to cure the psychic illnesses of his Twenty-one-year old son, resulted in consequence of a failure at a session of the Imperial Examinations. Ricci agreed but explained that he needed more time to stay with Shi Xing's son and asked permission to go to Jiangxi (江西) and ultimately to Beijing (北京), which was granted by the Vice-Minister⁶⁵. At this point, Ricci obtained the right to legally leave Guangdong and to become unsurveilled by his old acquaintances; so he secretly ordered a Confucian scholar's robe made from silk and a quadrangle headgear and let his beard grow⁶⁶.

Ricci and Shi Xing traveled together until Jian (吉安) when the retired Vice-Minister of War was constrained to part with the Jesuit under the pressure of some of his colleagues; because they considered it inopportune to introduce a foreigner to Beijing during a "tempo tanto sospettoso"⁶⁷.

Some days before 20 May 1595⁶⁸, Ricci went to Zhangshu (樟树), also in Jiangxi, where he met with a friend of the missionaries, Xu Daren (徐大任), the prefect of Shaozhou, who was staying in his hometown after a visit of work report to Beijing. During this meeting, he already adopted the appearance of a Confucian scholar and explained to his host the reasons behind it: "Because we do the work of the scholars, dedicating ourselves to the Lord of the Heaven, and we excel in our learning. When we came to Zhaoqing, we were unaware of the Chinese costumes, so we adopted the attire of the Buddhist monks, but our dogmas and disciplines are completely different from theirs⁶⁹." The reaction of the prefect was extraordinarily positive; he not only received the Jesuit with much more respect, he even dispensed Ricci from prostration⁷⁰.

This reaction was possible not only due to the prefect's personal sympathy toward the missionaries and the fact that he was not originally from Guangdong, but it should also be attributed to the cultural context of the Late Ming Society. At least

⁶⁵ Fonti Ricciane, vol. 1, pp. 338-340.

⁶⁶ Complete Works of Fr. Matteo Ricci, S. J., vol. 3, p. 202.

⁶⁷ Fonti Ricciane, vol. 1, p. 345. Referring to the Japanese invasions of Korea (1592-1598).

⁶⁸ The date when Ricci arrived in Nanchang (南昌), about 90km northeast of Zhangshu. Complete Works of Fr. Matteo Ricci, S. J., vol. 3, pp. 154-155.

⁶⁹ *ibidem.*, p. 154.

⁷⁰ *ibidem.*, p. 158. During the Ming Dynasty, the right to not prostrate when a person met an official was a privilege of the *literati*; this gest meant that the prefect accepted Ricci as a Confucian scholar.

beginning from the reign of the Wanli Emperor (万历皇帝) from 1572 to 1620, due to the proliferation of commercial activities and the development of the urban lifestyle; fashion became more complex, luxurious materials such as silk and bright colors were used more frequently than before; the vestimentary code as established at the early period of the Ming Dynasty was relaxed, for example, actors were allowed to dress any attire proper to their roles during the stage, even the imperial vestments⁷¹.

Since then, our protagonist realized his third metamorphosis and completed it with supplementary measures: he ordered his servants to call him “Master (先生)” and dress in a long robe typical of the Chinese servants and begun to travel on a litter (轿)⁷²; when he entered into a new town, he didn’t establish firstly a church, but a predication hall (布道厅), similar with the learning halls (讲学厅) of the Confucian scholars⁷³.

Ricci’s move was beneficial to his mission and to the establishment of the Catholic Church in China. He was received into an imperial audience on 24 January 1601 and was granted permission to establish a Church in the capital⁷⁴; this was the first permission granted to the Catholics in Beijing since the beginning of the Ming Dynasty. One of the churches established by Ricci, the Catholic Church of the Xuanwu Gate (宣武门天主堂), remained until today and is the Cathedral of the Archdiocese of Beijing. Ricci was also granted to right to be buried in Beijing, being the first foreigner to enjoy such honor, which inaugurated precedence for other missionaries who died in the Chinese Mainland, and the Emperor even conceded him a large and luxurious burial site⁷⁵. One of the disciples of Ricci, named Xu Guangqi (徐光启), later became the Minister of Rites (礼部尚书), whose family remained Catholic, and whose estate “Xu Jia Hui (徐家汇)” was chosen in 1824 to be the headquarter of the Jesuits in Southern China and was transformed into an important center of Catholic Culture in the Far East.

But was Ricci’s mission – the propagation of the Catholic Faith successful? Ricci himself recognized it was not the case⁷⁶; actually, in order to dissipate the suspicions of the Confucian scholars, the Jesuit even avoided talking about his true mission with

⁷¹ Qian Hang [钱杭], Cheng Zai [承载], *Society and Lifestyle of the Seventeenth Century Jiangnan [十七世纪江南社会生活]*, Popular Publisher of Zhejiang [浙江人民出版社], 1996, pp. 251-260.

⁷² Complete Works of Fr. Matteo Ricci, S. J., vol. 3, pp. 176-177, 202-203.

⁷³ *ibidem.*, p. 236.

⁷⁴ *Fonti Ricciane*, vol. 2, pp. 152-161.

⁷⁵ *ibidem.*, pp. 564-632.

⁷⁶ Complete Works of Fr. Matteo Ricci, S. J., vol. 4, p. 256.

most people he met⁷⁷. Likewise, the adoption of the Confucian scholar's attire meant necessarily also the adoption of their discourse; as a "Scholar from the Far West", Ricci couldn't publicly speak about "the subjects on which the Master did not talk"⁷⁸; he was expected to promote only those things considered interesting by the Chinese *literati*, namely European science, culture, and philosophy – especially ethics.

As we can observe, after more than four centuries, Catholicism – and Christianity in general, still remains not only a minority but also a marginalized religion in China. Ricci and others' efforts to adapt it to the Chinese culture were not fruitful, no matter how many external assimilations were realized – from the Confucian scholar's attire, traditional Chinese style church architecture, and liturgy in the Chinese language to the "Catholic Ritual of Ancestor Veneration (天主教祭祖礼仪)" among others. Because the basis of the Chinese identity is not the same as the European one. The Chinese mainstream society doesn't accept a person as its member just because he or she speaks Chinese and adheres to its external cultural practices; it is neither race-based. Confucian ethics are the core spirit of Chinese civilization, and it is completely focused on social relationships, especially the maintenance of a certain social order, called "rites (礼)".

Ricci's intention was to introduce Christianity as a structure over Confucian ethics; so a Chinese convert didn't need to renounce the latter but to "complete" it. Indeed, Confucian ethics are not necessarily contradictory to Christianity, but it constitutes an obstacle to the search for *post-mortem* liberation. A Christianity "superimposed" over Confucianism is nothing but a Christianity obstructed to explore its vertical dimension. Certainly, it is not impossible to reconcile both, as Ricci himself (almost) did; but in this case, the Christian Faith becomes just a private matter, as wished also by the radical secularists of Contemporary Europe.

On the other hand, Ricci's metamorphoses should provoke us to reflect on Church's approach to contemporary secularized Post-Christian societies. To what extent could the *aggiornamento* be beneficial to the Church's mission in the world? It is imperative to find an equilibrium in this process in order to avoid the danger of prioritizing the social relevance of the church instead of her mission to propagate the Words of Salvation.

⁷⁷ *ibidem.*, p. 257. The scholar Li Zhi (李贽) met three times with Ricci and was still unable to know the Jesuit's true motivations. Li Zhi [李贽], *Xu Fen Shu* [续焚书], Beijing [北京], Zhonghua Book Company [中华书局], 1975, p. 35.

⁷⁸ "The subjects on which the Master did not talk were: extraordinary things, feats of strength, disorder, and spiritual beings." *Analects: Shu Er* [论语: 述而], v. 21. < <https://ctext.org/analects/shu-er/zhs?en=on#n1271> >