

# The Background in European History of Matteo Ricci's Mission

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The Italian Jesuit Matteo Ricci arrived in Macao in the fall of 1582. The following year Ricci and other missionaries moved to Zhaoqing, Guangdong Province. Ricci's arrival in China marks the beginning of modern Chinese Church history and draws an important dividing line in the history of Sino-Western relations. This great event did not happen in a vacuum, but at a definite time and historical context. Therefore in order to appraise fairly the missionary activities and the Sino-Western cultural exchange of the period, it is necessary to first examine 16th and 17th century China and Western Europe, and the religious, political and cultural background of Sino-Western relations and missionary activities.

## PORTUGAL and SPAIN'S SEAFARING EXPANSION:

To discuss 16th and 17th century East-West relations one must begin with the voyages of expansion by Portugal and Spain. In the Middle Ages what is Portugal and Spain today was a land conquered by Moslem Arabs. The history of the Middle Ages of the peninsula is in great part the story of the Portuguese and Spanish Christian struggle to free themselves from the political control of a foreign people and a foreign religion. After a struggle of a few hundred years the power of the nobles gradually coalesced into the kingdom of Portugal and the associated kingdoms of Spain. At the same time the nobles nourished the habit of looking with enmity on Islam and all things belonging to foreign religions. They also looked down upon foreign religious believers and were in the habit of using violent means to solve religious differences. They were also accustomed to obtaining riches by conquest. At the end of the 15th century the great task of "reconquista" for Spain and Portugal could be considered completed on the Iberian peninsula. But the nobles' Crusader habits were difficult to change immediately. The two countries then began their expansion on the high seas.

Portugal's reconquest took place earlier, and under the leadership of Prince Henry the Navigator, they had already begun to explore the islands in the Atlantic Ocean west of Portugal and along the coast of Africa to the south. On the one hand the object of this exploration was to find more land so that the Portuguese kings' Crusaders could conquer and divide it. On the other hand, the object was to encircle the Islamic countries on the southern and eastern shores of the Mediterranean and attack from behind, as well as hoping to establish trade with China. This was an ambitious plan but showed a lack of knowledge of geography. At this time the Europeans did not know how big Africa was. They wrongly thought that Africa, Ethiopia and India were one land-mass, and that this land-mass was the fabled rich and powerful kingdom of Prester John. The Portuguese thought that if they could circle Africa and link up with Prester John they could attack from front and back the Moslem Turkish empire, divide it up, force its citizens to accept Christianity and snatch the China trade from their hands. As a result after much difficulty the Portuguese rounded the Cape of Good Hope and reached the eastern coast of Africa. Then they discovered that Africa was larger than Europe, that India was to the east of Africa, that the kingdom of Prester John did not exist and that Ethiopia, although a Christian country, was poor and weak and had no intention of uniting with Portugal to attack Turkey. The Portuguese grand strategy for conquest could not be realized but their ambition to carry out military forays and to seize trade routes did not die out. They made use of their sturdy ships and powerful cannon, as well as their bases on the coast of Africa, to continuously assault the Moslem trading vessels on the Indian Ocean. They also continually expanded eastward on the Indian Ocean, established bases, and made themselves the enemy of every Islamic country. In their eyes this was a crusade for religious and economic motives, but in the eyes of the Islamic Countries these "Firanghi" or Franks (the Muslims called Europeans Firanghi) were pirates and invaders. Later, in 1517, the Portuguese arrived at Guangzhou, but the bad reputation of the Firanghi had already reached China, passed on by Indian or Southeast Asian traders. For several years the Firanghi tried to carry out the same activities along the coast of Guangdong as they did in India and Southeast Asia, but they did not succeed. The Ming government, because of its defenses against the Japanese pirates, was also vigilant and strong against all armed strangers who came from the sea. As a result, the Portuguese peacefully settled in Macao, completing a series of imperialistic bases which stretched from Lisbon through Africa, Goa, Malacca and finally to China and Japan. The Portuguese king also obtained from the Pope "Patroado" (patronage of missionaries) for this eastern route.

The Spanish restored their country and established an united kingdom a little more slowly, but they also vigorously expanded their territory. They too sought a route around the powerful Moslem countries so they could trade with the China of unparalleled wealth described by Marco Polo. Since the Portuguese had already beaten others to the sea route along the Coast of Africa to the south, the Spanish king helped Columbus to go west in search of a sea route to the Orient. The Spanish were more intolerant toward "heresy" and "infidels" than the Portuguese and they did not allow Christian converts to deviate the least from Spanish religious practices. The money to finance Columbus' journey came from the confiscated property of the Spanish Jews who had already converted to Catholicism. Columbus unwittingly discovered the "New World", and with no cost to himself, the Spanish king became the ruler of a great empire and received from the Pope the patronage of missions for this western route. Later the Spanish conquered the whole of Central and South America and forced the Indians to become baptized and enter the Church. They also established the Inquisition in the Americas and forced the Indian Christians to give up their traditional culture. Although this bloody policy did not prove completely effective, the subject people of the Spanish empire could be considered Christians. From their base in Mexico, the Spanish conquered the Philippine Islands and established their American form of imperialist rule there. These Spaniards began traveling to Fujian to carry on trade and sent missionaries to Taiwan to preach the Gospel to the Chinese and aborigines there. Thus both Spain and Portugal established bases in China for trade and missionary work. Their missionary methods were generally ethnocentric. They had an absolutely intolerant attitude toward local cultural traditions and they openly criticized native religions and customs. They preached a Christianity native to the Iberian peninsula. This missionary method achieved some results in the colonies of both countries where it was closely linked with the political and military power; those natives who became Christians had to put aside their religion and family, abandon their past and take Portuguese or Spanish family names. But outside the colonies the results of such missionary work were very limited. The missionaries became ashamed and angry and frequently favored the use of armed force. For instance several of the 16th century missionaries believed that if the Portuguese or Spanish king would only send three to five hundred horsemen they could conquer the whole of China and all the Chinese would be baptized.

#### THE RENAISSANCE and the REFORMATION:

In the year the Portuguese first arrived at Guangzhou, in Europe the monk Martin Luther openly challenged the Church's "orthodox" theology

and brought the reform movements in the 15th and 16th century Church to a completely new stage. From that time on the Latin Church was split asunder. The Roman Catholic and the Reformed Churches, through the literary and military battles which took place over the next hundred years or so, continually spelled out their doctrines in a more and more fixed way. But while they defined their terms very strictly, these were lacking in flexibility. Hope, love and toleration between Christians became less and less while emphasis on dogma increased year by year. Each Church's requirements concerning the "purity of faith" of its members, regulations for worship, the training of clergy and restrictions of life-style also became more and more strict and rigid. A more hostile attitude was adopted and more severe measures taken to deal with "heresy".

Under the pressure of such forces, two important movements took place within the Catholic Church which are closely related to the theme of this essay. One was the reformation of old Religious Orders and the establishment of new ones; and the second was the Council of Trent and the implementation of its decisions. In the latter half of the 16th century many old religious Orders, such as the Dominicans, Franciscans, Augustinians, etc., underwent a fairly effective internal renewal. New religious Orders such as the Jesuits were also founded at this time to reform the Church and obedience to the Pope was the basic principle of their establishment. These religious Orders enthusiastically enforced the Catholic Church's teaching. They strictly trained their members in order to, on the one hand, recoup the Church's losses in Europe, and on the other hand, go to the new lands discovered by the Portuguese and Spaniards to teach Christianity. Among these religious Orders, the most distinctive was the Society of Jesus. With its more modern constitution and education, they very quickly attracted elite youth in every country in Europe to study at the Order's schools. Some students desired to enter the Order and they went through a very rigorous selection and training process. Familiar with ancient and modern learning and well-founded in scholarship, the Jesuits therefore were frequently the most talented men in Europe. The Jesuits were also able to assign their members to all kinds of important work with great flexibility. Because their family and educational backgrounds were superior, graduates of Jesuit schools often held high positions in political and intellectual circles. In this way the Jesuits were very useful both politically and intellectually in the promotion of the Catholic Reformation. Inevitably competition and conflict, even to the point of mutual accusation, with other religious Orders could not be avoided. This kind of intramural struggle in the Catholic Church, coupled with the fact that each Order's method of preaching the Gospel in China was

different (which was the underlying cause of, and background to, the outbreak of the "Rites Controversy") led finally to Rome's disbanding of the Jesuits in the latter half of the 18th century. (The Jesuits obtained permission to start up again at the beginning of the 19th century.)

The Council of Trent was the final result of the conciliar movement in the church of the Middle Ages. It was also the most important example of the Roman Catholic Church's arousal to action, after several decades of attack by the reformed churches. The decisions of the council strengthened the power of the Pope, and made the church organization more like the centralized monarchy existing in European politics at that time. It also consolidated church control over the life and training of clergy, the faith and devotion of believers, and other areas of administration. Thus, the Roman Catholic Church was able to be put in order and become stabilized in eastern and southern Europe, and was in a better position to send out missionaries along the new sea routes. However, the formalism and dogmatism of Trent's decisions prevented mutual harmony between Christianity and the native cultures of the places the missionaries went.

Besides the Protestant Reformation, 15th to 17th century Europe also experienced "the Renaissance." Nineteenth century historians considered this to be a period of decline in the thought and learning of the Middle Ages, and to be the restoration of the literature and art of ancient Greece and Rome. They thought that it represented the passing of darkness and the reappearance of light. For the past several decades, more and more historians dissent from this view. They consider this period an intermediate stage between the Middle Ages and modern times. They point out that the influence of the Middle Ages on the thought and learning of this period was very deep, and that there were only a few isolated sprouts of modern thought. Only after more than a hundred years of quiet growth, up to the end of the 17th century, was the time ripe for the new ideas to come to fruition.

Astronomy may serve as an example. The Middle Ages followed the Aristotelian theory of "geocentrism," and the church had long been dissatisfied because people could not calculate an accurate calendar from this theory. In 1543, Copernicus proposed the "heliocentric" method of calculation. But for calculating the calendar, this method was not necessarily more accurate than the old, and it was not generally accepted by astronomers. During the subsequent century or more, the new method



and a modification of the old one were in competition with each other. But Tycho Brahe still used the "geocentric" theory to calculate the most accurate calendar. Finally Newton, gathering together the research accomplishments of Kepler and Galileo, produced a complete cosmology based on "heliocentrism," firmly establishing the new method of calculating the calendar.

Besides astronomy, the development of many other areas of learning went through a long period of transition. The partial re-flowering of the literature and art of ancient Greece and Rome did not completely change the appearance of European thought. It was only a long, complicated partial process. The thought of 16th and 17th century intellectuals was still for the most part a Christianized Aristotelianism, mixed with some Platonism and certain beginnings of doubts. It was like this, not only in Catholic countries, but in Protestant countries also. Avant-garde thinkers and the forerunners of later modern thought were also in the same category. Thus in the latter part of the 16th century, the Jesuits at Portugal's Coimbra University made exhaustive annotations of the learning of the Middle Ages, and published a series of textbooks based on the thought of Aristotle and Aquinas. These were sold to the Catholic and Protestant universities of every country, and became the most popular textbooks of the time. These textbooks were often the foundation of the education of the Jesuits who came to China, and were the basis of the western learning which they introduced to China. In retrospect, this set of medieval knowledge may appear to be the last gasp of the scholastic period, but in the eyes of the majority of the scholars of that time, it was the fruit of revival.

#### LATE MING POLITICAL THOUGHT

In the tenth year of the reign of the Ming emperor Wan Li, Matteo Ricci and the other Jesuit missionaries came to China from a Europe which had experienced the Reformation and many dynastic wars. Late Ming China, whether in economy, technical skills, defense, art or other areas, was not inferior to Europe; in social security and political stability, it was at least a match for Europe. Of course in some areas China was more developed, and in other areas more backward. But generally speaking, China was the equal of the western Europe of that time, or maybe even a little better. Thus the well educated Jesuits, after they had lived in China for a long time, and observed and studied, had nothing but the greatest admiration for most things Chinese. They thought that there was only one matter in which China was not the equal of the West, and that was religion. And so, while determined to preach the Gospel

of Christ, they did not have the haughty and arrogant attitude of the missionaries in Macao or the Philippines. And they certainly were not as oppressive as the gunboat missionaries of the 19th century. In the letters, which the Jesuits in China wrote back to Europe, they were always full of praise for what they saw and heard in China.

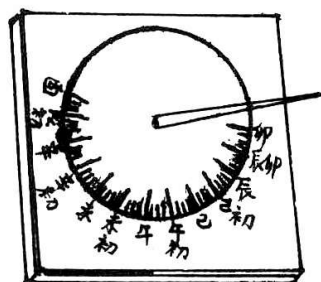
However, from the point of view of late Ming intellectuals, the several decades from the end of the 16th to the middle of the 17th century was certainly not a bright period in Chinese history. From the beginning of the 16th century the emperors more and more gave themselves over to pleasure, and a few of them did not even hold court for dozens of years. Imperial power gradually fell into the hands of the eunuchs, and as government administration deteriorated, the eunuchs made use of court power and secret police to kill loyal, honest and outspoken scholar-officials. The scholar-officials themselves split up into various factions, and accused one another before the court over all kinds of issues, both great and small. Regarding the finances of the nation, because of the luxurious expenses of the court and the cost of wars with the Japanese, the economic situation became unbearable. Emperor Wan Li levied a heavy tax, and he appointed trusted eunuchs to become "mining officials" to plunder the people. This made both the rich and the poor people even more angry with the government. At the same time, the rapid rise of the Manchus beyond the borders to the northeast increased the anxiety of those intellectuals who were concerned about the country's affairs. In this gloomy situation, what spiritual force could true intellectuals rely on for support?

During the Ming Dynasty all students in theory were Confucianists. They had to study the commentaries on the Four Books and Five Classics of the Confucian philosopher Zhu Xi. But those who really accepted this "orthodox" thinking were not many. The most important thinker in the Ming Dynasty was Wang Shouren. At the beginning of the 16th century, Wang left the school of Zhu Xi and promoted "the study of the mind." For over one hundred years afterwards, many intellectuals found their orientations from Wang's philosophy. However, many people shouted the slogans of Wang's philosophy, while really practicing a life of hedonism. There was also a revival of Buddhism and Taoism during the late Ming period, and it attracted many people. Some people also promoted a syncretism of the three ways: Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism. The "three religions" moved in the direction of popularity by preaching a simple doctrine of doing good and avoiding evil. All in all, various theories were rampant. They vied with one another to attract people

who were in difficulty or were confused. Intellectuals and common people, in an atmosphere of political darkness and social fluctuation, earnestly searched for the answers to the problems of life, old age, sickness and death.

### SUMMING UP

At this time, Matteo Ricci and the Jesuit missionaries arrived in China. In accordance with the Portuguese Padroado, they came on Portuguese ships and passed through the Portuguese colony to reach China. However, they were not contaminated with the arrogance of imperialism. Whether in personal likes and dislikes or in missionary strategy, they tried to separate themselves from the bad reputation of the "Firanghi." With a Renaissance and Jesuit educational background, they experienced the superior parts of Chinese culture, and observed where Chinese culture could make use of their contributions. Possessing the enthusiasm of the Catholic counter-reformation and Jesuit spiritual training, they made contacts with Chinese intellectuals. Thus with astronomy, geography, geometry and mechanics as the keys to open the door, and "accommodation with Confucianism" as the missionary method, they attempted to spread their faith in the searching society of the late Ming Dynasty. By so doing, they opened the first chapter in both the history of Sino-Western relations and the history of the Chinese Church.



Xu Guangxi