

Some Reflections on the Historical Significance of Matteo Ricci in China

by John D. Young

For someone who has been studying the history of the Jesuit movement in China for more than a decade,¹ the current outburst of interest in Matteo Ricci should be gratifying. On this 400th anniversary of Ricci's arrival in China, once again the questions of "cultural accommodation", "East and West", and "Chinese religiosity" are being discussed avidly. Matteo Ricci has become relevant in this age of global conflict and cultural confrontation. His tolerance, patience, understanding and unique approach to Chinese civilization seem more than adequate for solving many of the problems the world faces today. Indeed, the history of his work in China may even give some insights into the particular challenges faced by the modernization efforts in the People's Republic of China.

It is with mixed feelings, however, that I ponder and reflect upon the historical significance of Matteo Ricci's sojourn in China. Contributions aside,² the legacy of Matteo Ricci seems ironic. Ricci is remembered as a scientist, a mediator of Western and Chinese cultures, and a pioneer in the history of Christian missions in China. What is generally not discussed enough are Ricci's own intentions.

Ricci tried desperately to become part of the Chinese scene. He was able to learn the Chinese language -- more than fluently. He wrote and composed treatises in classical Chinese.³ All true. He was a rare breed, especially by today's standards.⁴

But Ricci stayed in China for almost three decades because he wanted to challenge the Chinese world-view. His intentions were quite clear, to convert the Chinese and at the same time to get rid of Confucianism. Despite all the efforts at "inculturation",⁵ Ricci must defend Christianity whenever irreconcilable philosophical differences arise. The best example is the concept of God. Really it was not simply a language problem, or that the Chinese had lost the term for God. The Chinese did not have the idea, as simple as that. And I believe Ricci himself recognized this.

Perhaps Ricci had tried too hard to "inculture" the Gospel message; he suggested that the Christian God was worshipped in ancient China -- as recorded in the Confucian Classics. Ever since Ricci, it has become the tradition of Chinese Christian scholars to "assist" Ricci in finding God in the sacred books of Confucianism. Treatises, pamphlets and books have

been written to demonstrate that the Chinese 'T'ien' is another term for God. The effort continues today.⁶

The fact that Chinese Christians must look for God in their own tradition is indicative of a serious dilemma which affects the lives of the Christians in the People's Republic. To put it mildly, the question to ask is: am I a Christian or a Chinese?

Again, many have repeatedly stated that it is possible to be both a Christian and a Chinese at the same time. I think otherwise, especially when the issue is actually more than a problem which only a Chinese-Christian faces. The ultimate questions are faced by every Chinese person, whether he is consciously aware of it or not. Is there such a thing as 'Chinese' in the contemporary world? What exactly are the elements of a being Chinese? What is Chineseness? Indeed, what does being Chinese mean?

I will use an example from contemporary Hong Kong to illustrate. A disc jockey once stated on radio that "unlike gwei-los, we Chinese must cook soup everyday". When he stated again that "We Chinese cannot survive without soup everyday", a listener called him up and told him that most Chinese north of the Yangtze do not need to have soup everyday. Of course, most people south of the Yangtze cannot afford to have soup everyday, but the point is to demonstrate the irrationality behind such emotional claims. This particular disc jockey is part and parcel "made in Hong Kong", but he has been told that there is some virtue in verbally declaring his Chinese background and he feels obliged to do so.

Another more personal example. A good friend came back to Hong Kong a month ago with his wife and new-born baby. The purpose of the trip was to leave behind the daughter in his mother's care. At the farewell dinner, my friend elaborated on the lack of human sentiment and filial piety in American society, and the worthlessness of the American educational system. His sister responded and asked why he was leaving his own daughter behind. Unfortunately (or fortunately for him) he never saw the irony in his own behaviour.

The same kind of irony faces the present Chinese leadership in Beijing. Am I stretching my point just a little bit too much? No, I honestly do not think so. What I am referring to are the statements made by the Chinese leadership that there is a Chinese way in the modernization process. The famous slogan, "Chinese learning for the basis; Western learning for practical use", is very much alive today. The Chinese Communist Party Chairman, Hu Yaobang, reiterated on numerous occasions that China only wishes to import Western technology, but not the corrupt influ-

ences of Western ideology.⁷ In the nineteenth-century, the Chinese leadership said they would import Western "techniques" and retain Confucian moral principles. In the twentieth-century, the Chinese leadership also said they would import Western "things" but not Western ideas. The truth of the matter is: the Chinese have not done very well in terms of importing Western technology and know-how, but they have imported a Western ideology Marxism-Leninism.

In the Christian case, as revealed by writings of Chinese Christians, this kind of attitude is also at work. Simply witness the writings on the 1997 issue in Chinese Christian magazines published recently in Hong Kong.⁸ The Christians in Hong Kong would stay after 1997 because they are also Chinese. I have no idea how popular this belief is, or how committed are the people behind such a statement. But once again the need to utter such an idea is indicative of the inherent contradictions. Why should there be the need to affirm, and why can't one be simply a Christian?

Looking at the ultimate "failure" (in terms of the number of converts) of the Jesuits' admirable efforts, I cannot help but wonder whether the history of the Christian mission in China would have been different if the missionaries had tried to emphasize the differences between East and West thereby creating a greater impact. The attempt to single out compatible elements have only helped to create a "wishy-washy" Chinese mind. Perhaps the Chinese Christians should be told that they are Christians first and being Chinese second. They must choose. There is nothing in between.

Indeed, if the Chinese people must accept modernization, then by all means do it whole-heartedly, and let the indigenous culture influence the process where it will. To attempt modernization and yet at the same time "worry" about being Chinese or not has really been the major problem of contemporary China. The net result oftentimes is the creation of irrational attitudes towards anything "foreign". Perhaps Joseph Levenson did have a point when he discussed modern Chinese thinking in terms of "emotional ties to and intellectual alienation from" the Chinese tradition.⁹

What I have done here is to bring out some of the larger issues implied by the historical significance of Matteo Ricci's contributions to China. Individually speaking, there may be many who could be Christian and Chinese at the same time; there are always exceptions. Here I am simply looking at the history of Matteo Ricci from the perspective of China's encounter with the West in the last three hundred years, especially with reference to the modernization effort.

If the present Chinese leadership continues to have problems meeting the needs of modernization head-on, the twin mountains of feudalism and tradition will continue to disturb the collective Chinese mind. If this were to be the case, then Chinese modernization will continue to swing in its pendulum-like fashion, going through cycles of borrowing from the outside world, and in turn rejecting the effort.

NOTES:

1. My approach has been primarily from the perspective of Chinese intellectual history -- using Chinese sources hitherto unnoticed or neglected. I have just published Confucianism and Christianity, The first Encounter (University of Hong Kong Press, 1983), and my plan now is to study the "Second Encounter", i.e., during the nineteenth-century.

2. The special issue on Matteo Ricci published by Tripod, no. 12 (December 1982) fully illustrates this fact, although the precise influence of Ricci on Chinese philosophical thoughts should be given further analysis.

3. Ricci's approach to the Chinese language should also be studied further; his written Chinese (although probably with assistance from some of his Chinese converts) is unsurpassed by any missionary who had even lived in China.

4. I had intended to elaborate on this point because of the state of the field of Chinese studies, but it is basically impossible to do so without "attacking" some well-known names. I have also come to the conclusion that many people do realise this, and they try to read books on China more selectively.

5. "Pope's address on the work of Father Ricci in China", Tripod, no. 12 (December 1982), pp. 66-72. The term "inculturation" seems rather innovative, but after some thoughts, I have decided that it is just another word for a "policy of accommodation".

6. I have many articles in Tripod arguing along such lines.

7. South China Morning Post (January 3, 1983) reporting on a long speech by Hu recorded in the People's Daily on January 2, 1983.

8. Numerous publications by the Hong Kong Christian Industrial Council.

9. Joseph Levenson, Confucian China and Its Modern Fate (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1968).