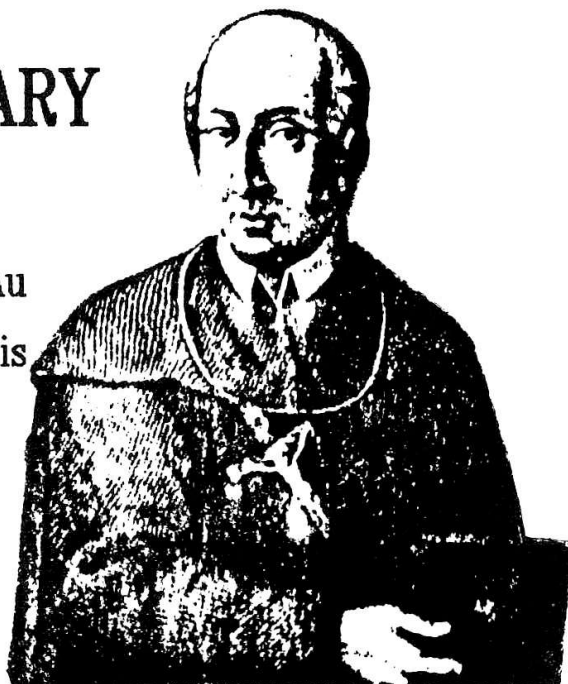


MATTEO RIPA:

REFLECTIONS ON A FORGOTTEN MISSIONARY

by Joseph Au
translated by Donald MacInnis



My good friend Philip W.L. Kwok has written a book entitled Naples and China - From the Eighteenth to the Early Twentieth Century to mark the tricentennial of the birth of Father Matteo Ripa. He divides his book into two parts: the first is a biographical sketch of the life of Ripa, while the second part is a study of trade relations between China and the Kingdom of Naples during that period. It is the stated purpose of the author not to provide us with the definitive biography of this remarkable missionary, whom history seems to have overlooked, but rather to introduce us to his valuable work in the field of fine arts at the Court of Peking in service to the Kangxi Emperor, and, upon his return to Italy, his founding of the Collegio Dei Cinesi (the Chinese Academy) in the city of Naples.(1) The writer brings to his task his many years of living in southern Italy, where he has served as a Professor at the academy, which is now known as the College of Oriental Studies. Here he was able to unearth many primary sources on Ripa hitherto overlooked by most historians of that fascinating period of East-West relations.(2)

Ripa was born in southern Italy of an aristocratic family on March 29, 1682; he was to die 64 years later in 1746 on his own birthday.

When he was fifteen, his father sent him to study in Naples, one of the leading commercial, artistic and educational centres of Europe. There he gave himself for a time to the frivolous and leisurely life-style quite common among students who were the sons of wealthy families. At the age of eighteen, he experienced a personal conversion to Christ and determined that his future would be spent in service as a missionary to the Far East. After being ordained a priest in 1705, he went to Rome for further training. Two years later, he was appointed by Pope Clement XI to work in China. In 1710, he, and five companions who were sent with him, arrived in Macao, where they called upon the Papal Delegate Carole T.M de Tournon (a leading figure in the Rites Controversy) to present him with the red hat, which was the symbol of his elevation to the College of Cardinals.

In 1711, Father Ripa was appointed by the Kangxi Emperor to serve as a teacher of art in the imperial palace, where he had twenty-two students under his tutelage. Two years later the Emperor, who had a keen interest in modern printing but was unable to find a skilled engraver, set Father Ripa to work on copper etchings. He was sent to the Jehol Palace as a cartographer to produce a new set of maps covering the entire Qing empire. The Emperor had decided to replace the hand-drawn, and highly inaccurate, maps then in existence with a new series engraved in copper. Surveyors were sent to the far corners of the empire to return with accurate data that would provide the basis for the new maps.(3) Father Ripa produced a series of 44 detailed copper engravings, which subsequently became known as the "Jehol Palace Maps". In 1929 forty-one of these maps were discovered in the Boyang Palace Museum.(4) Another is to be found in the office of the president of the Oriental College in Naples, although it is blurred and difficult to discern its details. One edition of the set produced in 1711 is preserved in the Naples National Library. It includes thirty-five maps and Fr. Ripa's notes in his own hand - a valuable legacy for historians.

While Father Ripa's main work was in the field of cartography, he also performed other tasks for the Emperor, serving as interpreter and sometimes companion on the Emperor's hunting expeditions. He was also put in charge of the imperial hour glasses, of which the Emperor was an avid collector, to keep them in good running order.

The death of the Kangxi Emperor, the storms over the Rites Controversy and the squabbling among the missionaries themselves, all led to Ripa's decision to leave China and return to Italy in 1723. He took with him four Chinese students and a teacher. His reputation was significant enough to have him invited to the palace of King George I,

when passing through England on his way home. There he was greeted warmly by the king and along with his students invited to a dinner in his honour.

Perhaps Father Ripa's greatest contribution to China in his missionary efforts was the establishment of the Chinese Academy upon his return to Naples. The Academy was founded in 1723 with the approval of Pope Clement XII and the Holy Roman Emperor Charles VI. Originally called Elena D'Aosta, the Academy opened its doors to non-Asian students as well. Since its foundation, the Academy has passed through



various stages and a somewhat tumultuous history to survive until this present day. With the planning and construction of the Suez Canal and the expansion of trade between Europe and China during the middle of the 19th century, the Academy's usefulness as a centre for the study of Asian languages and culture was not overlooked by the Italian government. The Chinese Academy became the basis for the Royal Asiatic College and, while maintaining its own identity, served as a training centre for both diplomats and those engaged in commerce. The marriage of the Academy and the College was shortlived, however, and the Academy was officially closed in 1888. Its furnishings were sold at auction and its library sent to Hong Kong and placed in the keeping of Father A. Piazzoli, the acting head of the China Region of the Milan Foreign Mission Society. Piazzoli later became Bishop of the Vicariate of Hong Kong. The Royal Asiatic College continued to develop, however, and in 1913 it became the Royal Oriental Institute. Today it is known as the College of Oriental Studies and is part of the University of Naples, where its handsome new buildings overlook the scenic coastline. Thus, the original Chinese Academy has been transformed through the centuries, until all that is now left are the bones of its founder, which rest below the altar of the small chapel in Elena D'Aosta Hospital where once stood the original Academy building. Submissions to Rome for the canonization of Father Ripa were made during the last century by the Congregation of the Holy Family. To date there has been no news of their progress.(5)

In reading the life of Matteo Ripa, one can appreciate how the missionaries who arrived in China during the end of the Ming and at the beginning of the Qing dynasties came equipped not only with a zeal for evangelization and love for God, but also with a rich store of learning, especially in the area of Western sciences. They were well-versed in such fields as astronomy, natural psychology, mathematics, engineering, medicine, weaponry as well as the fine arts of their day. Because of their special skills, they were accorded great respect by the people of the society to which they went. Their talents and skills enhanced their opportunities to spread the gospel. Such skills were not lost on the Kangxi Emperor, an enlightened ruler, who had already shown in many ways his admiration for traditional Chinese culture, and, upon assumption of the imperial throne, had made Confucianism with its rites and rituals the cultural backbone of his political system. His admiration of and commitment to the Confucian Rites was fully revealed during the Rites Controversy. On the other hand, he also appreciated the advances of Western civilization and invited many learned Westerners to serve in his government. When it came to actual worship, he, as all emperors before him, was a practising Taoist; and also in keeping with tradition, he had many concubines, as can be seen from the paintings of Ripa done in the Jehol Palace. Had there been no Rites Controversy and had the missionaries been allowed to remain longer in China, is it too much to imagine how far his sympathy for these missionaries and their faith would have taken him? Personal conversion to the God of the Christians does not seem to be far outside the realm of possibility.

In former times, dedicated but conservative church members placed obstacles in the path of other missionaries intent on evangelization; large areas of knowledge were placed out of bounds to seminarians preparing for the priesthood in the local community. Without doubt, these people had spun their own cocoon. Today, however, the Church itself instigates open debate on methods of evangelization, questions its priorities, isolating its main issues and methodologies: where should the emphasis fall? Direct evangelization by preaching the gospel? Witness through cultural and social work? For some the former view prevails, for others, however, it is the latter that receives more of a hearing. Personally, I agree with the long term view, because evangelization needs a favourable environment and a smooth road on which to travel before it will reach its ultimate destination. Like all important enterprises, progress here is only made step-by-step, and the lessons of history can be summed up in the old adage "Haste makes waste".

The history of the most celebrated universities of Europe, such as Paris, Oxford, Cambridge, Cologne, Tübingen, Bologna, Vienna, and

others, show that they were all established by the Church with approval and encouragement from Rome, and through the centuries they continued to be greatly influenced by the Church in their expansion and development. Later, however, their strong links with the Church were broken as they became national institutions. I see in this a natural tendency. Today these national institutions - whether in size, faculty or reputation, all exceed present day church-related universities. The Church does have a mission to enlighten, to instruct, and to pave the way in establishing constructive social organizations and institutes, but it should also, as part of its intent, retire from such work when the national government reaches a point where it is well able to manage such institutions by itself. The Church should not view what is temporary as permanent, and, certainly, there is no necessity to mourn the past. This principle can be seen in the history of the Oriental University. Founded by Matteo Ripa, it is today in the city of Naples a famous institution specializing in Asian studies. Had the government not assumed operational responsibility, one assumes it would not have lasted, or, if it did, it would be struggling for its own survival. It is my belief that Ripa's spirit looks down benignly from heaven and with pride on what has become of his initial efforts in his mission to serve the Chinese.

The original purpose for establishing a religious community is to bear witness to the gospel, to bring new light and depth to the Church's gospel commitment. In their foundation, they are linked to Rome, established by Rome's approval and serving under its direction. Within such a system, are these religious societies able to give a pure and uncorrupted witness to the gospels, or is it still a question of being "under orders"? There can be no doubt about the extent of the contributions religious societies have made to the Church, but neither can it be denied that they have in the past, as well as in the present, also been a source of trouble to the Church. Why else is it that many nations both past and present allow for local seminaries and religious groups to exist, but do not welcome the establishment of transnational religious societies within their boundaries?

When this writer visited the grave of Father Ripa on the original site of the Chinese Academy, I remembered that Father Ripa did not come to China as a member of a religious society. My friend Mr. Kwok, who brought me there, turned to me and said: "So many Chinese people and members of the church-at-large know the name of Matteo Ricci, but few know of the contributions made by Matteo Ripa to the Chinese, which have not been small. It's a pity so few people know of him, and even fewer publicize his name...he was not a 'religious'." I still remember Mr. Kwok's tone of somber regret. (Footnotes see p. 22)