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Being Matteo Ricci: Secular & Spiritual Pathways of a Jesuit in China

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Being Matteo Ricci: Secular & Spiritual Pathways of a Jesuit in China

Dressed in the traditional robes of a Ming dynasty scholar, the Matteo Ricci of this portrait ironically appears more Chinese than European (Figure 1). His garb and demeanor perhaps belie the humble origins of this Italian priest, who seemed as comfortable in the ethnically Chinese hanfu as he was in the habits of his monastic order.

As the first foreigner to reside in the Forbidden Court and the first to be buried in Beijing, Father Matteo Ricci was a pioneer who bridged the East and West through Jesuit evangelism. He continues to be a well-respected icon among Western and Chinese audiences, with the Xinhua News Agency writing in 2009 that “he indicated an alternative route of incorporation of culture and science for all.” A true Renaissance man, Ricci’s skill lay in adopting a variety of personas that went beyond mere physical disguise, donning the robes of a Buddhist monk and later those of the Confucian literati during the mission. More than a missionary and religious figure, Ricci was at once a politician, scholar, scientist, and cultural emissary, making him a complex and occasionally contradictory character. It is this tension between the intensely spiritual and the extrinsically secular that forms the central inquiry of this paper: the two sides of Ricci, expedient diplomat and introspective thinker, reveal a nuanced moral universe that facilitated his acceptance into early Chinese society. Despite the lofty spiritual purposes of the China mission, Ricci and his companions were obliged to make compromises and bend their role as missionaries in order to effectively interact

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with the Chinese. Their decisions highlight the pragmatism and utilitarianism of proselytizing, transforming the mission from not only a religious undertaking but an economic and diplomatic one as well. The holy objectives of the mission were thus coupled with the secular, worldly concerns of gaining access to China through a sophisticated reliance on gift-giving and patron-client relationships. However, the practical logistics do not alone explain Ricci’s unprecedented success in China; instead one must look closer at the man himself, at his worldview and personal philosophy, to understand the intimacy of his accommodation approach. Shaped by his Jesuit training and Italian humanism, Ricci was uniquely inclined to recognize similarities between his cultural and religious beliefs with those of the Chinese. In the contemplative philosophy of Confucianism, Ricci found reflected the transcendent, meditative spirituality of Jesuitism, itself unlike any other religious order, and a point of connection with the Chinese. Ricci’s experiences weave a story of how agents of change are themselves changed by their interactions and relationships with local peoples.

This paper is driven by close reading of Ricci’s journals, compiled and translated into Latin by contemporary Nicolas Trigault in 1615 and into English by Jesuit priest Louis J. Gallagher in 1942. The Trigault edition, De Christiana expeditione apud Sinas suscepta ab Societate Jesu, is a combination of Ricci’s unpublished Italian manuscripts and Trigault’s own additions, which raises questions as to the reliability of the source. Although Trigault assures the reader that “what I have added, I have seen with my own eyes, or have obtained it from the true report of other Fathers,” it becomes necessary to separate Trigault’s voice from that of Ricci throughout the book (xiv). 2 It is known that Trigault drew from the Annual Mission Letters and

Ricci’s correspondence to tie together the narrative, which is most evident in the final chapter that describes Ricci’s funeral. The Gallagher edition used in this paper, published as *China in the Sixteenth Century*, then is further removed from the original source, though somewhat improved by its sparse footnotes. Despite the multitude of voices contained in the Gallagher version, the book remains a valuable source of information and the only complete English translation of Ricci’s journals. From the outset, it is clear that Ricci intended for his journals to be widely published, indicated not only by the formality and detail of the writing, but also constant reference to himself in the third-person. The book is divided into five sections: the first a comprehensive overview of Ming China’s customs and governance, while the other four describe in chronological order the history of Jesuit China missions from Francis Xavier to Ricci’s own twenty-seven years of experiences.

Born in 1552 in Macerata, Matteo Ricci likely had no inkling of the transformative, lifelong journey that would take him from his native Italy to the other end of the world, China. He was the eldest of thirteen children in a noble family, and at an early age began his education at the local Jesuit college. Though his father sent him to Rome to study law, a young Ricci had chosen to enter the Society of Jesus by 1571. At the Jesuit Roman College he was steeped in the humanist philosophy of Cicero and Aristotle as well as a rigorous curriculum of mathematics, astronomy, and cartography, an intellectual framework that would serve him well with the Chinese literati. Fascinated by stories from Portuguese missionary Martino da Silva, Ricci requested an assignment in the East in 1577. After four years in India, Ricci was specially chosen to travel to Macao, where he diligently studied the Chinese language and prepared himself to enter China.

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From a young age Ricci was also exposed to a world of violence, family feuds, and vengeful murders in Macerata. For example, he was five years old when a Benedictine friar murdered a member of the local Floriani family.\(^4\) In the larger context of Europe, deeply fragmented by wars of the Reformation, Ricci’s adolescent environment would play an important foil to the stability and unity he saw in Chinese society. Writing about the Chinese, he observed, “in this respect they are much different from the people of Europe, who are frequently discontent with their own governments and covetous of what others enjoy” (55). The complex moral system of Confucianism not only provided a unifying orthodoxy, but also prized social harmony, class hierarchy, and chastity above all else, to the extent that Ricci observed the Chinese style of drinking as so well-controlled that hangovers were rare. In his mind, China benefited from a meritocracy of bureaucrats, whose close advisory relationship to the emperor came very close to the Platonic ideal of a philosopher-king. So great was his admiration of these elite magistrates that he opined, “they do their duty so thoroughly that they are a source of wonder to outsiders and a good example for imitation” (49). Here Ricci could have been gesturing to the Italian Wars and political upheaval that had characterized his home country, due in part to the shifting alliances and struggles for power among its leaders. All these aspects would be at the forefront of Ricci’s mind as he entered China and began his long physical and spiritual journey to establish legitimacy there.

**GIFT GIVING & MATERIALISM**

Ricci landed in Macao in 1582, a time when China stringently limited all foreign activity and missionary endeavors to the Portuguese outpost. No Jesuit mission had yet to establish a sustained, meaningful presence in China, and it was this climate of aloofness and suspicion that

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Ricci and his companions faced while building their first church in Zhaoqing. Religious zeal alone was not enough to win the hearts of the Chinese, but patron-client relationships, forged through elaborate gift-giving and reciprocity, were needed to secure approval, or at least tolerance, from regional officials. Luxurious items such as artwork, furnishings, and rare cloths were bestowed to the Chinese elite as tokens of friendship and implicit favoritism, as well as performative symbols of cultural exchange. Commercialization and materialism thus constituted an integral part of the missionary experience, such that the skein of extravagance and indulgence was interwoven with that of spirituality. Therein lies a tension between the secular and the spiritual, between the profane and the sacred.

“When the two delegates came into the presence of the Viceroy of Sciauquin [Zhaoqing], they presented him with the watch and also with several pieces of triangular shaped glass in which objects were reflected in beautiful multi-colored tints,” recalls Ricci (138). The Viceroy was delighted by the gifts and soon extended a cordial invitation for the missionaries to formally visit, offering them a comfortable abode adjacent to his palace. As a further display of generosity, he also dispensed an official document granting the Jesuits public authority to build a house and church in Zhaoqing. From that initial act of gift-giving developed a fruitful and mutually beneficial relationship, one that allowed the Jesuits their first quasi-permanent residence in China. This particular situation was one of many in which gifts, especially European novelties that were unknown in China, allowed the missionaries to initiate relationships, facilitate cross-cultural communication, and navigate the asymmetry of official encounters through mutual interest. “Gift exchange persists as an essential relational mode, a repertoire behavior, a register with its own rules, language, etiquette, and gestures,” which is able to signal the legitimacy and
sophistication of the otherwise unknown foreigner. Ricci’s statement that “we have at our house a box full of these gift fans which have been given to us by our friends as a mark of esteem and which we in turn give to others as proof of our friendship” suggests that the value of gifts lie in their conspicuous consumption and public reputation rather than the monetary gain (25).

The culture of gift-giving is rooted in generosity, courtesy, and flexibility: it is an instrument of diplomacy that walks the line between hard, explicit political negotiation and soft, informal cultural customs. For the Chinese, gift-giving was deeply engrained with Confucian concepts of respect, social obligation, and interpersonal relationships, expressed through the term 礼, which encompasses a variety of meanings (ritual, courtesy, propriety, gift, etc.). Among Western cultures gift-giving had a similarly rich tradition, from the ancient Greek concept of xenia to the complex social arrangements of Castiglione’s The Book of the Courtier. Most importantly, gifts served as a site of dialogue and constructed relationships, especially when there were linguistic or cultural barriers. Ricci would have understood the expectations involved in gift-giving, his Italian heritage affording him a certain familiarity with courtly patronage, but needed to adapt that set of practices to local Chinese customs, as in what was appropriate to give and what constituted a bribe.

Ricci recognized that gratitude often engendered obligation, loyalty, and commitment on the part of bureaucrats, an interdependence that enhanced the survival of the mission. Patronage carried out through the rhetoric of gifts ensured that “the element of mutual interest was softened

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without being obliterated." The most striking example of this lies in the 15-page manuscript transported in 1588 by Father Michele Ruggieri, a colleague of Ricci, back to Rome, entitled "Memorandum of the things that need to be sent as a present from His Holiness to the King of China." More a shopping list than an ecclesiastical document, the memorandum highlights the mission’s reliance on material goods, inhabiting the belief that the Chinese could be “wooed with objects.” Those twenty-one gifts were to be presented to the emperor should the Jesuits ever gain a formal audience and were painstakingly selected by missionaries to epitomize European and Christian civilization. Though the gifts were never realized, they included a variety of lavish, rare items designed to impress the emperor with the Jesuits’ sophistication and taste: 200 pieces of Venetian stained glass, three strings of coral, two mirrors, two decorative boxes, engraved images of Rome, 25 pieces of brocade, and so forth. Ricci, the son of an apothecary; Ruggieri, whose father managed the estates of the prominent Orsini family; and the Visitor Alessandro Valignano, of noble origins, all hailed from prosperous backgrounds and were eminently suited to such a discussion of prestige goods. Given their connections to Macao, a central trading post, the trio was further exposed to a world of commerce and consumption. This “epic shopping trip,” as historian Mary Laven playfully describes it, seems to undermine the pious purpose of the mission.

Ricci himself evinced a keen interest in Chinese commodities and economic production, devoting a number of pages in his journals to descriptions of their trade, industries, and goods. He observes, “they have all sorts of raw material and they are endowed by nature with a talent for trading, both of which are potent factors in bringing about a high development of the

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9 Ibid., 72.
mechanical arts” (19). Naturally, Ricci was prone to make comparisons between products of the West and East: tea and lacquer were presented as novelties to the European mind, although Ricci deemed Chinese glass-blowing and paper production to be inferior to those of Europe. He expressed admiration for the extensive network of rivers and canals that enabled one to travel and trade freely, while criticizing the paucity of ocean-faring ships. Ricci’s attention to economic and manufacturing capabilities in China is understandable given the context of expanding global trade during the sixteenth century. Discovery of the New World, new trade routes, and a commercial revolution were transforming Europe; it meant that religious proceedings could not be divorced from and were formidably shaped by the processes of commodification and commercialization occurring throughout the world. In this sense, Ricci embodied both missionary and merchant, a cultural broker who must be able to navigate the materialism of secular society as skillfully as the quiet contemplation of the rectory.

FRIENDSHIPS WITH BUREAUCRACY

Hand in hand with the custom of gift giving, the missionaries channeled their efforts into fostering private linkages with the bureaucracy. The security of the mission lay not in explicit legal rights, but in the cultivation of personal friendships and networks with a powerful, but capricious, bureaucracy. In his journals, Ricci relates that the joy of receiving a permit for permanent residence from the Viceroy of Zhaoqing was short-lived. The Viceroy was suddenly relieved of office for unknown reasons and replaced by a governor less amenable to the foreigners’ presence. Despite the legal mandate of the document, Ricci and company were forced to return to Macao, “knowing as they did that such a document of an ex-Viceroy would have no authority whatsoever” (139). This incident illustrated the difficulty of securing a permanent mission in China without the long-term support and patronage of magistrates. In cruder terms, it
helped to have friends in high places. For years Ricci and his fellows would travel from city to city because they lacked permanent legal status or protection from discrimination in China. After the governor expelled them from Zhaoqing in 1589, they journeyed north to Shaozhou, but there too their residence was tenuous, a 1592 attack on the residence leaving Ricci with an injured foot. By 1595 they had traveled to Nanchang by boat, although they suffered a terrible shipwreck and the drowning of a young Chinese convert along the way. Ricci was so affected by the young man’s death that he “fell into grave doubt as to whether or not he should continue the journey” (264). It was only in 1601, after many tribulations, that they reached the capital city, wherein after multiple attempts to petition the emperor they were finally granted a permanent residence in China.

By 1604 the mission was well-established in Beijing and much of the South, owing to the protection of the Wanli Emperor and a wide network of bureaucratic contacts developed over decades. The early misfortune at Zhaoqing can be contrasted with an incident in Beijing in 1604, when “men of distinction” threatened to incite a rebellion against the missionaries for disparaging their idols. Ricci coolly writes that “by the grace of God and due to the patronage of certain friends, the missionaries succeeded in frustrating this hostile endeavor” (455). The value of personal relationships and friendships far surpassed the authority of any official documents. In fact, Ricci argued that the formalization of the missionaries’ presence would put pressure on the magistrate to bear responsibility for their actions. As a result, implicit or tacit approval allowed bureaucrats greater flexibility to deal with the missionaries: “By demanding written permits, we raised suspicion and fear. Thus, it was better now to proceed confidently as though we were in fact Chinese,” comments Ricci (491).
However, the cultivation of meaningful and enduring friendships was by no means an easy task: it required a sense of propriety, diplomacy, and social eloquence to successfully navigate the nuanced world of banquets, tea breaks, and social calls. A lifestyle of wining and dining meant forgoing the solitary and ascetic lifestyle to which Ricci had vowed, forming an important source of tension and compromise for the missionary. He was no stranger to conviviality (il bevere et il parlare were just as central to Renaissance sociability), but he was exhausted by the four or five banquets a night. He noted with exasperation that a banquet could last up to ten hours, leaving him little time to contemplate Scripture or improve himself (23).

Historian David Mungello humorously imagines that “Ricci’s negative comment [was] born of many hours of sitting captive at such banquets by the demands of etiquette, while other mission needs awaited action.”10 The endless parade of banquets was a particular challenge each year during Lent, to which Ricci adapted by skipping lunch (Laven 109). These sacrifices of spirituality were necessary to advance the long-term survival of the mission, and Ricci recognized that banquets could serve his purpose as well, since “it is customary with the Chinese to argue over their differences at the dinner table” (339). His journals contain a chapter entitled “Father Ricci Debates with a Minister of Idols,” in which Ricci battles wits with a well-known temple minister during a banquet; by the end, the temple minister was the only one who refused to admit defeat, and several guests later became frequent visitors to Ricci’s church. Thus banquets and other social setting served as opportunities for intense male sociability, in addition to initiating religious dialogues.

Amidst those social interactions, what Ricci was experiencing and accessing was the Chinese concept of 關係 guanxi, which can be understood as ‘personal connection’ or a special

10 David Mungello, Curious Land (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag Wiesbaden, 1985), 54.
relationship with implications of continual exchange of favors.\textsuperscript{11} Good *guanxi* is essential to the maintenance of interpersonal relationships, and in the case of the missionaries, to building networks of trust and dependence that would enhance their status in China. As a foreigner with no common kinship or locality ties, Ricci cultivated *guanxi* in other ways by donning the robes of a literati and conversing philosophical ideas, by tutoring the sons of wealthy magistrates, and by sipping wine with men of all walks of life he encountered. Ronnie Hsia describes him as a “great artist in human relations,” considering his ability to parlay both a warm humanism and a devout piety with his acquaintances.\textsuperscript{12} In fact, out of the five Confucian relationships that govern Chinese society (ruler to ruled, father to son, husband to wife, elder brother to younger brother, & friend to friend), Ricci was only able to fulfill the last one. As a Jesuit priest, Ricci was unmarried, displaced from his fathers and brothers, and vowed loyalty to no ruler except God himself. Because he lacked the standard ways of connecting with Chinese peers and inserting himself into the social hierarchy, Ricci placed an even greater emphasis on friendship.

Given the importance of these interpersonal relationships, it is perhaps not a surprise that Ricci devoted an entire essay to the subject of friendship. Ricci presented *On Friendship: One Hundred Maxims for a Chinese Prince* to the Jian’an Prince, a distant cousin of the emperor, as a gift. The essay immediately became a Ming best-seller: it was reprinted in several editions, quoted extensively by literati in their written works, and eventually included in the Imperial Encyclopedia.\textsuperscript{13} Its popularity was such that Ricci commented in a letter, “This *Friendship* has


\textsuperscript{12} Ronnie Hsia, *A Jesuit in the Forbidden City* (Oxford University Press, 2010), 38.

\textsuperscript{13} 古今圖書集成 Complete Collection of Illustrations & Writings from the Earliest to Current Times
earned more credit for me and for our Europe than anything else that we have done.”

Etiquette or advice books were experiencing a similar wave of popularity in Europe, where Castiglione’s *The Book of the Courtier*, Erasmus’ *A Handbook on Manners for Children*, and Della Casa’s *Il Galateo* were widely read. Those placed great emphasis on how a man should properly conduct himself in the public sphere, project a successful image, and navigate interpersonal relationships, all of which Ricci strove to observe in the equally complex, elite culture of China.

The subject of friendship had been explored in such classical works as Cicero’s *Laelius de Amicitia*, but Ricci was likely also influenced by the humanist views on friendship at this time. British historian Peter Burke has suggested that the nature of friendship shifted from the monastic relationships of the Middle Ages to more secular and emotional modes in the late Renaissance, evidenced by a greater willingness to express sentimentality, camaraderie, and warmth among male networks. The deeply collaborative friendships of such great thinkers as Petrarch, Erasmus, and Pietro Bembo, maintained through the “imagined community” of letter-writing, would have provided profound models for Ricci’s intellectual and personal development. He would have been accustomed to these types of social circles in Italy as well. It is notable that *On Friendship* is a secular work; he mentions God only twice throughout the hundred maxims. Instead, Ricci sought to create a space for cross-cultural understanding, accommodation, and goodwill. One passage reads, “once a friendship is made, do not let your mutual feelings of friendliness break off even once… when jade wares have been glued back together they are unsightly, shattered easily, and of little use,” which emphasizes Ricci’s

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profound understanding of the reciprocal obligation embodied by guanxi. Though proselytization was the explicit goal of Ricci’s mission, it is clear that he would not have written this essay had it not been for his personal desire for genuine friendship and intimacy with his Chinese peers.

SPIRITUAL PATHWAYS

The third, and perhaps most significant, aspect of Ricci’s approach is the synthesis of Confucianism and Christianity, with Ricci being the first missionary to recognize and valorize the compatibility of the two belief systems. In the Confucian classics, Ricci observed subtle traces of a Christian affinity, as well as a lay spirituality and contemplative tradition that appealed to his own Jesuit training. So great was his admiration for Confucianism that he argued, “the teachings of this academy, save in some few instances, are so far from being contrary to Christian principles, that such an institution could derive great benefit from Christianity and might be developed and perfected by it” (98). Ricci’s interpretation of Confucianism reflected as much his own convictions and aesthetics as it did an analysis of ancient Chinese sources: he crafted a narrative of holy or divine purpose in the hopes of discovering a Christian universality. It is in this site of creation, synthesis, and construction that the tension of the spiritual mission emerges—to navigate the worlds of Confucianism and Christianity without detracting from either, and to accommodate the religious pluralism of Chinese society without straying from the core tenets of Christian orthodoxy. Ricci struggled to meld the two traditions in such a way that Christianity would supplement and improve Confucianism, and significantly, vice versa. Samuel Wells Williams, a nineteenth century missionary to China, would later criticize Ricci for having

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“disfigured the Christian religion by a faithful mixture of superstition… and teaching the Christians to assist and cooperate at the worship of idols,” which emphasizes the controversial, uneasy balance which Ricci was attempting to forge.\(^\text{17}\) Regardless, this syncretic approach was possible—perhaps inevitable—during the sixteenth century due to the intellectual and theological transformations taking place within both Europe and China. The Reformation fostered questioning and reevaluation of Christian doctrine, while the late Ming was a period of scholarly ferment that welcomed new interpretations of Confucianism, even from foreigners.\(^\text{18}\) There was a certain degree of openness on both sides to allow religious dialogue to develop.

Confucianism and Christianity resemble each other in their quest for self-transcendence and personal improvement through moral striving. Though Confucianism lacked the dogmatic structure of an institutionalized religion, it resonated with Christianity on beliefs such as the worship of deities and a spiritual ascetism in daily life. Ricci further contended that what it lacked in a doctrinal mythology could be filled by Jesuit teachings. His culminating work, *The True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven* 天主實義, argues that Confucian classics contained the seeds of Christian dogma and an awareness of a Divine Creator, but that their original meaning had been lost in the contemporary generation. Written as a conversation between a Western scholar and Chinese one, it imitates the back-and-forth dialogue of the Confucian *Analects*, thereby making its theological points more accessible to the Chinese public. Ricci distinguished between the original Confucianism that had been practiced by Zhou emperors and the “neo-Confucianism” that emerged by the Ming dynasty, which had been corrupted by the superstitious influences of Buddhism and Taoism. Of the triple cult of the Literati (Confucianism), Sciequia (Buddhism), and Laucu (Taoism), Ricci laments that “in believing they can honor all three laws

\(^{17}\) qtd. in John Young, *Confucianism & Christianity* (Hong Kong University Press, 1983), 26. 
\(^{18}\) See Tung-lin Movement (1530-1630).
at the same time, they find themselves without any law at all” (105). With uncharacteristic hostility, Ricci derides Buddhism and Taoism as confusing the Chinese with concepts of reincarnation, nirvana, and perfect nothingness, which are antithetical to Christian doctrine. The adherence to these false religions detracted from the promising teachings of Confucianism, such that “primitive ideas of religion become so obscure with the passing of time, that there are very few who do not descend to the worse error atheism” (94). It is for this reason that Ricci changed from the Buddhist bonze robes he had worn at the outset of the mission to those of a Confucian scholar, believing the latter to be more compatible with Christian ideology.

“From the very beginning of their history it is recorded in their writings that they recognized and worshipped one supreme being whom they called the King of Heaven,” observes Ricci (93). The strength of his catechism *The True Meaning* lay in relating Christian precepts through Confucian terms and concepts, for instance equating the idea of a single creator 上帝 shangdi (Sovereign on High) in the Confucian canon with God (天主 tianzhu Lord of Heaven).\(^\text{19}\) “Having leafed through a great number of ancient books, it is quite clear to me that the Sovereign on High and the Lord of Heaven are different only in name,” explains Ricci.\(^\text{20}\) These two terms stand in contrast to the neo-Confucian idea of 太極 taichi (Supreme Ultimate), which was a Taoist concept of a cosmological, impersonal force of creation. Ricci goes on to defend the immortality of the soul, using select passages from the classics, and relating Catholic compassion and love for God to the Confucian precept of 認 ren (humanity, benevolence). Interestingly though, *The True Meaning* fails to mention the paramount doctrines of Trinity or Original Sin, revealing both a flexibility in Ricci’s approach to Catholicism and a selective administration of

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\(^{19}\) John Young, *Confucianism & Christianity* (Hong Kong University Press, 1983), 33.

spiritual teachings. Nor did Ricci introduce the concept of the Pope and the institutional hierarchy of bishops, priests, and deacons to the Chinese. The challenge of Ricci’s synthesis was evincing the Christian faith without destroying the moral and cultural traditions of Confucianism, of which he was a great admirer. For example, he encouraged converts to adopt Christian burial practices instead of traditional cremation, but allowed the Confucian ritual practices of honoring family ancestors (i.e. worshipping ancestral shrines and placing food as grave offerings). Certain customs were also adapted to make room for Christian belief. At the beginning of a new year, the Chinese place statues of gods over the main entrance of their homes. Christian converts replaced those statues of Buddhist gods with those of Jesus and Mary, which “gave them all the consolation of knowing that they were in no way inferior, in the observance of the national custom (460).”

However, Ricci’s attraction to Confucianism was in part based on its moral, meditative, and metaphysical qualities that coincided with a Jesuit tradition of transcendence and meditation. The Society of Jesus was itself a reviverist religion founded during the Counter-Reformation, with an emphasis on the contemplative and introspective aspects of faith. At its core is the *Spiritual Exercise of Saint Ignatius Loyola*, a set of meditations, prayers, and mental exercises to be conducted over a thirty-day retreat. Part of the novitiate training program, the Exercises are unusual in that they privilege a reflective, internalized experience of spirituality rather than liturgy or outwardly demonstrative practices of faith. Retreatants were expected to seclude themselves, so that “examining one’s conscience, of meditating, of contemplating, of praying vocally and mentally, and of performing other spiritual actions… so every way of preparing and
disposing the soul to rid itself of all the disordered tendencies.” Ricci’s legacy has hinged on his intellectual and philosophical propensities, but perhaps falters at an understanding of the man’s inner moral world. That strain of interiority and self-awareness likely resonated with Ricci in his studies of Confucianism, which demanded self-cultivation, contemplation, and a dash of mysticism. Christianity concerns itself with “the life of the spirit—of the Holy Spirit’s action on the soul,” just as Confucianism demands a conscience that savors its own presence and finds pleasure in reflecting upon a hallowed text.

It is also of interest to note that Ricci was known for his mnemonic prowess, impressing the Chinese with his ability to cache and recall information using a memory palace. It was said that he could run through a list of four to five hundred random Chinese characters, then repeat them in reverse order with ease. In fact, mnemonic techniques had a long tradition in Christian and Western thought, originating with Cicero and Thomas Aquinas, and may have served as a means of marshaling spiritual concentration. Catholic practices of reciting Hail Mary’s and memorizing prayers, as in The Spiritual Exercises, also point to an intimate, inward mental focus. Ricci may have been as much impressed by the emotive, ruminative, and self-reflective qualities of Confucianism as he was by its ethical teachings.

CONCLUSION

At the heart of this paper is the belief that Matteo Ricci was no ordinary Jesuit, but rather a missionary with an agenda and a mission independent of the Jesuit order, that of personal transformation and fulfillment in China. He immersed himself in Chinese identity and culture in

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24 Ibid., 13.
a way that had not been and has not since been replicated. On May 11, 1610, Ricci passed away at the age of 57, and despite law that foreigners must be buried in Macao, the emperor bestowed the land of a Buddhist temple for Ricci’s tomb as a symbol of his contributions to the Ming dynasty. By 1705, Pope Clement XI had reversed most of Ricci’s accommodation policies, officially forbidding the practice of ancestral worship in conjunction with Christianity and the use of the classical term for God, *shangdi*. So angered was the Kangxi Emperor that he issued a decree that no Westerner would be permitted to reside in China unless they “follow the customs of Li Madou [Matteo Ricci].” All Christian missions were subsequently banned in China and Chinese Christians heavily persecuted up until the 20th century.

The Chinese Rites Controversy forces one to reevaluate Ricci’s legacy in a new light, begging the question, where did Ricci stand as a Jesuit missionary? The Catholic Church evidently condemned his distortion of true religion with ‘heathen’ Confucian practices. To “follow the customs of Li Madou” suggests that the Chinese appreciated Ricci for his lack of ecclesiastical orthodoxy and willingness to compromise. Ricci is believed to have converted around 2,500 Chinese, but that number is limited to the elite classes and, in as vast an empire as Ming China, is barely a drop in the water. Instead then, let us consider Matteo Ricci for his virtues as a cultural emissary, as a successful mediator between East and West. Ricci lived for twenty-seven years, almost half his life, in China as Chinese; he was no transient sojourner, but rather a naturalized citizen by modern standards. While religion was certainly a driving force of his life, it was not the only means or identity through which Ricci engaged with Chinese society.

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His prolific body of work (all published in Chinese) include secular as well as religious writings, reflecting a diverse inner life distinct from his monastic occupation. In China, he was revered as a scholar and scientist, a high status and intellectual fulfillment that he could not have achieved in Italy, where courtiers were valued over academics. His quest for personal and intellectual growth oftentimes conflicted with his official purpose as a missionary, creating a tension between personal spirituality and that of the Church. Ricci did not denigrate Chinese customs or beliefs, like many of his Western contemporaries, but found reflected in them his own values, morals, and faith. Just as he sought to exhilarate the Chinese with revelation of the gospel, his life too was profoundly enriched and inspired by the experience of a Confucian way of life. On his deathbed he told his Jesuit companions, “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” (563). His rewards may have been as much secular as they were spiritual, and as personally meaningful as they were apostolic. By the end of his life it had become difficult to separate Ricci the mandarin from Ricci the monk.

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