

## Matteo Ricci sets out to conquer the Middle Country!

**“Those who will live one hundred generations after us are not yet born, and I cannot tell what sort of people they will be. Yet thanks to the existence of written culture, even those living ten thousand generations hence will be able to enter my mind as if we were contemporaries.”**

**Matteo Ricci, introduction to Ink Garden of the Cheng Family.**

Michela Fontana

A small notebook made of Oriental paper comprised of 131 pages, bound in soft leather and filled with thick orderly calligraphy, today preserved in a safe in the historical archives of the Jesuits of Rome. A simple, plain, precious object. It is the most personal item that remains of Matteo Ricci, the Jesuit from the city of Macerata in southern Italy, who went to China in 1582 and died in Beijing in 1610, after having conquered for himself an important place in the history of Chinese-European relations. It is the story of his pioneering mission to China, *On the Entry of the Society of Jesus and Christianity in China*, compiled in the last years of his life. About fifty letters sent to Europe, hand-written on thin pieces of Chinese and western paper also survive, yellowed with time, and some manuscripts such as the first Portuguese-Chinese dictionary in prized mien-chih white paper produced in Zhaoqing in 1587. Also copies of his ethical, religious and scientific works written in Mandarin Chinese printed during his stay in China remain, and some of his famous maps, that for the first time presented Europe, Africa and also the American continent - still unknown to the Chinese. In his maps, Ricci - skillful diplomat - drew China in the central position; it was called the Middle Country (Zhong Guo), and was perceived by its inhabitants as the reference point of the entire world.

Ricci's works - fragile paper objects rich in history, evoke a human and intellectual adventure celebrated last year through the 400th anniversary of his death with countless initiatives both in Italy and in China.

**RICCI PIONEER.** Matteo Ricci, Li Madou in Chinese, was the first European to be welcomed in China during the Ming dynasty, when the immense empire was closed to foreign penetration, three centuries after the visit of Marco Polo to the Mongolian court. He settled in the city of Zhaoqing in the coastal province of Guangdong in 1583, and never again left China. He moved to Shaozhou, later lived in Nanchang in the Jiangxi province, and then in Nanjing in the province of Jiangsu. In 1601 he arrived in the capital, Peking, where he remained until his death, thanks to the protection of Emperor Wanli, even if he never had the pleasure of personally meeting the “Son of Heaven”.

Ricci had set out as a missionary to conquer the Chinese over to his religion, to convince them to recognize his unique and personal God, Creator of Heaven and Earth. But instead, it was China - an imposing empire of ancient culture where religion was subject to imperial power - that conquered him. In order to be able to speak as a peer to members of bureaucracy, Ricci learned Mandarin, dressed in silk like a literate, adapted to local customs. He studied and appreciated the philosophy of Confucius, wrote books in Chinese and translated into Mandarin the mathematics and astronomy texts that he had brought with him from Europe. A literate among literates, respected by Mandarins, he became an effective and intelligent cultural mediator and used science to conquer the minds of imperial officers. He spoke of stars, of planets and comets as a preamble to then speak about theology and convince Chinese intellectuals to adhere to his religious views.

**FROM ROME TO CHINA.** After having studied in Rome at the Collegio Romano - the most famous Jesuit university - Ricci embarked in Portugal in 1578 as a missionary heading towards Asia. His belongings, besides religious texts, also contained some volumes he had studied on, including Euclid's *Elements* in the Latin version by his teacher Christopher Clavius, a German Jesuit, eminent mathematician and astronomer. Other philosophical and scientific texts he had “in his memory”, as he later wrote in a letter. During the long voy-age at sea towards the East, he could not yet have imagined that each of the works he had with him would have constituted a valid instrument for dialogue

## A CULTURE IN PAPER

with Chinese culture.

After arriving in Macau in 1582, Ricci began to study the Chinese language and culture, following the indications of Alessandro Valignano, Visitor of the Jesuit missions in Asia. Determined to “conquer” China over to the Christian creed, Valignano proposed a new approach to evangelization called “cultural accommodation”. Instead of imposing his religion with coercion and force - as was done in the past especially by the Portuguese in India - the Jesuits would study the language and culture of the population to whom their work was directed, in order to find contact points between Christianity and local creeds.

**BOOKS.** Ricci was committed to studying, and he was surprised that a very vast local book production was available; historical, philosophical and moral works in literary Chinese could be found on the market, as well as volumes in the vernacular for all tastes, practical and technical manuals, novels. The rich offer was made possible through the use of xylography or woodblock printing, diffused in China already in the VI century, well before it was used in Europe, where it arrived in the XIII century. Even movable type printing was diffused in China in the XI century, while in Europe it was used on a large scale only starting from the mid-XV century. But in China, movable type was not as diffused as it was in Europe, because the very high number of characters required a large number of “types”, making the printing process too expensive. Instead, xylography - much more economical - allowed printing a book as many times as needed in the required number of copies, re-utilizing the same wooden matrices bearing the engravings of the pages of the first edition, for subsequent editions.

Ricci greatly admired the skills of engravers - who worked much quicker than western typographers: “... no more time is consumed in engraving one block than would be required by one of our printers in setting up a form of type and making the necessary corrections.”

Having realized the extent of book diffusion, Ricci understood that writing would be the most effective vehicle to help his message reach the Chinese: “Books reached places where the Fathers could not and our message is rather better explained in this kingdom by the written rather than by the spoken word, because of the great power which their characters possess.”

**CHINESE PAPER.** Upon first contact with Chinese books, and during his initial practice with calligraphy, Ricci discovered that the paper used in China was delicate and porous, less resistant than the one used in Europe, and that only one side of the sheet could be written on. Even writing techniques were different. The Chinese used a brush for writing, differently from Europeans who at the time used goose feathers, quills, straws, instruments with “rough” points that could easily pierce an untreated paper sheet. The paper that Ricci studied and was learning to use was one of the many important Chinese inventions.

According to what has been passed down to us, paper production methods were invented by the court official Cai Lun in the year 105 A.D., during the Han Dynasty (202 B.C. - 220 A.D.), using mulberry tree fibers, hemp scraps and fishing nets. In reality, recent archeological excavations in the Gansu province suggest that paper was used in China more than a century before. The Chinese succeeded in safeguarding the secret of paper production until, in the VII century, Buddhist monks diffused them in Japan. In the VIII century, following the capture of some Chinese paper manufacturers after the Arab victory at Talas, in Kyrgyzstan, in 751, the techniques of paper production were propagated in the Islamic world and, in the XI century, reached Europe.

In China paper had many uses. Much to his surprise, Ricci discovered that it was used to make hats, shoes, clothing, blankets, kites, it was used to pack tea bags and to create ornamental objects. Also paper money was diffused throughout China for centuries, introduced for the first time during the Tang Dynasty (618-907), much earlier with respect to Europe. Paper money was not useful only in trade, but also to pay homage to the officials of the imperial administration, who on particular occasions, received banknotes inserted in colored paper bags as gifts. A curiosity: already in the VI century in China, paper was used for hygienic purposes. Improper uses were frowned upon, if it is true that in 589 the imperial official Yan Zhitui wrote that would never have employed for that use the pages of texts containing passages by the classics of philosophy. Chronicles report that in 1393, during the reign of Emperor Hongwu, 720 thousand sheets of toilet paper were produced for the imperial court, 15 thousand of which - yellow and perfumed - for the imperial family.

**HIS MOST FAMOUS WORKS.** Ricci began writing in Chinese as soon as he was able to master the Mandarin language. His first and most famous work, Treaty of Friendship, dedicated to Prince Kang Yi, written in Nanchang in 1595, fully embodied the spirit of cultural accommodation. It contained precepts by philosophers of ancient Greece and Rome and by the fathers of the Church, chosen to demonstrate to the Chinese that friendship - a virtue celebrated by Confucianism - was just as valued also in Europe. More ambitious was True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven, tra-

ditionally known as Catechism. It was published in 1603 to convince Chinese literates that Confucianism was compatible with Catholicism and contained an idea of God that coincided with the Christian God.

Among his scientific works, the most famous is *A First Textbook of Geometry*, i.e., the translation of the first six chapters of Euclid's *Elements* in the Latin version by Christopher Clavius, written in 1607 by Ricci in collaboration with the authoritative member of the imperial administration Xu Guangqi.

Thanks to xylography, Ricci's works were widely distributed among Chinese literates. His maps with China in the center, of which he prepared four different editions, were also diffused in Japan and in Southeast Asia.

**RICCI'S TOPICALITY.** Ricci went to China to convert the Chinese to his religion, but his project did not yield the results that Jesuit authorities had hoped. Upon Ricci's death, about two thousand people had been baptized - a very small number for a population of 200 million. But the Jesuit was satisfied with his pioneering work. He had always said that he preferred the quality of conversions, even to the detriment of their quantity. Furthermore, among those he converted, he could boast of prominent personalities of the imperial bureaucracy, like Paul Xu Guangqi and another important collaborator in scientific translations, Leo Li Zhizao.

Even though few Chinese has adhered to the western religion, Ricci's work acquired a meaning that went beyond evangelization. The daring interpretation of Confucius' philosophy, his scientific and ethical teachings, the respect for Mandarins and his skill in dialoguing were appreciated and valorized by the Chinese, who still today quote Li Madou as a friend of China. So today, it is right to remember the Jesuit from Macerata, attentive cultural mediator. His tolerating approach in regards to a different culture remains extraordinarily topic. •

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