

HOW WESTERN RELIGION TRIED TO ENTER THE 'CHINESE WAY' – OR WHY MATTEO RICCI'S ATTEMPTS TO SPREAD CHRISTIANITY IN CHINA REMAINED FRUITLESS

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Abstract: Matteo Ricci or Limadou, as he was called in China, was a Jesuit of Italian descent who came to live in China during the Ming dynasty. He was one of the pioneers of the Catholic Church in China, and also the first Western scholar to read, study and translate Chinese literature and the Chinese classics. He made an important contribution to the exchange between the Chinese and the Western cultures. This paper reveals some of the reasons why his attempts to spread Christianity in China remained fruitless.

Keywords: Mateo Ricci, religion, Chinese culture, Buddhism, belief system

Religion has been described by scholars in a variety of ways. In general it is connected with people's interpretation of natural phenomena, and could be used as a powerful method to overcome people's fear. There are some places where religion turned to be a necessary condition to unify a nation. For example, there are some countries in Europe which succeeded to stand independent and continued to exist even under the oppression of other nations thanks to their own religious consciousness. That is to say, religion could help a nation to survive the invasion of other nations and seek one's way of independence when it has been lost. But in China, religious consciousness is completely different from most of the Western countries, and until today there is no religion forming the basis of Chinese culture. There are many reasons, and one of them is that

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Confucianism itself exerted such a profound influence on people in Ancient China that there was actually no place left for any other religion's beliefs. Yet, Confucianism itself was not a religion, but rather an ethic-political system, a series of principles for China's population to abide by. Another reason that makes China stand out from other Western countries is that the Chinese philosophical system is characterized by pantheism. Sometimes the Emperor of China will absolutely support a sort of religion, or better say a set of beliefs (including Confucianism). But this kind of Imperial favor has often been overlooked by the emperor's inheritors. That means that no religion or set of beliefs could be inherited or be powerful enough to even destroy another religion as it has happened in Europe in the Middle Ages with many pagan religions. As a result, religious beliefs in China coexisted for a long time without conflicting with one another. The fact that no foreign culture has prevailed over the Chinese one should not be underestimated. Under foreign occupation Chinese culture has overpowered other cultures, such as the Mongols during the Yuan Dynasty or Manchu during the Qing Dynasty. Their culture and beliefs were not as well developed as the nations of the Middle Kingdom which assimilated the other cultures into itself.

There are many ancient cultures like those in Greece, or Rome who also believed in polytheism. Their belief systems viewed gods as being in control of all natural events and sacrifices were made to their gods. Many forces of nature were worshipped, including refers to non-human entities becoming "humanized" (the so called Anthropomorphism). For example, one of the earliest inhabitants of the Thracian religion in Bulgaria worshiped many deities. They worshiped a goddess Bendis who was mainly presented as a hunter, Dionysus (worshiped as Zagreus) – the God of Wine, joy and ecstasy (also a part of ancient Greek mythology), Semele – the mother of Earth. They also believed in the magic power of the fire. The Thracians were strong believers in the afterlife and placed food, weapons, and their most valued possessions in their tombs. In a few of the tombs the wives and steeds have also been found buried beside their master. Nations and tribes with pagan beliefs have often been discriminated against.

Religion often holds a key role in the nation's development as in 865 when the Christian orthodox religion was accepted as the main country's religion in Bulgaria. This was treated by others as a modern state that has emerged from the dark and one worthy of a place in the economic and social status for a modern state. Through the use of a single religion, the local ruler was able to crush descent, unite the population and establish stability in Bulgaria. With common religious beliefs come a common way of life, customs and moral concepts.

With this in mind, China is among the richest countries with pantheist beliefs. Throughout time various religious beliefs have led a harmonious

coexistence: Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism etc. There are few foreign missionaries who came to China and were welcomed and supported by the Chinese emperor. Although they could enjoy a higher status, Christianity itself was never able to gather popular support like it did in other places of the world, as far as we can say that “foreign religions” were tolerated. This failure to blend into the Chinese society, like Buddhism has, is largely due to the lack of Christianity’s to adapt and adopt Chinese cultural values.

Perhaps the most famous missionary in China was Matteo Ricci (October 6, 1552 – May 11, 1610) or Limadou, as he was called in China. He was a Jesuit of Italian descent who came to live in China during the Wanli period of the Ming Dynasty. Popular among Chinese intellectuals, he was commonly known as “the Confucian”.

Limadou was one of the pioneers of the Catholic Church in China, and also the first Western scholar who read, studied and translated Chinese literature and the Chinese classics. Beside the spread of the Catholic doctrine, he also had a wide range of official and social acquaintances in high positions, played a key role to popularize Western astronomy, Mathematics, Geography and other scientific and technical knowledge.

His writings not only made an important contribution to the exchange of Chinese and Western cultures, but also had an important influence on Japan and Korea. Some time ago there have been hold an exhibition called the “Chinese and Western Science and Technology Cultural Exchanges” at the Capital Museum in Beijing, where could be seen a contemporary view of China’s basic position on clergy in their hearts. We know, of course, that Matteo Ricci travelled to China in order to preach, after all, he was a Catholic clerk, rather than a university professor. However, he has a good knowledge and western science allowed him to secure a place in China. Among his possessions were novelty clocks, prism, maps, paintings and a variety of instruments from the West that were fascinating to the Chinese. These things combined with his western knowledge gave him a start in China where many others had failed, however, it didn’t help him with his main goal which was to spread Christianity to China.

From far away point of view we can see that Ricci’s Chinese mission work was very successful because of the pioneering and cultural aspects of his travels. This conclusion has a premise, that is, we will only see Limadou from the aspect of an ordinary religious missionary. But, since he was met by the Chinese Emperor and even respectfully buried in Beijing after his death, his status must be much higher than an ordinary religious missionary. Yet, Ricci’s position in the eyes of Chinese Catholics and Bodhi dharma’s position in the hearts

of Chinese Buddhists are very different. Bodhi dharma was not only of the greatest Buddhist in China, but a big contributor to Buddhism popularization. His “crossing a reed” story was regarded as an explanation and guide to ordinary people and how they could achieve their spiritual goals in life.

Originally, polytheism was popular in China, even some mountains, some rivers, even a piece of stone or a tree will be as God to be worshipped. A cleric has not been deified, which in itself can be seen father Matteo Ricci and his colleagues have not understand one thing, in China, missionary need to establish a Chinese Christian thought from that's close to the Chinese way of thinking or culture.

Compared with the doctrine of Buddhism, Catholicism in China has an adverse factor. That is the Catholic Church is against the worship of idols. The Bible several times mentions that Christians are not allowed to worship of idols.

In addition, up until now Chinese worship ancestors, the land, the Yellow Emperor, Confucius, Mencius and Mazu (also known as the Goddess of heaven, Mazu goddess) etc. It is seen that in China, in the thousands of years of faith, the traditional concept is still in the worship of various gods, and these Gods have their own shape.

But in Christianity the meaning of God is completely different. Any man, no matter how kindhearted or spirited, cannot become a god or be like god. The widely popularity and spread of Buddhism in Chinese is that pantheism is common among people. That is to say, it is believed that people can become “Buddha” through their own practice. For this reason, Matteo Ricci and other preachers cannot extent greater reach or gain popularity in China, because they could rarely enter among the many other Gods and deity world of Chinese demanding a belief in only one entity.

However, I think that the most important reason that Limadou's missionary did not succeed to change the “Chinese way” and spread Christianity is that he could not change the symbols of Christianity and images of God to fit the Chinese understanding and likings.

As we all know, after entering China, the image of Budha from Northern and Southern Dynasties to the Tang Dynasty has already started to have many Chinese characteristics. The image of a slightly chubby man, and the attitude of the very kind image of “Buddha” is very pleasing to the Chinese people. If we go to the subcontinent of South Asia then look at the images of the Buddha there we will find, they are just slightly overweight and they have a different more local looking face. This shows that Dharma had the intention of creating interest in the younger generation and the need to localize Buddhism within China. Only by letting people feel warm and close to these symbols, figures

and images, Chinese people were able to establish a closer relationship with the deity. The Catholic Church however has made no attempts at altering or changing parts in itself to relate to Chinese culture and remains identical to its roots.

In fact, Ricci's preaching was not rigid and frozen. He allowed Chinese Catholics to continue the tradition of worship, mainly ancestor worship. According to his interpretation, these are only ceremonies of the respect for the ancestors; worship of family and other scientific elements, in essence, is not a violation of the Catholic doctrine. Matteo Ricci advocated the worship of the Catholic "God" (English – God; Hebrew – Elohim or Latin – Deus); but he also believed that the Catholic God has already existed in Chinese thought, because of the Chinese tradition of using words like "Heaven" (Tian) and "God" (Shangdi) that contained the meaning of "the Only God".

I think it is a kind of technique Ricci had to use to be at ease with his beliefs and make compromises for the sake of Chinese believers. If during hundreds of years Confucius was regarded as God in the eyes of Chinese people, and there were not allowed to think so having to accept God that even doesn't look like them, apparently there will be few Chinese people to become Catholic believers.

But, why did Ricci never succeed with the church portrait image drawing and have Chinese accept it? Is it that he never thought of this layer, or did he thought it would be wrong? Maybe he felt Chinese wearing clothing with yellow faces of Virgin Mary and Jesus were not acceptable.

The missionary father Ricci was maybe also not successful, because he had alternative motives behind coming to China. At the time China was a flourishing place and probably the world's most developed country. At the same time very few foreigners were allowed in. So he had the opportunity to get close to a land that few were able to get to. So taking this into consideration he might have sacrificed his missionary goals in order to get a foot hold in China.

Father Ricci came to China in the complacent and pompous era of Ming Dynasty, which meant that in the beginning he struggled with finding a way to enter. He had to lie to the emperor at first and did not tell him that he wants to come "to spread the truth" when he first entered China. He did not dare to say that he was a Catholic and he said he was a Buddhist. Later, when he found himself not how Buddhist respected, he reserved the beard, wearing a robe and dressed as a scholar:

There was one time that he was even convinced that a mistake had been made in adopting a dress resembling that of the bonzes, a class who were the objects either of superstition or of contempt. With the sanction of the visitor it

was officially ordered that in future the missionaries should adopt the costumes of Chinese literates.²

Of course, not only the way he dressed, but the things he brought with him from the Western World as well as his knowledge on scientific and cultural issues attracted people. In fact, those things really appealed to the Chinese heart, more than the Catholic religion. At the above mentioned exhibition in the Capital Museum were displayed pieces of Chinese art: exquisite porcelain, beautiful ivory carvings, all of them by no means regarded as “very nice”. But Matteo Ricci showed Chinese that some things were not only nice, interesting and amusing but useful. Still, those instruments, maps, all scientific and technological knowledge were very “interesting and amusing” to the Chinese people so as to worship the Western culture or accept the western religion. Father Ricci met a far more complicated problem than those of Bodhidharma during the teaching of Buddha. He was unable to let the Emperor personally get acquainted with Catholic religion. But, in the early times when Buddhism started to be spread around China, this could be done.

From a general point of view father Ricci and his mission are successful because he was one of the first to come, stay and understood Chinese language and culture. But without the Emperor’s support he could not make any greater contribution.

Pope Paul II stated once that “father Ricci is the greatest contribution in the field of cultural exchange”³ but his attempts to introduce Church were not mentioned.

Limadou’s work was given a very high evaluation in many researches, but concerning his religious work at China the best approval he received was that “he made Chinese people know Jesus Christ, the Catholic theology and the etiquette terms”⁴.

If we only regarded Matteo Ricci as an ordinary clergy, then he and his life in China were more than successful. However, a man supposed to introduce Church in China, included in the speech of the Pope, I certainly put him in the same position as the Buddhist Bodhidharma. As a result the conclusion is entirely different.

In an era of rapid development of science and technology, we have begun to doubt whether religion is needed to achieve a peaceful living but we can

² Ref. *The Attempt of Matteo Ricci to link Chinese and Western Cultures*, pp 179-189.

³ 宗教若望堡禄二世《利玛窦到北京四百周年国际学术研讨会致词》，梵蒂冈广播电台官网，2001年10月24日

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clearly say that every religion contains a very valuable spiritual concept. In many Western countries there are still a lot of people in the study of Taoism and Buddhism, but they had their own beliefs (Orthodox, Muslim or Catholic) and this did not produce too many contradictions. At present, the orthodox religious consciousness of people in Bulgaria becomes weaker, but religious activities as church weddings, children Christianizing, Easter's celebrations have continued. But there are other activities many probably remembered only by the old people. I think, religion inevitably must make some compromises and changes to fit our society. With certainty the role of Christian Church has changed and its main function will not be to educate people. The spirit of Christianity is necessary in our era of network technologies, but we cannot anymore rely on a religion to rescue the society, these are issues to be addressed to Law, Sociology, Psychology and other fields of study.

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