16.1 Matteo Ricci, Journals

Matteo Ricci reached Macao in 1582. He had to overcome seemingly insuperable difficulties before gaining a foothold in China, which was rigidly Confucian and xenophobic. Ricci was quick to realize that the Jesuits could not hope to succeed in China if they adopted the same proselytizing approach that other missionaries had used. Immediately he set out to work from the top down: He began to penetrate the Chinese ruling class, not so much as a Christian missionary but rather as a learned friend and scientist. To dispel suspicion on the part of Chinese scholars and officials, he at first wore the robes of the Buddhist monk and then changed to those of the Confucian scholar-official class. Besides his mastery of the Chinese language and the classics, he made an intense study of Chinese history, customs, geography, philosophy, and government. He also knew how to arouse the curiosity and fancy of Chinese officials and scholars by presenting them with gifts previously unknown to them, such as clocks, sundials, clavi-chords, and astrolabes. As a result, Ricci won the respect, admiration, and friendship of the Chinese scholar-officials. At last, in 1601, after eighteen strenuous years, Ricci was allowed by the Chinese emperor to establish his residence at the imperial capital, where he stayed until his death in 1610. Ricci was buried in a plot donated by the emperor.

For a period of twenty-eight years, with patience, keen intellect, tact, and dedication, Ricci laid a permanent foundation for Christianity in China. Hundreds of fellow Jesuits followed in his footsteps to China and won thousands of Chinese converts. At the same time, Ricci and many of the Jesuits who later came to China developed a respect and fascination for Chinese civilization. Because of this scholarly interest, many of these Jesuits, starting with Ricci, emerged as pioneers in sinology in the West. They built a bridge between the two worlds. They introduced Confucius to Europe, and the Bible, Copernicus, and Euclid to China. Their letters and writings on Chinese history, government, society, philosophy, geography, and customs became the chief reference sources on China for the Europeans.

In particular, Ricci’s diary, De Propagatione Christiana apud Sinas (On the Propagation of Christianity Among the Chinese), contributed greatly to Europe’s understanding of China. The diary was posthumously published in 1615 by Ricci’s co-worker, the Belgian Jesuit Nicholas Trigault, who edited and translated the original Italian into Latin. This diary was widely read in seventeenth-century Europe and appeared in several European languages. Ricci described various aspects of Chinese life and institutions such as Confucian philosophy, the imperial examination system, the bureaucracy, the arts and sciences, customs, and religions. Thus, Ricci’s journal reopened China to Europe three centuries after Marco Polo had first bridged the gap through his famous travelogue. The following selection is Ricci’s description, as presented by Father Trigault, of China’s pacifistic tradition and the triennial rotation system of the imperial government.

be so. Not to question the reputation of the writers who have recorded the error, the mistake may have arisen from the fact that certain evidences of the presence of the Chinese have been discovered beyond the confines of the kingdom. For example, one might cite the Philippine Islands, to which they found their way in private enterprise rather than on any official commission by their government.

Another remarkable fact and quite worthy of note as marking a difference from the West, is that the entire kingdom is administered by the Order of the Learned, commonly known as the Philosophers. The responsibility for orderly management of the entire realm is wholly and completely committed to their charge and care. The army, both officers and soldiers, hold them in high respect and show them the promptest obedience and deference, and not infrequently the military are disciplined by them as a schoolboy might be punished by his master. Policies of war are formulated and military questions are decided by the Philosophers only, and their advice and counsel has more weight with the King than that of the military leaders. In fact very few of these, and only on rare occasions, are admitted to war consultations. Hence it follows that those who aspire to be cultured frown upon war and would prefer the lowest rank in the philosophical order to the highest in the military, realizing that the Philosophers far excel military leaders in the good will and the respect of the people and in opportunities of acquiring wealth. What is still more surprising to strangers is that these same Philosophers, as they are called, with respect to nobility of sentiment and in contempt of danger and death, where fidelity to King and country is concerned, surpass even those whose particular profession is the defense of the fatherland. Perhaps this sentiment has its origin in the fact that the mind of man is ennobled by the study of letters. Or again, it may have developed from the fact that from the beginning and foundation of this empire the study of letters was always more acceptable to the people than the profession of arms, as being more suitable to a people who had little or no interest in the extension of the empire.

The order and harmony that prevails among magistrates, both high and low, in the provinces and in the regal Curia is also worthy of admiration. Their attitude toward the King, in exact obedience and in external ceremony, is a cause of wonderment to a foreigner. The literati would never think of omitting certain customary formal visits to one another or the regular practice of freely offering gifts. In the courts and elsewhere, inferiors always bend the knee when speaking to a superior, and address him in the most dignified language. The same is true of the people toward their prefects and toward the mayor of the city, even though these officers may have arisen from the lowest state in life before attaining their literary degrees and admittance to the magistracy. The term of office of all the dignitaries we have been discussing is three years, unless one be confirmed in his position or promoted by order of the crown. Usually they are promoted but not for the same locality, lest they should develop friendships and become lenient in the administration of justice, or develop a following in the province in which they are so influential. The experience of past ages has taught them that a magistrate burdened with favors is likely to incline toward the introduction of novelties and away from the rigor of the law.

No one is permitted to carry arms within city limits, not even soldiers or officers, military prefects or magistrates, unless one be en route to war or on the way to drill or to a military school. Certain of the higher magistrates, however, may be accompanied by an armed guard. Such is their dislike for arms that no one is allowed to have them in his home, except perhaps a metal dagger which might be needed on a journey as protection against robbers. Fighting and violence among the people are practically unheard of, save what might be concluded by hair pulling and scratching, and there is no requiting of injuries by wounds and death. On the contrary, one who will not fight and restrains himself from returning a blow is praised for his prudence and bravery.

Questions:
1. How do you compare the people and society of China described by Ricci with those of Europe in the sixteenth century?
2. How did Ricci describe China’s pacifistic tradition? Do you agree or disagree with Ricci’s assessment? Why?