

Mission to China: Matteo Ricci and the Jesuit Encounter with the East

Review Number:

1142

Publish date:

Saturday, 1 October, 2011

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ISBN:

9780571225170

Date of Publication:

2011

Price:

£17.99

Pages:

279pp.

Publisher:

Faber & Faber

Place of Publication:

London

Reviewer:

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Mary Laven has established herself as a competent historian, writing on a variety of aspects centred on the Venetian Renaissance. The present book is the first contribution to take her out of Europe, at least in geographical terms. In reality, *Mission to China* is more concerned with the missionary experiment itself and, more than anything, with the Italian characters at the forefront of this Jesuit venture. Matteo Ricci, Michele Ruggieri and Alessandro Valignano thus receive significantly more attention than the Chinese recipients of the missionary message.

So far, nothing unusual. Western fascination with the founding fathers of Christianity in early modern China is as old as post-mediaeval Europe's exposure to China itself, even if the authors for religious or ideological reasons have not always agreed with the principles of the Jesuit mission. The most tantalising monographs have become classics for an ever-growing audience fascinated by the Jesuits' role in global history. George Dunne (*Generation of Giants*), Jonathan Spence (*Memory Palace of Matteo Ricci*) and Jacques Gernet (*China and the Christian Impact*) have, *inter alia*, become household names far beyond the confines of Christian or Chinese historical circles. Laven is well aware of this and makes frequent reference to such eminent historiography. Strangely, there is no bibliography displaying these titles, although the most salient publications are listed in the endnotes pertaining to the tail-end of the introductory chapter.

In terms of structure, Laven's monograph is subdivided into eight chapters, including the introduction entitled 'Mapping the world' and a concluding chapter ('The smell of Christianity'). Systematically Laven traces the progress of the Jesuit missionaries through the, initially, virtually impenetrable maze of cultural

and linguistic conundrums they faced when first arriving in China. Their attempts at rationalising a world which had hitherto been open to merely a token number of their European contemporaries are compared to a Soviet description of Cambridge. Produced for Soviet military intelligence at the close of the Cold War, few members of the Soviet elite would have had first-hand knowledge of Mary Laven's adopted home town. The author thus seeks to demonstrate the discrepancy between technical knowledge, however sophisticated, and the cumulative experience which only active participation in public life can purvey.

In chronological order, the first two chapters relate the missionaries' passage to China, via a maritime route testifying to the muscle and extent of Portugal's commercial might. Thus we read of the marvels of Goa and Macau, an imposing building with occidental architectural features right next to Guangdong's tallest pagoda (the Tower of High Fortune), as well as the missionary aspirations for a permanent residence in Zhaoqing and Guangzhou. Matteo Ricci and Michele Ruggieri were tested to the limits in an environment to which they were the clear outsiders ("the people are enemies of foreigners", (p. 64)) and where religious identity was defined along very different lines ("In China there exists no true religion" ... "[the Chinese] are not attached to their sects", (p. 66)). Laven then extracts evidence from Ricci's letters revealing the extent of the new arrivals' exotic value, with curious literati attempting to gain further insight into the strange nature of the European visitors. What exactly they made of Ricci and his Jesuit *confrères* is hard to gauge; the description accompanying the Soviet map of Cambridge once again springs to mind. As second-hand accounts, the Jesuit sources reveal surprise, at times consternation, at the degree of ignorance about the world beyond the Chinese literati's universe, as well as a high degree of scientific and linguistic awareness. A typical example is Ricci's baffled statement of 1595 that the literati "know nothing. ... They think that the earth is flat and square; that the sky is made of a single liquid, that is air, and many other absurd things" (p. 94). They also reveal an unshakable sense of certainty about the nature of their mission and its appeal amongst the very elite the Jesuits intended to attract to their faith. "If we teach them our sciences", concluded Ricci in 1609, "it will be easy to persuade them to our holy law" (p. 95).

We now enter the Nanchang episode of Ricci's China experience. As of 1595, he had become conversant with the Ming Empire's literati elite, both in terms of language and with their educational background. Now it was time for the Catholic polymath to prove to his influential acquaintances that European civilisation was in no way inferior to that of his hosts and that it furthermore chimed perfectly well with the Confucian principles they were steeped in. His case in point was friendship, focus of chapter three, which figured highly in both Greek philosophy, as well as in the social ethics of Confucianism. This relatively short chapter shows the author's talents for interweaving the familiar with the new, in this case the Renaissance perception of man and nature with the social etiquette of the late Ming period. Being expert in the former, Mary Laven employs the insight provided by first-rate cultural historians, such as Craig Clunas, in order to demonstrate how late imperial literati society was held together by a glue of communal eating and conversation. The chapter mentions tea, although a major innovation of the time, tobacco smoking, is omitted. 200 years later, opium would complement tea and tobacco in the genteel world of Chinese guest ritual.

The typical trajectory of a literatus is traced in the subsequent chapter, when the life of convert Qu Rukui is analysed, both in terms of fathoming his understanding of the Christian faith and as a typical example of late imperial China's scholar officials. Its function is to introduce the extent of knowledge which the Jesuits, as the Counter Reformation's intellectual spearhead, were equipped with. Theology, astronomy and medicine are the elements of this study, which Laven reconstructs from 16th-century sources, i.e. Ricci's collected letters (superbly edited by Francesco d'Arelli) and the *Fonti ricciane*. Citing Ricci, Laven summarises that "If it is not possible to say of this realm that the philosophers are kings, at least one can say with truth that the kings are governed by philosophers" (p. 134). And once again the author's astute sense of inter-cultural observation becomes evident. After presenting the multitude of examination hurdles which China's intellectuals had to clear level by level, the European university system is explained in great detail, with the focus on the particular experience of Jesuit education. 'As Ricci surveyed would-be literati', Laven concludes, 'desperately studying for their exams, experiencing rejection or jubilant success, he doubtless identified with the cut and thrust of male careerism' (p. 136).

Chapter five dwells on a particularly pungent example of cultural conflict, namely on the stand-off between the Jesuits and the palace eunuchs. It is characteristic of Laven's book that the phenomenon itself receives such prominent status. The author is certainly puzzled by China's eunuchs, drawing parallels with the craze of emasculating prepubescent choir boys in Catholic Europe, but never ceasing to identify with Ricci's repulsion against China's very own *castrati*. This is fully understandable, since the book is aimed at an audience which may only be marginally familiar with the workings of China's history and culture. But even a cursory mentioning of Wei Zhongxian and his Red Brocade police would have provided the level of historical background to be expected of a book on late imperial China's history.

The theme of chapter four is taken up again in the sixth chapter, which features an analysis of Ricci's *Tianzhu shiyi*, 'The true meaning of the Lord of Heaven', as well as in the conclusion ('The smell of Christianity'). Whereas the preceding chapters often have a certain introductory quality about them, here Laven has finally 'arrived' at her explanation of the Jesuit *Mission to China*, providing ample evidence of the missionaries' accommodation to Chinese culture during the introduction of their message and, thus, in the creation of a new variant of the Christian faith. One perfectly accurate observation states that 'miracles were sidelined in [Ricci's] accounts of mission strategy, although 'they were copiously recorded elsewhere in the *Letters* and his *History* of the mission' (p. 234). The only logical conclusion had to be, according to Laven, that the Jesuits' repute in producing miraculous solutions to earthly problems had become a major reason for converting to Christianity, for commoners and intellectuals alike. As important as the missionaries' alleged power to expel demons out of sickness-stricken minds and bodies was their admiration of the scripture-worshipping civilisation that was late imperial China. And while scholar-officials spent their precious time collecting and incinerating stray pieces of written paper, the 'logocentric' (p. 236) Jesuits furnished their very own holy books with everything it took to impress the literati they so longingly sought to convert. Finally, the author's account of Matteo Ricci's death in 1610, as well as of the subsequent death rites, funeral and eventual burial, produces ample evidence of the cultural confluences characterising this Jesuit mission. It is almost a shame that the book ends at this point, since it reads very much like the beginning of a new discourse, sufficiently substantial to form the basis of a much longer study.

Mary Laven's monograph is written intelligently and with great empathy for her protagonists. Readers conversant in the history of late imperial China will congratulate the author for familiarising herself with the subject matter to such an extent that she could place a historically well observed biography on the Jesuit Matteo Ricci *as if* she had been writing on her 'home topic' of Renaissance Italy. There remain simplifications and lacunae, such as her rather cursory description of other senior Jesuits in the mission, the reference to Adam Schall von Bell as being 'less intelligent' (p. 225) being a rather striking example. The author's knowledge of Ming history is constructed out of the chief titles produced by senior scholars in the field: Craig Clunas, Pasquale D'Elia, James Watson providing much of the insight into the background. However, the specialised literature on the 'China Jesuits' (not least on Ricci himself) is missing, as is that on the accommodation debate in general. Nicholas Standaert's long list of publications devoted to the interplay between Confucian civilisation and the Jesuits' Christian and academic calling would have proved useful in

the construction of Laven's arguments. Equally strikingly, there is a complete lack of Chinese sources, or even a reference to the latter. Also, while Laven is familiar with the religious discourse during the Reformation and Counter-Reformation, her grasp of Chinese religion is rather weak.

All in all, Mary Laven's book makes for intelligent historical reading, though Ming experts should not be expecting a path-breaking study in their field.

Other reviews:

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