

The Generalate of Claudio Acquaviva: The Origins of the Jesuit Myth of China

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The Society of Jesus's Chinese mission was characterized by the combination of four distinct methods, all of which were adopted and codified during the generalate of Claudio Acquaviva (in office 1581–1615): (1) adopting the customs and habits of Confucian Mandarins; (2) speaking and dressing in the manner of the Chinese; (3) establishing a dialogue with the Chinese through science; and (4) adopting aspects of broader Chinese culture. In the process of applying these methods, a Jesuit identity emerged that was “forged” by the Chinese, as noted in the subtitle of a 2002 essay by historian Nicolas Standaert.¹ Thus, it was under Acquaviva's generalate, with the approval of Alessandro Valignano's (1539–1606) guidelines for Jesuit missionaries, *Il cerimoniale per i missionari del Giappone*, that the Society of Jesus in Europe overcame its initial reluctance to adapt Chinese habits and customs for use in its Chinese missiological model.

However, the decision to base the Chinese mission on the adaptation of Chinese habits and customs involved more than simply adopting and ratifying a model of missionary work that was being formed *de facto* in China, as Acquaviva was forced to select and decide between the different interpretations of China gathered by the missionaries themselves. In the event, the superior general leaned toward a favorable view of China's culture and government and an interpretation of Confucianism as a doctrine of ethical and moral values. Hence, the superior general ultimately favored the proposals of Matteo Ricci (1552–1610) over the arguments of João Rodrigues (1561–1633) and the missionaries who had arrived in China from Japan regarding the apparent atheism of the Chinese religions. The diffusion of this interpretation of China—the most well known and widespread in Europe, at least until the question of the Chinese Rites (1645) became public knowledge through the publication of the annual letters (*Litterae annuae*) and the histories of the Jesuit mission in China—not only placed the Jesuit seal on East Asia; it also codified the first myth about China, a myth that would shape the way China was perceived in Europe throughout the early modern period.

1 Nicolas Standaert, “Le rôle de l'autre dans l'expérience missionnaire à partir de la Chine: L'identité jésuite façonnée par les Chinois,” in *Tradition jésuite: Enseignement, spiritualité, mission*, ed. Etienne Ganty, Michel Hermans, and Pierre Sauvage (Namur: Presses Universitaires de Namur, 2002), 115–37.

China Greet Claudio Acquaviva: The State of the Mission at the Election of the New General

At the college in Goa, many expressed great enthusiasm upon hearing of Acquaviva's election as superior general of the Society of Jesus,² sending letters of congratulations, happiness, and joy to Rome. Ricci, who was among them, wrote that

if I were in Rome during the election of [Your Paternity], I would have had to come with the other fathers and brothers to kiss your hands and show you some sign of the happiness I felt upon hearing that the person who was elected as our superior and father was the one whom, even without this, I have always loved and revered. But because this was not possible, since we are far away, it seemed that I should do so with the present letter, which, although it may be late, those of us who are in these parts have nevertheless been unable to perform this duty earlier.³

According to Alberto Laerzio (1557–1630), at the time of Acquaviva's election, the Jesuit missionaries in Goa were in a state of active leisure (*ozio*) while awaiting a suitable opportunity to enter China: "In the college we are all busy perfecting ourselves in study, so that when the door is opened [for carrying out missionary work in China], every person will be ready; and in the meantime one must not waste time, and instead lay the foundation for the building."⁴ As a small group of Jesuits had already been able to enter China, the door in question had in fact been left ajar. Thus, as Laerzio went on to say, "in a city on the outskirts of China, there are some members of the Society, among whom is Father Michele Ruggieri. They occupy themselves in preaching and hearing confessions of the Portuguese merchants and the other Christians there, and they also seek to convert some of those unbelievers."⁵

2 For the history of this generalate, see Mario Rosa, "Acquaviva Claudio," in *Dizionario biografico degli italiani* (Rome: Istituto dell'Enciclopedia Italiana, 1960), 1:168–78; Alessandro Guerra, *Un generale fra le milizie del papa: La vita di Claudio Acquaviva scritta da Francesco Sacchini della Compagnia di Gesù* (Milan: Franco Angeli, 2001); and *I gesuiti ai tempi di Claudio Acquaviva: Strategie politiche, religiose e culturali tra Cinque e Seicento*, ed. Antonella Romano et al. (Brescia: Morcelliana, 2007).

3 Matteo Ricci, *Lettere (1580–1609)*, ed. Francesco D'Arelli (Macerata: Quodlibet, 2001), letter from Matteo Ricci to Claudio Acquaviva, Goa, November 25, 1581, 30.

4 "Stiamo tutti in questo collegio perfetionandoci nelli studii perché, come se aprir [!] la porta, stia la persona apparecchiata: et in tanto non si perde il tempo, anzi si fanno li fondamenti della fabrica": *Documenta Indica (1580–83)*, ed. Joseph Wicki (Rome: Institutum historicum Societatis Iesu [hereafter IHSI], 1972), 12:434, letter from Alberto Laerzio to Ioanne Francisco Carattonio, Goa, November 8, 1581.

5 *Ibid.*, 435.

The start of Acquaviva's generalate consequently coincided with the beginnings of the Chinese mission, which had resulted from the arrangements that Valignano, named visitor to eastern Asia in 1573,⁶ had made in 1578 to send some Jesuits to Macao. Michele Ruggieri (1543–1607) had arrived there in July 1579,⁷ and it was from Macao that the diplomatic efforts to enter China began. As Ricci reported to Acquaviva shortly after disembarking from Macao,⁸ his companions Ruggieri and Francesco Pasio (1554–1612) had been “very well received,” but they had encountered much difficulty in obtaining permission to live there.⁹ Having use of a house in the temple frequented by Mandarins (which had been quickly converted into a chapel) and on the advice of the viceroy of Guangdong, the two Jesuits had put on the “vestments of the Beijing priests, which is the most honored that can be had.”¹⁰

A more detailed account of the missionaries' efforts to enter the Chinese mainland was sent to the general from Macao by Ruggieri himself on December 14, 1582, in which he informed Acquaviva that he was preparing “to depart from this port of Macao”¹¹ together with Pasio. On February 7 in the following year he retraced his story from Zhaoqing,¹² describing the travels to Macao and Canton and the difficulties they encountered in obtaining a residence that “is within the city and is [...] suitable for us.” Indeed, it was only in the following year, in September 1583, that the Jesuits were finally able to obtain permission to have a stable residence in China, something granted to them by the governor of the city of Zhaoqing—an extraordinary achievement, given that the Chinese rulers had only previously granted the “Portuguese” brief stays at fairs in Canton, forbidding them from any form of permanent residence.

6 A position that Superior General Everard Mercurian had given him: see Joseph F. Schütte, *Valignanos Missionsgrundsätze für Japan* (Rome: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 1958), 2:451.

7 *Fonti Ricciane*, ed. Pasquale M. D'Elia (Rome: La Libreria dello Stato, 1942), 1:147–48 (Letter 205), and 148–49n1.

8 Of the extremely vast bibliography, I will only mention the essays of Ronnie Po-Chia Hsia, *A Jesuit in the Forbidden City: Matteo Ricci 1552–1610* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010); Vito Avarello, *L'oeuvre italienne de Matteo Ricci: Anatomie d'une rencontre chinoise* (Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2014); and Francesco D'Arelli, *Matteo Ricci: L'altro e diverso mondo della Cina* (Milan: Il Sole 24 ore, 2014).

9 Ricci, *Lettere*, letter from Matteo Ricci to Claudio Acquaviva, Macao, February 13, 1583, 51.

10 Ibid.

11 *Opere storiche del P. Matteo Ricci S.I.*, vol. 2, *Le Lettere dalla Cina*, ed. Pietro Tacchi Venturi (Macerata: Premiata Stabilimento tipografico Acc. Filippo Giorgetti, 1913), 407–8.

12 Ibid., 410–19.

Thus began the period of “pioneers,” or of “giants,” which lasted until 1616.¹³ As the preamble to this period is well known, it is only necessary to recall certain aspects of the story with the aim of highlighting how the “foundation” of the Jesuit mission to China was laid within the period of Acquaviva’s generalate, in which the decisions made near the end of Everard Mercurian’s generalate (1573–80)—such as Valignano’s decision to designate the task of learning the Chinese language to Ruggieri and later to Ricci—finally came to fruition. But new decisions were also made under Acquaviva that imparted original characteristics to the Jesuit mission in China.¹⁴ As Ruggieri wrote to Acquaviva on May 30, 1584: “This mission is a new plant, a tender one, which the slightest breeze is enough to extinguish; and therefore it is necessary to act, in this beginning, very mildly and delicately, and in time, it will require farmers to cultivate it, otherwise they will abandon it.”¹⁵

Accommodating the Habits of Others

In 1581, Valignano had written a proposal for radical change in the missionary method that should be used in Japan,¹⁶ and these guidelines would also be used in China (the vice-province of China was only made independent of the Japanese province in 1615).¹⁷ However, the *Cerimoniale* was more than a simple guide to

13 For this periodization, see Nicolas Standaert, “Jesuits in China,” in *The Cambridge Companion to the Jesuits*, ed. Thomas Worcester (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 169–85, here 169. The date of 1616 refers to the so-called Nanjing “incident,” namely the expulsion of some missionaries accused of having spread a religious and scientific teaching that was unorthodox: see George H. Dunne, *Generation of Giants: The Story of the Jesuits in China in the Last Decades of the Ming Dynasty* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1962), 128–46.

14 For a summary of the characteristics of Jesuit evangelization in the Far East, see Nicolas Standaert, *L’“autre” dans la mission: Leçon à partir de la Chine* (Brussels: Editions Les-sius, 2003) and Standaert, “Le rôle de l’autre dans l’expérience missionnaire à partir de la Chine.” See also Ines Županov, “Accommodation,” in *Dictionnaire des faits religieux*, ed. Régine Azria and Danièle Hervieu-Léger (Paris: Puf, 2010), 1–4.

15 *Opere storiche del P. Matteo Ricci S.I.*, letter from Michele Ruggieri to Claudio Acquaviva, Schiaochin (Zhaoqing), May 30, 1584, 2:422–25, here 422.

16 On Valignano, see Joseph Francis Moran, *The Japanese and the Jesuits: Alessandro Valignano in Sixteenth-Century Japan* (London: Routledge, 1993); Andrew C. Ross, “Alessandro Valignano: The Jesuits and Culture in the Far East,” in *The Jesuits: Cultures, Sciences and the Arts, 1540–1773*, ed. John W. O’Malley et al. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999), 336–51; M. Antoni J. Üçerler, “Alessandro Valignano: Man, Missionary and Writer,” *Renaissance Studies* 17, no. 3 (2003): 337–66. See also *Christianity and Cultures: Japan and China in Comparison, 1543–1644*, ed. M. Antoni J. Üçerler (Rome: IHSI, 2009).

17 Acquaviva’s death postponed the division for several years. The question was revisited during the period of Muzio Vitelleschi (1563–1645, in office 1615–45) in 1619 and would be effectively implemented only in 1623: see Joseph Dehergne, *Répertoire des jésuites de Chine de 1552 à 1800* (Rome: IHSI, 1973), 328.

the etiquette that the missionaries should adopt in the East.¹⁸ As Acquaviva wrote, the problem was not the need to “accommodate habits and ceremonies in conversation and political discussion,”¹⁹ but rather the issues involved in accommodating the habits of the *zenshū* monks, some of which could potentially be viewed as heretical. This was particularly important at a time when the superior general, who was highly sensitive to the question of the Society’s unity, of its *corpus*—one and the same all over the world—was preparing to face the nationalistic and centripetal thrusts that were present within his own order at previously unseen levels.²⁰

In the *Cerimoniale*, Valignano provided the first description of Japanese society, its habits, and customs, and expressed his own judgments about the need for missionaries to “accommodate” themselves to make their preaching fruitful, making explicit for the first time not only the theoretical problem of adjustment to a non-European society but also the solution: the *accommodatio* in Christianity.²¹ Valignano proposed constructing a method to “acquire and preserve religious authority among the Japanese.”²² This represented the prologue for China

18 Alessandro Valignano, *Il Cerimoniale per i missionari del Giappone*, ed. Josef F. Schütte; new facsimile ed., ed. Michela Catto (Rome: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 2011). See also the essay by Adriana Boscaro, “Valignano interpreta il Giappone: *Il Cerimoniale*,” in *Alessandro Valignano S.I. Uomo del Rinascimento: Ponte tra Oriente e Occidente*, ed. Adolfo Tamburello, M. Antoni J. Üçerler, and Marisa Di Russo (Rome: IHSI, 2008), 217–29.

19 Letter from Claudio Acquaviva to Alessandro Valignano [Rome], December 24, 1585, in Valignano, *Il Cerimoniale per i missionari*, 314–24, here 319.

20 On internal conflicts within the order, see Michela Catto, *La Compagnia divisa: Il dissenso nell’ordine gesuitico tra ’500 e ’600* (Brescia: Morcelliana, 2009). On the nationalistic tendencies in missionary lands, see also, e.g., Liam Brockey, “A Vinha do Senhor: The Portuguese Jesuits in China in the Seventeenth Century,” *Portuguese Studies* 16 (2000): 125–47. See more generally the considerations of Ines G. Županov, “Correnti e controcorrenti: La geopolitica gesuita in Asia,” in Romano et al., *I gesuiti ai tempi di Claudio Acquaviva*, 205–18.

21 Michela Catto and Guido Mongini, “Missioni e globalizzazioni: L’adattamento come identità della Compagnia di Gesù,” in *Evangelizzazione e globalizzazione: Le missioni gesuitiche in età moderna tra storia e storiografia*, ed. Michela Catto, Guido Mongini, and Silvia Mostaccio (Rome: Dante Alighieri, 2010), 1–16; and Joan-Pau Rubiés, “¿Diálogo religioso, mediación cultural o cálculo maquiavélico? Una nueva mirada al método jesuita en Oriente, 1580–1640,” in *Jesuitas e imperios de Ultramar: Siglos XVI–XX*, ed. Alexandre Coello de la Rosa, Javier Burrieza, and Doris Moreno (Madrid: Sílex, 2012), 35–63. See also Guido Mongini, “Lo spiritualismo nella Compagnia di Gesù tra dissenso e obbedienza: Le teologie gesuitiche delle origini,” in *Ad Christi similitudinem: Ignazio di Loyola e i primi gesuiti tra eresia e ortodossia; Studi sulle origini della Compagnia di Gesù* (Alessandria: Edizioni dell’Orso, 2012), 131–54. On the origin of the Society of Jesus, see Mongini, *Maschere dell’identità: Alle origini della Compagnia di Gesù* (Rome: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 2017).

22 See Michela Catto, “Per una conquista dell’autorità religiosa: Alessandro Valignano tra ‘buone maniere’ e *accommodatio* gesuitica,” in Valignano, *Il Cerimoniale per i missionari*, v–xxvi.

to abandon Buddhist dress for Confucian clothing,²³ an encounter that was not only external but also an introduction to the philosophical and moral encounter with Confucianism.²⁴ Where the apostolate of the primitive church (miracles and speaking in tongues) did not appear,²⁵ and where use of force was not viable,²⁶ the encounter with the “other” made inroads.

From Michele Ruggieri to Matteo Ricci: The Codification of a Method to Learn the Chinese Language

There was much opposition within the Society to the evangelization of China and the suggestion that missionaries should learn the Chinese language.²⁷ However, as Valignano wrote, there was also great enthusiasm and a conviction among other sections of the Society that this was the only possible way forward “because this is the path through which (for our purposes) we can hope to enter China.”²⁸

Ruggieri encountered many difficulties in seeking to achieve his goals. Staying in Macao and unable to find a single person who knew both a European

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- 23 On the topic of adjustment to external aspects, see Matteo Sanfilippo, “L’abito fa il monaco? Scelte di abbigliamento, strategie di adattamento e interventi romani nelle missioni ‘ad haereticos’ e ‘ad infideles’ tra XVI e XX secolo,” *Mélanges de l’Ecole française de Rome: Italie et Méditerranée* 109, no. 2 (1997): 601–20, and Sabina Pavone, “Spie, mandarini, bramini: I gesuiti e i loro travestimenti,” *Il capitale culturale: Studies on the Value of Cultural Heritage* 7 (2013): 227–43.
- 24 On the differences, see Isabel Pina, “The Jesuit Missions in Japan and in China: Two Distinct Realities; Cultural Adaptation and the Assimilation of Natives,” *Bulletin of Portuguese–Japanese Studies* 2 (2001): 59–76. See also Andrew C. Ross, *A Vision Betrayed: The Jesuits in Japan and China (1542–1742)* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1994).
- 25 As Acquaviva wrote: “perché, come Dio Nostro Signore non concorre già con miracoli et doni di profetie, et quelle genti si muovono tanto con queste cose esteriori, è necessario accomodarsi loro et entrar con la loro per uscir poi con la nostra”; see Valignano, *Il cerimoniale per i missionari del Giappone*, 317–18. On the awareness that the modern world would be deprived of miracles, see Girolamo Imbruglia, “L’‘História do futuro’ del gesuita Vieira e il processo di secolarizzazione della storia universale,” *Archivio di storia della cultura* 2 (1989): 185–98.
- 26 See Michela Catto, “Una crociata contro la Cina: Il dialogo tra Alonso Sánchez e José de Acosta intorno ad una guerra giusta al Celeste Impero (1587),” *Nuova rivista storica* 93 (2009): 425–48, here 434.
- 27 Michele Ruggieri wrote to the superior general, Mercurian, Macao, November 8, 1580: “intendei dire: ‘A che fine occupare un padre, che può servire in altre occupationj de la Compagnia, perdere tempo nell’apprendere la lingua cina e in impresa desperata?’” (I should say: to what end should a father, who could be involved in other occupations within the Society, waste time learning the Chinese language, and in such a hopeless undertaking?); *Opere storiche del P. Matteo Ricci*, 2:396–99, here 397.
- 28 Alessandro Valignano, *Historia del principio y progreso de la Compañía de Jesús en las Indias orientales (1542–64)*, ed. Josef Wicki (Rome: IHSI, 1944), 256: “porque este es el camino, por donde podemos esperar (quanto a lo que a nosotros toca) que aya alguna entrada en la China.”

language and “the Chinese court language,” which he wanted to learn in order to go to Beijing, he was forced to turn to a painter who “with pictures taught me the letters and also the Chinese language.”²⁹ Yet while Ruggieri had been chosen for the Chinese mission because of the ability he had previously shown in learning Tamil,³⁰ his knowledge of the Chinese language came to be judged, for the most part, as mediocre.³¹ Indeed, in a letter to Acquaviva, Ruggieri himself claimed to speak “mediocrement”;³² he was eventually recalled to Europe, and the task of learning Chinese was instead entrusted to Ricci.³³

On February 12, 1582, Valignano issued a series of directives for the missionaries assigned to China,³⁴ stating that at least four Jesuits should be present in Macao, all of whom should be dedicated to learning spoken and written Mandarin as well as the habits of the Chinese:

They should not be distracted by other occupations, nor should the superior of the house distract them by occupying them in other matters. In fact, until we have some of ours who know the Mandarin language, it is impossible to obtain the fruit which we greatly desire, the conversion of China.³⁵

However, in addition to this emphasis on learning Mandarin, Ricci would later provide a further condition that would have to be realized in order for the missionaries to be able to communicate with Mandarins: namely, reading and becoming familiar with the canonical texts of the Confucian tradition and of the Chinese *Cursus studiorum* (Plan of studies).³⁶ As Ricci wrote, “once having heard the *Four Books*³⁷ of the Chinese *literati* and one of the *Five Classics*, which is what a learned Chinese man often hears [...], one can say that [the new missionaries] have completed their course of studies, and nothing else remains except

29 *Opere storiche del P. Matteo Ricci*, 2:411, letter of Ruggieri to Acquaviva, Zhaoqing, February 7, 1583.

30 Thus in an annual letter of Antonio Monserrate of October 26, 1579, cited by D’Arelli, *Matteo Ricci: L’altro e diverso mondo della Cina*, 98–99.

31 On this, see Francesco D’Arelli, “Michele Ruggieri S.I., l’apprendimento della lingua cinese e la traduzione latina dei *Sishu* (Quattro libri),” *Annali: Istituto Universitario Orientale* 54, no. 4 (1994): 479–87.

32 *Opere storiche del P. Matteo Ricci*, 2:447–448, letter of Ruggieri to Acquaviva, Zhaoqing, November 8, 1586.

33 On this aspect, see Jacques Gernet, “Sur les différentes versions du premier catéchisme en chinois de 1584,” in *Studia sino-mongolica: Festschrift für Herbert Franke*, ed. Wolfgang Bauer (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag GmbH, 1979), 407–16.

34 D’Elia indicated that these would be included in the fourth volume of the *Fonti Ricciane*, but the volume was never published: *Fonti Ricciane*, 3:xi.

35 *Fonti Ricciane*, 1:lxxxix.

36 D’Arelli, *Matteo Ricci: L’altro e diverso mondo della Cina*, 119–20.

37 In Chinese, *Sishu*, composed of the *Daxue* [Great learning], *Zhongyong* [The doctrine of the mean], *Lunyu* [The analects], and *Mengzi* [Mencius].

to give themselves to composition,”³⁸ “because in truth—something not easily believed—one does more in China with books than with words.”³⁹

In 1587, Acquaviva approved this system: all Jesuits sent to China would have to study the Chinese language and the canonical texts of the Confucian tradition.⁴⁰ The decision to do so went hand in hand with the decision to change dress (1594–95), abandoning Buddhist clothing for Confucian dress in order to acquire the “authority” that came from dressing like Mandarins, as well as the decision to “ban the name of ‘monk,’” “a very base thing” because “it is [...] associated with perverse people who do not study letters. And although they profess to be virtuous, they are perhaps more sinful than all the others.”⁴¹ With this method,⁴² Ricci was finally able to enter Beijing in 1601.

The Interpretation of Chinese Religions: The Beginning of a Long Discussion

In a September 13, 1583 letter to Giovanni Battista Romano (1530–1589), Ricci included the first description of China’s religion, specifically of the three “sects” he suggested were present in the country. In the letter, Ricci offered a portrait of Confucianism: the sect “of the literati is the most widespread. They do not believe, in general, in the immortality of the soul, and they mock what the other sects say about demons, and they only thank heaven and earth for the benefits that they receive, but they do not seek paradise.”⁴³ This description was noted by José de Acosta (1539–1600) and reprised in travel literature,⁴⁴ such as the Augustinian Juan González de Mendoza’s (1545–1618) *Historia de las cosas más notables, ritos y costumbres del gran reyno de la China* (The history of the great and mighty kingdom of China and the situation thereof, 1585),⁴⁵ and it would eventually receive canonical recognition in Giovanni Botero’s (c.1544–1617) *Relationi universali* (Universal relations, 1591–96).⁴⁶ The descriptions of Chinese religions

38 D’Arelli, *Matteo Ricci: L’altro e diverso mondo della Cina*, 123.

39 Ricci, *Lettere*; Matteo Ricci to Girolamo Costa, Beijing, March 8, 1608, 461.

40 Liam Matthew Brockey, *Journey to the East: The Jesuit Mission to China, 1579–1724* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 246; letter from Acquaviva to Valignano, December 28, 1587.

41 Ricci, *Lettere*; Ricci to Acquaviva, Nanchang, November 4, 1595, 308–9.

42 Jacques Gernet, “La politique de conversion de Matteo Ricci et l’évolution de la vie intellectuelle en Chine aux environs de 1600,” *Archives de sciences sociales des religions* 36 (1979): 71–89.

43 Ricci, *Lettere*, 85.

44 Ana Carolina Hosne, “Lo deseable y lo posible: La visión y representación de China en la obra de José de Acosta,” *Archivum historicum Societatis Iesu* 22 (2012): 482–514.

45 For a detailed description of the work’s contents and its sources, see Donald F. Lach, *Asia in the Making of Europe*, vol. 1, *The Century of Discovery* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 751–94.

46 Giulia Bruna Bogliolo, “Una fonte sconosciuta del Botero: *L’historia de la China* di Juan González de Mendoza,” in *Miscellanea di storia delle esplorazioni* (Genoa: Fratelli Bozzi,

and of the apparent indifference—or tolerance—that the Chinese showed toward religions became a classic of the literature of the “customs, habits, and religions of the world,” which explicitly posed the problem of the link between religion and culture, civility, idolatry, superstition, atheism, or paganism.⁴⁷ The task of the missionaries was to classify and compare. Ricci did so by drawing a comparison between the Greco-Roman world, together with the ancient Epicurean and Pythagorean philosophers,⁴⁸ and Confucianism. In his *Della entrata della Compagnia di Gesù e Christianità nella Cina* (On the entry of the Society of Jesus into China) and in his letters,⁴⁹ there emerged a desire to adhere entirely to Confucian doctrine, both to use it to distance himself from Buddhism⁵⁰ and to

1977), 2:48–78. See also Michela Catto, “La Cina nelle *Relazioni universali* di Giovanni Botero: Tra religione, civiltà e ragione,” in *Milano, l’Ambrosiana e la conoscenza dei Nuovi mondi (secoli XVII–XVIII)*, ed. Michela Catto and Gianvittorio Signorotto (Rome: Bulzoni, 2015), 307–34, here 322.

- 47 See, e.g., Shi Zhan, “L’image de la Chine dans la pensée européenne du XVIII^e siècle: De l’apologie à la philosophie pratique,” *Annales historiques de la Révolution Française* 347, no. 1 (2007): 93–111; Jacques Revel, “The Uses of Comparison: Religions in the Early Eighteenth Century,” in *Bernard Picard and the First Global Vision of Religion*, ed. Lynn Hunt, Margaret Jacob, and Wijnand Mijnhardt (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2010), 331–47; and Carlo Ginzburg, “Provincializing the World: Europeans, Indians, Jews (1704),” *Postcolonial Studies* 14, no. 2 (2011): 135–50.
- 48 Ricci, *Lettere*, 100, letter to Claudio Acquaviva, Zhaoqing, October 20, 1585: “Non voglio consumare in questo la carta in darli conto delle sette della Cina per essere cosa lunga. In breve le dico che i grandi sono tutti della setta epicurea, non già di nome, ma con leggi e opinioni; gli altri più bassi, che confessano l’immortalità dell’anima, sono pitagorici, perché tengono scrupolo di mangiare carne di animali e pesci, dicendo che ha transmigrati-one di animali tra gli huomini et anco nelli animali” (I do not want to spend this entire letter telling you about the different Chinese sects, since it would take quite some time. In brief I will say that the elites are all members of the Epicurean sect, not in name, but by their laws and opinions; the other, lower people, who confess the immortality of the soul, are Pythagoreans, because they have scruples in regard to eating the meat of animals and fish, saying there is transmigration of animals between men and also animals).
- 49 For the many connections between the contents of these letters and Matteo Ricci’s work, see D’Elia, “Preliminari alla *Storia dell’Introduzione del Cristianesimo in Cina*,” in *Fonti Ricciane*, 1:clxv ff.
- 50 As would be made explicit in his catechism, *The True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven* (*Tianzhu shiyi*), begun in 1593 and printed in 1603. The structure of the work is typical for a catechism: a literary genre in which the master and student usually address questions and answers. Here, the master is a European/Western, while the disciple is a well-read Chinese man who, at the end of the book, and perhaps a little too quickly, converts. The catechism’s topics range from God’s being to errors that doctrines and human theories have produced about divine reality, from the question of the immortality of the soul to the nature of spiritual beings, and so on. But above all, it refutes the soteriological teaching of Buddhism and discusses the conception of the essential goodness of human nature presented by Confucianism and the right path shown by Christianity; finally, it gives a glimpse of Western habits and customs—in order to explain things culturally

deny its religious essence and its religious cult, exalting instead its philosophical and civil aspects. As he wrote to Acquaviva:

But as we want to prove the matters of our holy faith through its books, in these past years good masters make me declare besides the *tetrabiblio* also all the “six doctrines,” and I noted many passages in all of them that support the things of our faith, such as the unity of God, the immortality of the soul, the glory of the saints, etc.⁵¹

According to Ricci, the Confucian *literati* were superior to the pagan philosophers of Europe inasmuch as they never “believed things as disordered as our Romans, Greeks, Egyptians, and other strange nations believed”: “of all the peoples known to our Europe, I know of none that lacked errors regarding matters of religion of the type that China had from its antiquity.”⁵² For Ricci, Confucianism was the ancient law that governed China; it had books “full of much piety and good advice for human life and for acquiring virtues,” was esteemed, and did not have idols. As a result, many of the ancient Chinese could have been saved “by natural law.” In addition, according to Ricci, Confucianism possessed a number of elements that were similar to Christianity. Confucians of antiquity believed in “divine punishment,” in the “reward that the good and the evil will receive,” and in the immortality of the soul. Even the rites for ancestors and Confucius (which in Ricci’s eyes were not of a religious nature) drew the Chinese close to the Christians. Being practiced by the living for the dead, they responded to the need to respect various hierarchies—of the weak toward the strong, of children toward their parents, of wives to their husband—thus sanctioning another affinity between Chinese Confucianism and Christianity, the latter with its command to “honor your father and mother.” For Ricci, Confucianism was the sect

instituted for the good government of the Republic, and thus, it could well be of this Academy and to make them Christians, seeing that in its essence it contains nothing against the essence of the Catholic faith; nor does the

incomprehensible to the eyes of a Confucian, such as the celibacy of priests. Ricci’s strategy is to seek to counter every similarity between the Christian and Buddhist religions, sharpening and perfecting the possible similarities with Confucianism. An Italian translation of *The True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven* has been edited by Alessandra Chiricosta (Rome: Urbaniana University Press, 2006).

- 51 Ricci to Acquaviva, Nanchang, November 4, 1595, in Ricci, *Lettere*, 315. By *Tetrabiblio*, Ricci indicates the four books of *Sishu* (see note xx); the six doctrines are the “Six Classics,” that is, the *Yijing* [The book of changes], *Shijing* [The book of odes], *Shujing* [The book of history], *Liji* [The book of rites], *Chunqiu* [Spring and autumn annals], *Yuejing* [The book of music] or *Zhouli* [The rites of Zhou].
- 52 Matteo Ricci, *Della entrata della Compagnia di Gesù e Christianità nella Cina*, ed. Maddalena Del Gatto (Macerata: Quodlibet, 2000), 90.

Catholic faith inhibit anything, rather, it greatly helps the peace and quiet of the Republic, that its books require.⁵³

This theory led him to recognize the presence of an ancient “natural light” in the Chinese, or of an ancient monotheism that they had forgotten, so that of “those who, in these times, flee from Idolatry, there are few who do not fall into atheism.” Ricci thus turned his attention to Confucianism rather than Buddhism, choosing as his privileged interlocutors those atheists who would be expelled from the political-social contract in the Europe of the Wars of Religion (1524–1648).⁵⁴

The interpretive model Ricci developed was founded on the similarities that existed between the precepts of ancient ethics and the teachings of Christianity, on the analogy of the King on High and the Master of Heaven. As noted, his interpretation was not shared by everyone, generating debates that were the basis of the Chinese Rites Controversy from the 1650s onward.⁵⁵ Yet there were open voices of dissent even in the time of Acquaviva. Some Jesuits were opposed to the proposals contained in Ricci’s letter. There were those who did not support the “sweet and mild” method of evangelization that it implied, and who also held that Ricci had misread Confucian doctrine and the relationship between Confucianism and Buddhism.

Thus, while the Chinese Rites controversy—in which missionaries such as Niccolò Longobardo (1565–1655),⁵⁶ as well as those outside the Society, would seriously question Ricci’s interpretation of Confucianism—only emerged after Ricci’s death, internal voices of dissent were not absent during

53 Ibid., 98.

54 On changes in the meaning of the term “atheism,” see Vittorio Frajese, “Ateismo,” in *Dizionario storico dell’Inquisizione*, ed. Adriano Prosperi (Pisa: Edizioni della Normale, 2010), 1:114–18.

55 On the Chinese Rites Controversy, see George Minamiki, *The Chinese Rites Controversy from Its Beginning to Modern Times* (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1985); *The Chinese Rites Controversy: Its History and Meaning*, ed. David E. Mungello (Nettetal: Steyler Verlag, 1994). On the defense of Martino Martini and the Holy Office, see Severino Vareschi, “Martino Martini S.I. e il decreto del Sant’Ufficio nella questione dei Riti Cinesi (1655–56),” *Archivum historicum Societatis Iesu* 126 (1994): 209–60.

56 His *Responso brevis super controversias de Xanti, ecc.*, written in Portuguese around 1624, reached Europe in the 1661 Latin translation of António de Santa Maria (1602–69), certified in 1662 by the Dominican Juan Bautista Morales (1597–1664). It reached a certain level of success with the 1676 edition, printed in Madrid, by the Dominican Domingo Navarrete (1618–89). (*Tratados históricos, políticos, éticos y religiosos de la monarquía de la China*) and especially with the French edition by the abbot de Ciré of the Foreign Missions of Paris printed in 1701, right in the middle of the Parisian controversy over the Chinese rites, entitled *Traité sur quelques points de la religion des chinois*. For the debate on Ricci’s interpretation of Confucianism inside the Society of Jesus, see Henri Bernard Maître, *Sagesse chinoise et philosophie chrétienne* (Paris: Cathasia, 1935), 110.

Acquaviva's generalate. As historian Urs App has documented, the Portuguese Jesuit João Rodrigues (1561–1633), having arrived in China in the wake of the letter composed by the visitor, Valignano, on the nature of Japanese Buddhism, had informed Acquaviva about numerous errors committed by his *confrères* in their explanation of the Chinese religions.⁵⁷ Rodrigues severely criticized the literature that described ancient Confucianism as a religion of natural light corrupted by Buddhism. Compared with Ricci, he thought that the three religions that constituted the Chinese system—Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism—all originated in Mesopotamia, from which the remnants of the atheistic philosophy of the Hamitic race that had fed all religions (Eastern ones just as the pagan ones of the West, including Greek philosophy) had departed. Neo-Confucianism therefore was not corrupted by Buddhism; its atheism was ingrained at the beginning. Although this interpretation was ultimately destined for oblivion—defeated during the conference of missionaries that took place in Jiading in 1627—it continued to be voiced for a long time before the Chinese Rites controversy.

The Construction of the Model: Its First Dissemination in Europe

In 1608, to satisfy the desire of Superior General Acquaviva, Ricci began to write his *Dell'entrata della Compagnia di Giesù e Christianità nella China*,⁵⁸ in which he retraced the successes and failures of his mission, together with an extensive description of China, of its rites, its customs, and its civilization. The peculiarities of his interpretations would be noted by a general European audience only after his death in 1610, when his Flemish *confrère* Nicolas Trigault (1577–1628) translated the manuscript into Latin, sending it to the printer with the title *De Christiana expeditione apud Sinas* (On the Christian mission among the Chinese).⁵⁹ It was eventually published in Augsburg in 1615 after receiving the general's approval.⁶⁰

57 Urs App, *The Cult of Emptiness: The Western Discovery of Buddhist Thought and the Invention of Oriental Philosophy* (Rorschach: University Media, 2012), 91–110, here 105.

58 The manuscript was rediscovered and published by Pietro Tacchi Venturi (*Opere storiche del P. Matteo Ricci S.I.*, vol. 1, *Commentari della Cina dall'autografo inedito* [Macerata: Premiato Stabilimento tipografico Acc. Filippo Giorgetti, 1911]), and later by D'Elia, *Fonti Ricciane*, vols. 1 and 2. Here I use the edition previously cited, published by Quodlibet in 2000.

59 Printed in Augsburg in 1615, the Latin translation was repeatedly republished in 1616, 1617, 1623, and 1684, and translated into the major European languages: French (1616, 1617, 1618), German (1617), Spanish (1621), and Italian (1622).

60 As Nicolò Longobardo (1559–1654) wrote on November 21, 1612: “Il buon Padre raccomandò molto nella sua morte che non si mostrasse questa *Historia* a nessuno prima d'esser vista di Vostra Paternità” (The good father much recommends that, in the event of his death, this *History* not be sent to anyone before it has been seen by your paternity); *Fonti Ricciane*, 1:clxxi.

The text, which was also conceived as an instrument for recruiting men in Europe in favor of the Chinese mission, has repeatedly attracted scholarly attention, beginning with Trigault's translation, which raised the question of authorship thanks to his controversial frontispiece;⁶¹ the work was later debated and studied with an eye to the alterations made to the manuscript before it was printed for the purpose of presenting Chinese culture to the European public and constructing an image of China. Among the propagandistic additions or additions of particular curiosity, and among the variances in transliteration and reductions made to long descriptions of facts and practices, there are important and strategic omissions about Chinese customs (such as their dishonesty or the corruption of their sexual customs), about the representation of China's rulers, about the figure of Confucius and the religion of the Chinese, and about the strategies of evangelization used by the Jesuit priests.⁶²

Among the thousands of precautions taken to explain to Europeans that Ricci's *litterati* were *philosophi*,⁶³ Trigault decided to omit some descriptive parts of the cult dedicated to Confucius⁶⁴ and simplified the explanation of how to translate God's name, which would become one of the most controversial aspects in the question of the Chinese Rites,⁶⁵ summarizing Ricci's long and complicated passage by saying: "So that ours might obtain authority for the God whom we worship, they called him *Thien-ciu*—that is, Lord of Heaven—for since they do

61 See Edmond Lamalle, "La propagande du P. Nicolas Trigault en faveur des missions de Chine (1610)," *Archivum historicum Societatis Iesu* 9 (1940): 49–120. But also Gaetano Ricciardolo, *Oriente e Occidente negli scritti di Matteo Ricci* (Napoli: Chirico, 2003).

62 On this aspect, see Luca Fezzi, "Osservazioni sul *De Christiana Expeditione apud Sinas suscepta ab Societate Iesu* di Nicolas Trigault," *Rivista di storia e letteratura religiosa* (1999): 541–66, revisited with new considerations by Jacques Gernet, "Della Entrata della Compagnia di Giesù e Christianità nella Cina di Matteo Ricci (1609) et les remaniements de sa traduction latine (1615)," *Comptes-rendus des séances de l'Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres* 147, no. 1 (2003): 61–84.

63 Fezzi, "Osservazioni sul *De Christiana Expeditione*," 555.

64 Luca Fezzi reveals the omission of an entire paragraph: "in ogni città e scuola, dove si congregano i letterati, per lege antica vi è il tempio del Confutio molto sumptuoso, dove sta la sua statua e il suo nome et titolo; et tutti i novilunij et plenilunij e quattro tempi dell'anno i letterati gli fanno una certa sorte di sacrificio con profumi et animali morti che gli offeriscono, sebene non riconoscono in lui nessuna divinità, né gli chiedono niente. E così non si può chiamare vero sacrificio" (In each city and school where the literati gather, by ancient law there is a very sumptuous temple of Confucius where there is his statue, name, and title; and every new moon and full moon and four times a year the literati make a kind of sacrifice to him with perfumes and dead animals that they offer to him, even though they do not recognize any divinity in him and do not ask him for anything. And thus one cannot call it a true sacrifice); *ibid.*, 555.

65 Still fundamental is Joseph Dehergne, "Un problème ardu: Le nom de Dieu en chinois," in *Appréciation par l'Europe de la tradition chinoise à partir du XVII^e siècle* (Actes du III^e colloque international de sinologie. Centre de Recherches interdisciplinaire de Chantilly [CERIC], 11–14 septembre 1980) (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1983), 13–46.

not know one corresponding to God, they could not apply to him a more fitting name that seemed in the Chinese view august and divine.”⁶⁶

This precaution reveals the order’s awareness of the impact that Jesuit *accommodatio* could have on European culture and the need to proceed gradually not only in China but also in Europe. In many respects, the publication of *Confucius Sinarum philosophus* (Confucius, philosopher of the Chinese, 1687), a partial translation of the *Four Books* of Confucius, would help to spread the Riccian interpretation among the European public and represented the beginning of a path, perhaps slightly unforeseeable, in libertine and later “Enlightenment” thought, supplying rich material for arguments over the existence of a religion independent of ethics, or of the possibility of ethics in the absence of religion.⁶⁷

News and information coming from China was widely used by the Society of Jesus in the “construction” of China—a land that posed numerous problems given the apparent incongruence between the good works of the Chinese, their morality, and their good government on the one hand and their atheism, superstition, and idolatry on the other.⁶⁸ From this point of view, Trigault’s translation simply reflected the dispositions and devices that were widely disseminated during Acquaviva’s generalate.

66 “Ut Deo quem nos colimus auctoritatem nostri conciliarent, Thien-ciu, hoc est, coeli Dominum appellarunt; cum enim D. consonantem nesciant, aptius illi nomen indere non potuerunt, quod apud Sinas magnificum divinumque videbatur.” Whereas the passage by Ricci claims: “E perché nella lingua della Cina non vi è nessun uomo che risponda al nome di Dio, né anche *Dio* si può ben pronunciare in essa per non avere questa lettera *d*, cominciarono a chiamare Dio *Tienciu*, che vuol dire *Signore del cielo*, come sin hora si chiama per tutta la Cina, e nella *Dottrina christiana* et altri libri che si fecero. E cadde molto bene il nostro proposito, perciocché, adorando i Cinesi per suppremo nume il Cielo, che alcuni anco pensano esser questo cielo materiale, con l’istesso nome che habbiamo dato a Dio, manifestamente si dichiara quanto maggiore è il nostro Dio di quello che loro tengono per suppremo nume, poichè Iddio è il Signore di quello” (Because in the Chinese language there is no person that responds to the name of God, nor can the word “God” be pronounced very well [because it lacks the letter ‘d’], they began to call God *Tienciu*, which means the *Lord of Heaven*, as he has been called thus far throughout China and in the *Christian Teaching* and in other books being written. This works well for us because the Chinese worship heaven as their highest deity [*per suppremo nume*] [...]. So by the very name that we have given to God, it openly shows how much greater our God is than what they take to be their supreme deity, since God is the Lord of it [i.e., heaven]); Fezzi, “Osservazioni sul *De christiana expeditione*,” 557–58.

67 See *Confucius Sinarum Philosophus (1687): The First Translation of the Confucian Classics*, ed. Thierry Meynard (Rome: IHSI, 2011) and David E. Mungello, *Curious Land: Jesuit Accommodation and the Origins of Sinology* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1989), 247–99. On the European impact, see Michela Catto, “Confucio in Europa e Gesù in Cina,” *Annali di storia dell’esegesi* 31, no. 1 (2014): 191–201.

68 See the essay by Gaetano Ricciardolo, “L’aspetto reale e la componente mitologica nell’immagine della Cina trasmessa dai gesuiti,” in *Cina: Miti e realtà*, ed. Alfredo Cadonna and Franco Gatti, Atti del convegno, Venezia, 21–23 maggio 1998 (Venice: Cafoscarina, 2001), 411–19.

On January 16, 1595, Acquaviva—who had approved a new *Instructio pro Annuis litteris Societatis* (Instructions for the Society's annual letters) a year earlier—wrote a letter to Valignano with an example of the many precautions that should be taken when they were submitting information in the annual letters. The letters' purpose was not only to describe men and places, providing examples to emulate, but also to be a key mechanism in publicizing the mission.⁶⁹ The worries were tied to the new role that the *Litterae* were to play in promoting the mission in Asia. Translated, printed, and read beyond the Jesuit community, they not only needed to aim to be uniform but should also avoid exaggerations when recounting events and facts. The superior general specifically urged the visitor not to dwell on long lists of gifts and gratuities, either given or received, since there was a possibility that these stories would be poorly received:

Although I believe that in the *annua* of Japan [your reverence] thought, by mentioning so many presents and expenses, perhaps to move people so they would be stirred to aid the needs of Japan, we here see the arrangements of things and think that it would have rather the contrary effect, and have removed many of those things from the *annua*.⁷⁰

The rush to fix standards ran parallel to another realization sharply perceived by those who wrote such letters. In the preamble to his *Historia del principio y progreso de la Compañía de Jesús en las Indias orientales* (History of the origin and progress of the Society of Jesus in the East Indies, 1584), for example, Valignano wrote that the interest in Europe for news originating in East Asia had nourished intense efforts of translation. As soon as the letters arrived, they were

translated and printed. And given that these letters were from many people, who write them from many different places, and are far from one another, and they of very different quality, as in that province which is so large; and given that they do not write for them to be printed, nor are they printed in an orderly manner, this causes a certain confusion, as a result of which many things are either not understood or seem to be contradictory.⁷¹

The Society's focus on how China was represented to a European audience, with the omission of anything that could strike European sentiments and sensibilities, represented a core concern in the construction of the first myth of China. Among the different visions of China that began to appear, the one that was preferred greatly supported the Jesuit identity and its missionary experience, inspired by

69 The bibliography is vast, for which I refer to Markus Friedrich, "Circulating and Compiling the *Litterae annuae*: Towards a History of the Jesuit System of Communication," *Archivum historicum Societatis Iesu* 77 (2008): 3–39.

70 *Documenta Indica*, 17:39–41, here 41; letter from Acquaviva to Valignano, visitor to Japan, Rome, January 16, 1595.

71 Valignano, *Historia del principio y progreso*, 1.

the Pauline model.⁷² The analogies that apparently came to be made between China and pagan Europe and between Confucianism and Greek philosophy were sources of faith for the positive outcomes of the conversion of China. It was a myth codified and planned by continually mediating between the different sensibilities and practical needs of the mission. The Jesuit myth of China was born from this dual perspective. From then on, nothing could be written, either in favor or in admiration or opposition, without appealing to the sources and narratives of the Society of Jesus.

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72 On the identity of the first Society, see Guido Mongini, "Compagnia di Gesù e Chiesa primitiva: Un mito identitario tra eresia e ortodossia; Riflessioni sull'autocoscienza gesuitica delle origini," in "*Ad Christi similitudinem*," 7–21.

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