

Reviews

A Jesuit in the Forbidden City: Matteo Ricci 1552–1610 (Review)

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A Jesuit in the Forbidden City: Matteo Ricci 1552–1610, by R. Po-Chia Hsia. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010. Pp. 273. \$82. ISBN: 9780199592258.

Untouched by the innovations of modernist authors, most writers of scholarly prose present a conveniently linear world where cause precedes effect and where abundance yields to organization. Multidimensional phenomena of complex personalities decompose into bits and pieces that, in turn, may be evaluated sequentially. Despite all the trendy chatter about innovative, multilevel pedagogies, academic discourse remains remarkably straightforward and flat. Cinema, television, and other visually deep media, by contrast, routinely deploy multiplicity and confusion. Taking a cue from Renaissance drama, with its perplexing habit of beginning *in medias res*, contemporary popular media routinely plunge uninformed viewers into simultaneously transpiring scenes, events, and stories in the expectation that dominant themes, issues, and personalities will work themselves into clearer view. It is exactly this strategy that R. Po-Chia Hsia follows in *A Jesuit in the Forbidden City: Matteo Ricci 1552–1610*, a magisterial travelogue-biography in which the central figure, the son of an ambitious bourgeois pharmacist who literally made good by doing holy deeds in hostile environments, keeps emerging, again and again, from a slightly uncanny background of strange, exotic, colorful, frightening, shadowy, and, always, cinematic events.

The made-for-more-than-TV movie that was Matteo Ricci's life opens, in Hsia's technicolor rendering of the adventures of a man-in-religious-black, with a vivid montage. Hsia's first chapter alone is enough to conjure memories of Cecil B. DeMille, Father Flanagan, and maybe a little bit of Houdini. In the dazzling opening sequence, the young Ricci breaks out of his affluent but claustrophobic society and embarks on a full-throttle career, a career that seems to run in a thousand directions even while the hand of a directing narrator such as Henry Fielding or Eliza Haywood or maybe even providence seems to hold the steering wheel. Leaving the cultivated but still provincial county seat of Macerata, Ricci enters the glitzy world of the Roman capital with perfect timing, at the moment of Jesuit ascendancy. Quickly mesmerized by an intellectual glamor by which the Jesuits outshine even the eternal city, Ricci basks in the cerebral radiance of mathematician and calendar reformer Christopher Clavius and of theological and diplomatic superstar Robert Bellarmine, all while relishing the jubilee year of the universal church. Meanwhile, a seeming miracle occurs. Young Matteo's father, fearing that his son might abandon riches for righteousness, attempts to head off his son's confession of religious vows only to be stopped in his tracks by a fever, a mishap that the meddling dad interprets as the intervention of providence. Add to this Ricci's early experience of the emotionally overpowering interior decorating tastes of the Jesuits—murals showing instruments of torture purportedly

overcome by the heroic fathers—and one has a theatrical collage that floats somewhere between a Vincent Price horror flick and Charlton Heston’s rendering of Michelangelo in *The Agony and the Ecstasy* (with maybe a touch of Ann Radcliffe, too).

This cinematic, kaleidoscopic technique befits a character and a subject in which the miscellaneous matches the methodical. Surely one of the greatest multitasking intellectuals of all time, Matteo Ricci has faded from the meek memory of history books, owing to the scope and variety of his somewhat dispersed achievements, which ranged from cartography to astronomy to philology to diplomacy and on to evangelism, architecture, and even textiles. Complicating Ricci’s story is its extraordinary geographical reach, which extends from Italy and Portugal to India and on to multiple Chinese venues. Biographer and intellectual historian Hsia thus faces the question of structure. How can one organize a life that is not only relentlessly various and that transpires on multiple levels—from the baptizing of peasants to the conducting of palace intrigues—but also completely regular? How can one enliven a character who, despite making the world his oyster, had few personal or private life concerns, who, in taking his religious views ferociously literally, lived as if he were a righteous version of Roderick Random who had taken holy orders—a picaro who had also selflessly abandoned all the usual plans, hopes, or desires for a happy life with a gorgeous wife and a rich estate that should come at the end of his exploits?

Hsia solves the organization problem by mixing chapters focusing on the specific locales in which Ricci lived, moved, and had his being with chapters on specific personalities who defined or dominated specific intervals in his evangelistic tour. Following the opening chapter on what might be described as Ricci’s “conversion by Rome”—his transformation into an urban intellectual who suddenly sees the limits of urban life and who therefore volunteers for the Jesuits’ oriental missions, where, unbeknownst to this precocious stripling, he would become one of the greatest Christian messengers of all time—Hsia offers three chapters on, respectively, Ricci’s pre-journey Portuguese period and subsequent sea travels to India’s Goa, his initial interval in colonial Macao, and his assimilation into Chinese culture in up-and-coming Zhaoqing. In these chapters, Hsia walks a very fine—sometimes disappearing—line between the disciplined presentation of Ricci’s career and luscious storytelling. In chapter 2, which deals with Ricci’s Portuguese period and pre-Indian sea travels, Hsia is full of descriptions that waver between scholarly didacticism and travelogue. Hsia presents a fine description of later-sixteenth-century Lisbon that could easily qualify as cultural history, then presents a somewhat reconstructed account of shipboard experiences that could pass as a maritime novel. Similarly, he delivers a painterly evocation of old Goa while plunging into a more theoretical critique of the use of enslaved populations to staff Portuguese colonies. Chapter 3, which addresses Ricci’s first extended stay in the Chinese sphere of influence, combines an anecdotal, evidence-intense approach to history with the instructional techniques of the *Bildungsroman* to show how Ricci learned from his early Macao mishaps and exploits, whether a diplomatic blunder that led to the caning of a Buddhist monk or confrontations with mandarins or a grudging agreement to do occasional exorcisms to win the esteem of superstitious local officials. In chapter 4, Hsia again changes tone as we watch the increasingly canny Ricci devising creative approaches to Christian diplomacy. Entering the surprisingly cultivated backwater town of Zhaoqing, Ricci develops his signature hybrid approach, shaving his head so as to pass as a Buddhist monk and thereby partially overcoming his apparent foreignness. This carefully drawn study of Ricci’s Zhaoqing period includes a miniature study of Ricci’s adaptive intellectualism: an account of his ability to gain access to those at the top by exploiting oriental astonishment at Western technology, whether by gifting mandarins with copies of European world maps (which he discreetly adjusts

so as to place China at the center of the world) or by bribing aristocrats with entertaining gewgaws such as tick-tock clocks and armillary spheres.

As he moves into Ricci's most productive and most adventurous midlife phase, Hsia mixes in a chapter on a fellow Jesuit, Michele Ruggieri, the developer of the first Chinese-language catechism. Hsia, who seems fond of the Jesuit missionaries, insists on the independent significance of Ruggieri's accomplishments, but the most compelling consequence of his activities seems to have been the solidification, in Ricci's mind, of Ricci's hybrid approach to East-West religious dialogue, specifically Ricci's habit of blending Confucian wisdom with Christian theology by way of winning local followers while undermining Buddhism. Although this short study of a person prominent in Ricci's formation and career abounds in useful and interesting information, it also marks a turning point in Hsia's narrative: a point at which the cinematic technique of the first several chapters, in which Ricci is always popping up from a rich background, begins dissolving into anecdotal digressiveness. Chapter 6, on Ricci's stay in Shaozhou, admittedly tells us as much about the sometimes comical misconceptions of the local people. Sometimes, anecdote replaces foreground, as occurs in the story of Qu Rukui, whose transition from would-be alchemist to votary of Western science eclipses the story of Ricci's supervision of a record-breaking twenty-two baptisms. A fundamental turn in Ricci's career, his shedding of his feigned identity as a Buddhist monk from the Far West in favor of a new designation as *daoren* or "master of the way," appears as an afterthought behind stories providing local color.

Admittedly, Hsia faces challenges as he attempts to characterize a figure who specialized in changing his character. During his Nanchang period, recounted in chapter 7, Ricci once again reconfigured himself, this time as the "Man of the Mountain of the Great Western Region," a title modestly suggesting a status as a rough hermit in the Chinese outback while also suggesting membership in the untitled, underappreciated literati. Hoping to seize what is probably his one chance, in a publishing world not much given to monographs on Jesuits, to tell us everything he knows about Ricci, Hsia seems unable to rank or prioritize Ricci's achievements. One minute Ricci is dazzling interested local people with parlor tricks such as reciting long passages from the Confucian classics; the next minute he is developing a new mnemonic system for learning Chinese characters; readers never know whether Hsia values these deeds equally or differentially. Hsia also engages in a degree of psychological speculation as he attempts to mind-read Ricci: "Only the thought that young Joao was enjoying his eternal reward gave Ricci some comfort" (142)—a nice thought, but one drawn from the deep fund of veneration rather than from the treasury of evidence.

The latter chapters of Hsia's colossal monograph achieve what Ricci himself may not have fully attained during his life: the merger of Western discourses with large tracts from the broad field of Asian wisdom literature. Reading these later chapters recalls reading either an eighteenth-century novel, with its abundance of minimally connected but seemingly purposive episodes, or a semi-narrative wisdom work such as the Confucian *Analects*. In chapter 8, for example, we find a long characterization of Ricci as the consummate Enlightenment-era travel writer who records all the cultural, economic, and geographical novelties encountered during long voyages; we have speculative digressions on what Ricci must have thought about Marco Polo; and we have vignettes of potentially allegorical conversations such as that between Ricci and the deposed chief eunuch Feng Bao or that between Ricci and supporters of philosopher Jiao Hong or that between Ricci and zealous Buddhist apologist Hong 'en (a report accompanied by a reconstructed dialogue between the two controversialists). The concluding decade of Ricci's life

was far less mobile than his early days, much of his last nine years having been spent within Beijing (where he was occasionally a de facto captive). Hsia has a difficult time maintaining the same pace that he set in the earlier, more picaresque chapters as the elder Ricci spends his days negotiating with upper-level bureaucrats and maintaining a steady schedule of scientific lectures. Chapter 10, for example, is largely an explication of Ricci's *The True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven*. Such a chapter certainly contributes to the understanding of Ricci's attempt at an East-West fusion theology but seems somewhat out of place in the action-packed narrative that precedes it. These later chapters include more than a few stories revealing the texture of Ricci's life, including the incredible tale of "The Evil Book" incident, a yarn more than worthy of the finest conspiracy theorists. Readers will perversely enjoy the account of Ricci's ingenious strategies for deflecting the political blowback from a Spanish massacre of Chinese citizens in the Philippines, strategies that included his use of Jesuitical equivocation to blame *dios*, the Spanish god, for the odious deed while clearing the more Latinate Jesuit god, *deus*, from all charges. The intended intensity of reader engagement with these episodes—is Ricci's career-culminating work on the same scale or level of importance as is his emergency-driven verbal trickery?—remains unknown.

If there is a common tone or motif or technique in this energetically comprehensive rendering of Matteo Ricci's chameleon career, it is surely that of the cinema and the panorama. Hsia's volume opened with a wraparound view of the vivacious cultural, intellectual, and physical world that surrounded the dazzled young Ricci; Hsia's volume closes with a more tranquil rendering of a wizened thinker who, in his later career, lived as if he were a rotating lighthouse or projector. Old Ricci looked out over and shed light on vast panoramas that, if subjected to a zoomed view, would reveal endless details and abundant anecdotes. Living with his scientific equipment in a kind of museum of curiosities patronized by the amazed citizens of Beijing, spending most of his days writing letters to university and conventual addresses around the whirling world, Ricci spent his last years in stage-setting a world full of horizons. Artful Hsia ends his book with a moving portrait of Ricci gazing out from the walls of Beijing, viewing and reviewing the spaces of his past and of Christendom's future. Hsia's is a book to be experienced in just that way. Sometimes dense, sometimes gossipy, always erudite, and never locked into one space or story, it makes a high demand of readers while it confers rich rewards on those willing to go the distance. Those who finish the book will, like Ricci, look back on a vast and interesting if archaic terrain—a far-away world full of lands that will never again be seen but that will live on in story and song, a world that readers of this book, as unwitting converts to the Riccian "way," will inadvertently convert into their own intellectual home away from home.