

MATTEO RICCI (1552 to 1610)



HIS LIFE AND CONTRIBUTION TO SCIENCE IN CHINA

Matteo Ricci was born in Macerata, Italy, in a rich family. Against his father's wishes, he entered the Jesuits and started learning theology and law in a Roman Jesuits' school. He entered the religious order in 1571. At the end of his training he was assigned to the China Mission, and arrived there in 1583, where he worked for 27 years. He made Western developments in mathematics available to the Chinese and in 1584 and 1600 he published the first maps of China ever available to the West which brought about a revolution in traditional Chinese cosmography. For the first time the Chinese had an idea of the distribution of oceans and land masses. He introduced

trigonometric and astronomical instruments, and translated the first six books of Euclid's elements into Chinese which assures Ricci an important place in the history of mathematics.

In 1601 Ricci was invited by the Wanli Emperor to become an advisor to his court becoming the first Westerner to be invited into the Forbidden City. This honour was in recognition of Ricci's scientific abilities, chiefly his predictions of solar Eclipses, which were significant events in the Chinese world. Although Ricci was given free access to the Forbidden City, he never met the reclusive Emperor; however, Wanli granted him a generous stipend that helped the Jesuits in China.

He died in Beijing on May 1610 at the age of 58.

HIS VERSATILITY AND RESPECT FOR THE CHINESE



Ricci's success was due to his personal qualities, his complete adaptation to Chinese customs and his profound appreciation of Chinese cultural and moral values. This enabled him to make China known to the West and the West to China. He was a scientist of great versatility, and by his display of such novelties as Venetian prisms, European books and paintings and engravings, sundials, clocks, and maps, he attracted a steady audience. This was the beginning of his major contribution to the diffusion of knowledge and the

religious apostolate he promoted, that is, the composition of works in Chinese on such varied topics as mathematics, literature, apologetics, and popular catechetics. The prestige he gained in the highest cultural spheres by his wisdom, scientific knowledge, and capacity for philosophical speculation won him a hearing when he spoke of the gospel message. Without any trace of superiority in his manner, he used dialogue which was characterized by esteem and respect for everyone. By working out a synthesis of the human and moral values in Chinese culture and of the integral gospel message, his method anticipated the pastoral approach of the Church today.

HIS APOSTOLATE

During his research he discovered that, in contrast to the cultures of South Asia, Chinese culture was strongly intertwined with Confucian values and therefore decided to use existing Chinese concepts to explain Christianity, so the Catholic faith was not foreign or new, instead, he said that the Chinese culture and people had always believed in God, and that Christianity is simply the most perfect manifestation of their faith. Thus the Chinese *Lord of Heaven* (天主) is identical with *God*. He also supported Chinese traditions by agreeing with the veneration of the dead.



Unfortunately Dominican and Franciscan missionaries felt he went too far and convinced the Vatican to outlaw Ricci's approach so the identification of European culture with Christianity led to the end of Catholic missions in China.

TODAY

Nowadays the importance of his works and intelligent apostolate has been largely recognized. To celebrate the 400th anniversary of Matteo Ricci's arrival in China, an official Chinese magazine published a warm account of Ricci with numerous photographs of some of his better known works which are now in the Beijing Library collection. A lot of cultural initiatives and exhibitions have been carried out in Macerata and Rome to celebrate this anniversary centering on his role as initiator of cultural and scientific relations between China and the West.

