

The Model of Missionaries:
Matteo Ricci and the Chinese Rites Controversy

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Abstract

In the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, Roman Catholic priests of the Society of Jesus, led by Matteo Ricci, embarked on a mission to bring Catholicism to China. Unlike other missionaries of their era, the Jesuits did not require converts to become European—rather, the Jesuits allowed converts to retain certain cultural practices. The Church hierarchy and other religious orders expressed concern as to the orthodoxy of the Jesuits' accommodationism, igniting a conflict that ultimately led to the banning of Christianity in China. My research finds that the Jesuits did not sacrifice the integrity of Catholic doctrine in order to gain converts; rather, they allowed Chinese cultural practices such as the veneration of ancestors to continue, so long as these practices did not violate Church teaching.

Utilizing the journals of Matteo Ricci, I examine how the Jesuits invited the Chinese to the Christian faith, and how these missionaries interacted with the complex social dynamics of Chinese society. I discuss how the Jesuits, by their mastery of the Chinese language and knowledge of Confucian literature, dealt with the apparent worship of Chinese deities, ancestors, and Confucius by redirecting their converts' piety to the Triune, Christian God while replacing Chinese deities with images of Mary and the saints, and emphasizing the cultural merit of venerating, not worshipping, Confucius and ancestors. Allowing converts to retain their culture while ensuring the orthodoxy of Catholic doctrine, Ricci differed notably from his fellow missionaries and cemented his place in the history of the dispersion of Christianity.

Key words: Jesuit, Matteo Ricci, China, Roman Catholic, Christianity, missionary

Matteo Ricci entered the Society of Jesus in 1571 at the age of 19, while Europe still reeled in the chaos of the Protestant Reformation and subsequent Counter Reformation. His zeal for souls led him halfway around the world to Goa, where he studied theology in preparation for missionary work. Around the same time, a few thousand miles to the east, Alessandro Valignano, S.J., was stuck in Macao, in transit to inspect the Cis-Ganges region of the Jesuits' expanding Asian missionary field.¹ While there, he began studying China (he himself being a missionary to Japan) and in doing so “[rekindled]

the dormant ardor for the Chinese expedition.”² China seemed to be the ideal mission field, conducive to gaining converts to Christianity. Father Nicholas Trigault, who compiled Ricci's journals after his death in the early 17th century, marveled at the fact that despite being non-Christian, “from the very beginning of their [the Chinese] history, it is recorded in their writings that they recognized and worshipped one Supreme Being whom they called the King of Heaven.”³ It was further believed that a people so “devoted to the study of fine-arts, distinguished for their learning and virtue” would more than

¹ Matteo Ricci, *China in the Sixteenth Century: The Journals of Matthew Ricci: 1583-1610*, trans. Louis J. Gallagher, S.J. (New York: Random House, 1953), 130.

² *Ibid.*, 130.

³ *Ibid.*, 93.

readily accept Jesuits living among them who embraced the Chinese language and an aptitude for learning.⁴ It was hoped that, with the right approach, “this people would one day gladly accept the Christian religion, seeing that it could serve as a help rather than a detriment to their system of government.”⁵

Ricci, a Jesuit priest from Macerata, Italy, was one of the first assigned to the Jesuit mission to China. As a young man, he studied in Rome with priests of the Society of Jesus and entered the Society on August 15, 1571.⁶ Upon receiving news of his son’s vocation, Ricci’s father began traveling to Rome planning to “withdraw his son from the Jesuit novitiate.”⁷ However, Ricci’s father fell sick on the way and, “persuaded that his illness was a visitation from heaven,” reconsidered his plan and instead returned home, writing a letter to his son voicing his support and approval.⁸ Emboldened, the younger Ricci and several fellow Jesuits received a blessing from Pope Gregory XIII and permission from their superiors to travel to Goa, India to study theology. After several years, the official Visitor of the Society of Jesus assigned Ricci to the China mission, where Ricci would cement his place in the history of China, and in the history of the dispersion of Christianity.⁹

Within his thirty years as superior of the mission, Ricci’s efforts to lead the Chinese to Christ are notable in that they did not require the Chinese to become European, contrary to the methods of many other early modern Christian missionaries. Rather, Ricci and his missionaries did, to a large extent, become Chinese by embracing the language, literature and customs in order to win converts. Methods of evangelization in China under Ricci’s tenure accommodated Chinese customs and even appealed to aspects of the culture; but the Mendicant orders that arrived in the 1630s perceived this strategy to be dangerously unorthodox, igniting a controversy that ultimately ended Christian missions in China in the early modern period.

The Jesuits who made their way to China faced no shortage of new and seemingly insurmountable challenges in gaining converts. Gone were the oftentimes-

violent confrontations between Catholics and Protestants that they witnessed in Europe; now the Jesuits faced

complex dynamics between the literati, Buddhists, Daoists, and Chinese deity-worshipping cults. China was, in a sense, another world, and the inhabitants of that world were notoriously “suspicious of strangers” regardless of their religious or philosophical persuasion.¹⁰ In order to overcome this suspicion and to illustrate to the Chinese that Christianity could be applied even in their society, the Jesuits adopted methods that have been referred to as accommodationist. Jesuit Duarte de Sande described this approach as “accommodating ourselves to them in what our Holy Faith permits...to divulge and teach our holy doctrine, which they would receive in no other way.”¹¹ The Chinese, a society already reluctant to engage with the rest of the world, would likely have found it revolting to exchange Chinese culture for that of Europe for the sake of a foreign religion. Thus, the Jesuits adopted an approach that for the most part, allowed for Chinese social and cultural identity to remain intact while consistently maintaining the integrity of Christian doctrine.

Learning the Chinese language served as the cornerstone for all of the Jesuits’ work in China. This allowed them to not only share the basics of Christian doctrine, but also to engage in theological debate and dialogue with the most educated of Chinese society. Liam Matthew Brockey writes that, if the Jesuits had not “first [passed] through the door of language, they could not [have expected] success in their apostolic endeavors.”¹² Indeed, surmounting the language barrier not only enabled everyday communication, but also allowed the Jesuits to become well versed in Confucian literature, a skill that enabled them to further identify and ally with the literati, a social class held in high regard.¹³ In this, they “mimicked the basic intellectual formation of their hosts.”¹⁴ Acceptance by such well-respected members of the population helped the Jesuits establish legitimacy among those who may have been most suspicious of the foreigners. Embracing the language and literature of the

⁴ Ibid., 131.

⁵ Ibid., 131.

⁶ Ricci, *xi*.

⁷ Ibid., *xi*.

⁸ Ibid., *xi*.

⁹ Ibid., *xiii*.

¹⁰ Ricci, 128.

¹¹ Liam Matthew Brockey, *Journey to the East: The Jesuit Mission to China, 1579-1724*, (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 2007), 244.

¹² Ibid., 244.

¹³ Brockey, 244.

¹⁴ Ibid.

literati, who held positions of repute in society, allowed them to “gain positions of respect among the erudite elite of the Ming Empire.”¹⁵

Aligning themselves with the literati gave the Jesuits stature in Chinese society. Ricci, in his journals, considered the literati to be “the most ancient in the kingdom, [with] an extensive literature...far more celebrated than others.”¹⁶ This group had an affinity for learning, and a reputation for being well read in Confucian philosophy. They frequently clashed with the deity-worshipping cults in the kingdom; in fact, the literati and Jesuits held in common a staunch opposition to deity-worship.¹⁷ The Jesuits also tried to illustrate compatibility between Confucian philosophy and the Christian religion by referencing the natural law they found embedded in Confucianism and in the writings of Chinese scholars, even those dating back to ancient times. The Jesuits “continually endeavored to emphasize...the fact that the Christian law was in perfect accord with the innate light of conscience that the most ancient of the Chinese scholars had approached to this same doctrine of Christianity in their writings.”¹⁸ Thus, Christianity was not “abolishing the natural law, rather they [the missionaries] were adding to it what it was lacking, namely, the supernatural as taught by God who Himself had become man.”¹⁹ In fact, when the Jesuits began circulating copies of the Ten Commandments in Chinese, “reverence for the Christian law” increased even among those who did not convert as the Chinese realized that “these laws were in such perfect accord with the voice of conscience and the natural law.”²⁰ Identifying themselves even further with the literati and in order to immerse themselves more fully in the culture, the Jesuits often dressed as the literati.²¹ This useful association with such a reputable group would not have been possible without the ability to speak the language fluently and a thorough knowledge of classical Chinese literature.

The Jesuits’ approach to evangelization took on forms unique to urban and rural environments, but preaching the Gospel in these areas appealed to the Chinese love of learning and the fact that their society was quite ritualistic, not unlike the Roman Catholic Church. Ricci’s journals indicate that the Jesuits “made an effort to merit a reputation for learning, not as a matter of vain-glory but...to further the cause of Christianity, which on all occasions they purposely weave into their conversations.”²² According to Ricci, the Chinese were “a thinking people who frequently entertain doubts, and not without reason, about the many absurdities contained in their own religious beliefs.”²³ This common desire among potential converts to resolve doubts and acquire knowledge led the Jesuits to employ a learning-based approach to evangelization in Chinese cities.

A Jesuit mission house in a city would contain an entirely new world of learning that visitors would investigate by visiting the houses by their own volition. Clocks, globes, prisms and especially maps were just some of the European, scientific novelties that attracted curious Chinese men, who absorbed what they could while talking with the Jesuits and then shared their new knowledge with their wives and friends.²⁴ The Jesuits’ knowledge of European math and science also drew many to the mission houses. Ricci and his Jesuits taught many curious visitors Euclidean geometry, and before the Jesuits arrived, the Chinese “had never seen a geographical exposition of the entire surface of the earth, either in the form of a globe or as represented on the plane surface of a map.”²⁵ Regardless of what they found most interesting, many came to the mission intrigued by the Jesuits’ knowledge, and would study these subjects with the priests. At the same time, the Jesuit fathers of course included discussions of Christianity when the opportunity arose. In 1604, a Chinese man named Lin visited the Jesuit house in Nanchang (now known as Nanjing),

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ricci, 337.

¹⁷ It should be noted that the Jesuits themselves referred to Chinese polytheists as “idol-worshippers.” To avoid an anachronism, the term “idol” will henceforth be replaced with “deity” or “Chinese deity-worshippers” to refer to Chinese polytheists.

¹⁸ Brockey, 156.

¹⁹ Brockey, 156.

²⁰ Ricci, 155.

²¹ Ibid., 337.

²² Ibid., 201.

²³ Ibid., 155.

²⁴ Brockey, 46.

²⁵ Ricci, 326.

led by his curiosity about a clock at the entrance.²⁶ When visitors came out of curiosity in this way, the Jesuits engaged in discussion about the item in question—in this case the clock—but always included some mention of “the Law of God” in the discussion and “gradually they [would] turn to the subject of religion.”²⁷ In Lin’s case, the missionary—Joao Soeiro—gave him a catechism “to mull over slowly.”²⁸ Lin returned for days and weeks after, asking the Jesuits questions about the Christian God, such as “why God gave good things to the bad, and bad things to the good,” and “why He did not kill the evildoers who wrought so much destruction on the world.”²⁹ Lin, because he had several wives, could not be baptized, but he became convinced of the truth of Christianity and presented his sons for baptism in his place.³⁰ In this way, observes Brockey, “the road to conversion would begin with an encounter.”³¹

The evangelization approach in the Chinese countryside differed in that the process relied more on the initial presentation of Christianity, and this presentation’s theatrical nature. In the countryside, Brockey writes, “the symbolic power of the wandering holy man was greater than it was in the cities,” and this was certainly the case for Father Nicolo Longobardo, a Jesuit under Ricci’s authority, in particular, who spent much time and energy visiting Chinese hamlets in the late 16th and early 17th century in order to win converts in the farther reaches of the kingdom.³² In Longobardo’s case, before visiting a village, one of his converts traveled ahead of him to alert the people to “get ready to hear a preacher who had come from the distant west.”³³ Once Longobardo arrived in the village, curious villagers gathered around to hear him “explain the purpose of his coming, namely, to convince them to adore the one true God, ruler of heaven and of earth, assuring them that no hope of salvation was to be found unless that religious belief was accepted as truth.”³⁴ He explained the Ten Commandments and, after his presentation of the basic tenets of the faith,

displayed a crucifix for veneration, surrounded by candles and burning incense. He entreated those present to “adore the one whom this figure represented and to promise henceforth to renounce their idols which were only imitations of gods who did not exist.”³⁵ Consequently, his presentation contained a degree of ritual, to which the Chinese were attracted considering the deeply ritualistic aspects of their culture. Rituals were an integral part of Chinese society, and thus the Christian rituals (including the sacraments) and reverence for them seemed to resonate with the Chinese. Ricci marveled that “they make so much of urbane ceremonies that a great part of their time is wasted in them,” even having extensive rituals when sitting down to eat a meal as a group.³⁶ People were often “impressed by the theatricality of his [Longobardo’s] presentation,” and it was not uncommon for people to express immediate interest in baptism, “either because of the reputation of the Christian faith for holiness, or because of the innate inclination of this people to adore some kind of deity.”³⁷ Catechumens would be instructed in the faith and, when Longobardo considered them “sufficiently trained in the precepts of their new faith,” he baptized them.³⁸ When baptized, the neophytes would receive rosary beads and saint medals, devotionals that were frequently used in rural mission work among the less educated. Thus, the method of evangelization in the countryside was not rooted in intellectual discourse. It did not “seek to reconcile Western concepts with Confucian philosophy” as the Jesuits did in the cities among the literati.³⁹ Rather, evangelization in the countryside was focused on the “tangible devotions of ordinary Christians” and attracting the Chinese to the faith by persuasive presentation and ritual.⁴⁰

Once an individual accepted Christianity, whether in the cities or the countryside, the Jesuits did not expect them to completely abandon their Chinese culture and way of life but to cease only plainly unorthodox practices,

²⁶ Brockey, 287.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ Brockey, 288.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² *Ibid.*, 293.

³³ Ricci, 406.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ Ricci, 67.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ Brockey, 294.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 294.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

such as that which placed something else in the place of God like deity worship. They allowed certain rites and rituals to continue, including deeply ingrained traditions of filial piety and rites in honor of Confucius. These practices were distinctly Chinese and completely foreign to the European idea of Christianity, but as long as these practices did not cross the line into idolatry or heresy, the Jesuits were accommodating. Culturally, the Chinese exhibited an immense filial piety that manifested itself most noticeably in funeral rites and their respect for ancestors. In later years, this would be perceived as crossing the line into idolatry and ancestor worship. But Ricci's journals do not indicate a real concern for the reverence the Chinese showed for their ancestors—in fact, there is only brief mention of the issue. After an elaborate funeral procession, and a three-year mourning period, family members would gather at the grave of the deceased each year to “perform anniversary rites.”⁴¹ In such rites, “incense is burned, gifts are offered, and funeral meals are left there.”⁴² These ceremonies varied according to region and local customs within that region, but the concept of honoring ancestors was the same. Ricci did not seem to harbor any concern for the orthodoxy of this practice among Christians:

They...consider this ceremony as an honor bestowed upon their departed ancestors...they do not really believe that the dead actually need the victuals which are placed upon their graves...it seems to be the best way of testifying their love for their dear departed. This practice of placing food upon the graves of the dead seems to be beyond any charge of sacrilege and perhaps also free from any taint of superstition, because they do not in any respect consider their ancestors to be gods, nor do they petition them for anything or hope for anything from them...⁴³

Ricci perceived this practice not as a threat to the faith of those who have accepted Christianity, but rather as a cultural practice that intended to honor and revere ancestors. He saw it perhaps similar to European Catholics honoring a patron saint or the Mother of God: venerating the person but not ascribing any qualities or abilities of God to that person.

Ricci perceived the Chinese rites in honor of Confucius in a similar way. Followers of Confucian philosophy, especially the literati, frequently held special events on Confucius' birthday in order to “do honor to their great master.”⁴⁴ The rite appeared almost as ritualistic as a Catholic Mass, involving acts of reverence such as bowing, “the lighting of candles and the burning of incense” and offering food in a way similar to the aforementioned ancestor rites.⁴⁵ Ricci showed little concern for the orthodoxy of this reverence for Confucius, saying, “they do not recite prayers to Confucius nor do they ask favors of him or expect help from him. They honor him only in the manner mentioned of honoring their respected dead.”⁴⁶ The precepts of Confucius, Ricci believed, were “quite in conformity with the light of conscience and with Christian truth.”⁴⁷ On the surface, lighting candles and burning incense for ancestors and Confucius was perceived by many—specifically the Franciscans and Dominicans when they arrived in China in the 1630s—to be inherently unorthodox and not permissible; but it appears that Ricci and his Jesuits considered ancestor and Confucian rites to be expressions of deep respect and honor. These practices certainly were not European and thus understandably quite foreign to Europeans. Nonetheless, since they were not placing ancestors or Confucius in the place of God, Ricci did not consider these rites at odds with Christianity.

However, the Jesuits were inflexible in regards to morals and the worshipping of Chinese deities. The literati, as well as the gentry and mandarins (government officials) who interacted with the Jesuits on an intellectual basis, occupied a high rung on the social ladder in Chinese society. Their social status and careers often came with “social impediments” that prevented them from being baptized. The most notable was the common practice of having concubines.⁴⁸ Wealthy Chinese men in government almost always had multiple wives and numerous children from those relationships. Becoming a Christian required them to “repudiate these women for the new religion's sake.”⁴⁹ Many of these men, especially mandarins, were “public figures who sought the estimation of their peers” and were unwilling to give up this veritable “status symbol” of taking concubines

⁴¹ Ricci, 75.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 75.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 96.

⁴⁴ Ricci, 97.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ Brockey, 48.

⁴⁹ Brockey, 49.

in order to be baptized.⁵⁰ Most of the converts from the mandarins, then, were older men nearing the end of their careers in public life, who were less invested in their public image.

Likewise, the Jesuits observed that many of Christianity's moral tenets were a deterrent to potential converts in general. Longobardo wrote that when many Chinese understood what would be required of them morally if they were to convert "they lost interest."⁵¹ Some hesitant but potential converts understood conversion to Christianity to mean, "that they would have to 'dismiss their concubines, lose the profits of usury, abandon the use of fortune-telling, cast out their idols'"⁵² These were sacrifices many people were simply unwilling to make, regardless of their interest in the teachings of Christ. It is notable, however, that the Jesuits were not willing to accommodate common cultural practices like concubinage simply to gain converts. Men who intended to remain married to multiple women were consistently barred from baptism. When necessary, the Jesuits placed limits on accommodating cultural practices, and held to those limits. The Jesuits considered veneration of Confucius and ancestors to be appropriately within that boundary while having more than one wife was not. The Jesuits accommodated the Chinese in cultural practices in honoring ancestors and Confucius, but they did not accommodate the Chinese at the expense of morality. They may have counted these reluctant potential converts as a loss, but one well-worth defending the integrity of Christian morals.

Time and again, the Jesuits also fought tirelessly against the presence of Chinese deities in the regions in which they ministered. Father Longobardo recalled that the Chinese "surpass all other heathens in idolatry."⁵³ Pagodas (shrines) to Buddhist deities were found frequently in private homes, and "one could not even find a boat or shack that lacked them."⁵⁴ Ricci echoed similar observations, noting that such deities seem to be in every home, public space, and boat, yet, "it is quite certain that comparatively few people have any faith in this

unnatural and hideous fiction of idol worship...[believing] that if their external devotion brings them no good, at least it can do them no harm."⁵⁵ Ricci's journal contains numerous examples of the Jesuits' consistent resistance to the worship of deities—in fact, it seems that eliminating deities from the homes of potential or new converts was a primary focus. For example, Ricci recounted a neophyte who approached Father Longobardo complaining that his pagan wife, pregnant at the time, "had saved one of the idols" the neophyte was trying to burn, as she believed it would "insure a safe delivery."⁵⁶ Longobardo told the husband to put an image of the Virgin Mary in place of the deity and to say a series of Our Fathers and Hail Mary's with his wife daily. The couple's son was born without any problems, and their whole family became Christian and intensely devoted to the Blessed Mother.⁵⁷

New Christians also made notable efforts to bring their friends and family to the Christian faith by ridding their homes of deities. In another episode, a convert tried to convince a young man who was a devout deity-worshipper of the truth of Christianity by asking him to read a commentary on the Catholic faith.⁵⁸ The young man agreed, but "the Devil evidently decided to frighten him away from making any progress" as "when he took the book into his hands, he began to tremble and was so affected by his shaking that he could not read."⁵⁹ When he handed the book back to the convert, "his trembling ceased."⁶⁰ The young man's mother asked the convert to take her son to a priest to ask for "protection against his enemy who was so persistent."⁶¹ The convert persuaded the mother to "take all the idols out of her home."⁶² After the deities were removed, the young man held the commentary on Christianity in his hands "without trembling and with nothing unusual happening."⁶³ Ricci recalled that both the son and the mother became Christians.

Thus, Ricci saw Christianity as being able to transcend cultural boundaries. Combining Christianity with reverence for ancestors and Confucius certainly did not fall in line with the perceptions of European Christianity;

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 48.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 300.

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ Brockey, 299.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ Ricci, 105.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 409.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ Ricci, 408.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ *Ibid.*

however, Ricci believed that cultural practices did not necessarily have to be European in order for the Chinese to be good Catholics. They could be both Catholic and Chinese, maintaining certain cultural practices while staying true to the doctrines of their new faith.

Less than three decades after Ricci's death in 1610, Mendicant friars (priests from the orders of St. Francis and St. Dominic) began missionary efforts in Asia. They quickly decided Chinese rites and Confucianism were unorthodox, and the Jesuit method of accommodating these rites intolerable in what came to be known as the "Rites controversy." Jesuit historian Henry Bernard-Maitre, S.J. considered the controversy "in terms of the number and caliber of the participants, its length and ferocity, the greatest internal struggle in the long history of the Catholic Church notwithstanding the early councils."⁶⁴ The conflict was rooted essentially in the Franciscans' and Dominicans' starkly different perception of the Chinese cultural rites that have been previously discussed—namely involving ancestors and Confucius. Instead of seeing these rites as cultural and related to the Confucian *philosophy*, the Mendicant orders considered the Chinese rites for ancestors to be idol worship and Confucianism a religion itself, and thus concluded these two practices to be wholly incompatible with the Christian faith. The Jesuits, who had lived and experienced the culture for several decades by that point, understood the situation in an entirely different way; and they understood that these two practices served as a sort of cornerstone to Chinese society and that requiring the abandonment of these would bring their progress in gaining converts to an abrupt halt. Because they understood reverence for ancestors as just that—reverence—and Confucianism as a philosophy, not a religion, they were willing to allow these practices to continue, believing that Christian doctrine was not being violated.

⁶⁴ "The Chinese Rites Controversy: A Long Lasting Controversy in Sino-Western Cultural History," *Pacific Rim Report* 32 (February 2004): 2-8, accessed May 6, 2015, <http://www.ricci.usfca.edu/research/pacrimreport/prr32.pdf>.

The issue received intermittent attention from Church officials beginning with the arrival of the Mendicant orders in the 1630s, who quickly reported their concerns to the Vatican.⁶⁵ At that time, the Jesuits found themselves already entangled in conflicts with the Mendicant orders and the Vatican itself, and so the Rites controversy was "exacerbated by tensions and jealousies between missionaries of differing religious orders and national origins."⁶⁶ Ecclesiastically, Vatican bureaucracies were undergoing a "tightening up at the center" as many in the curia pushed for greater centralization in the Church.⁶⁷ Likewise, "Europeanizers" considered a Western form of Christianity to be the only acceptable, orthodox form.⁶⁸ The China mission field became "a sort of surrogate battleground for European ecclesiastical conflicts" and the Jesuit order experienced the most backlash.⁶⁹

The Rites controversy drifted in and out of focus until Pope Clement XI issued a decree condemning both ancestor and Confucian rites for Catholic converts in China in 1715:

The spring and autumn worship of Confucius, together with the worship of ancestors, is not allowed among Catholic converts... Whether at home, in the cemetery, or during the time of a funeral, a Chinese Catholic is not allowed to perform the ritual of ancestor worship. I had made it clear that other Chinese customs and traditions that can in no way be interpreted as heathen in nature should be allowed to continue among Chinese converts... customs and traditions that are not contradictory to Roman Catholicism will be allowed, while those that are clearly contradictory to it will not be tolerated under any circumstances.⁷⁰

As a result, the emperor essentially lost patience with the missionaries and effectively banned Christianity in

⁶⁵ "The Chinese Rites Controversy: A Long-Lasting Controversy....," 3.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ "The Chinese Rites Controversy: A Long-Lasting Controversy....," 3.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁷⁰ "Modern History Sourcebook: The Chinese Rites Controversy, 1715," Fordham University, accessed May 6, 2015, <http://legacy.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/1715chineserites.asp>.

1721.⁷¹ A closer look at the different perceptions of the ancestor and Confucian rites illustrates that the conflict arose not because of a change in Jesuit strategy after Ricci's passing, but rather because of the added factor of the Mendicant orders and their concerns, compounded by existing tensions in the Vatican. The conflict can be attributed in part to starkly different approaches to missionary work between the Jesuits and the Mendicant orders: the two groups differed in interpreting how Christianity could be applied to non-European cultures. While the Jesuits were open to non-European cultures to the extent that they adopted these cultures themselves, the Mendicant orders approached missionary work "in an uncompromising, Europeanist manner."⁷² In another early modern example, consider the work of Junipero Serra in Alta California. Serra and his Franciscans established a mission system attempting to not only Christianize the native populations, but also "Europeanize" them by transposing indigenous culture with European culture. Serra not only sought to "mold good Christians," but also to instill in the indigenous European ways of living, self-sufficiency, and farming methods so they would be better citizens of the Spanish empire.⁷³

In a way, they believed that in order to be a good Christian, one must live and act as a European in a broad sense. Mendicant orders in China considered any non-Christian, non-European culture as "the work of the devil" and any tolerance, acceptance, or blending of Christianity with these cultures as a "betrayal of Christian principles."⁷⁴

The Jesuits wanted to bring the Gospel to a highly advanced, deeply intellectual culture whose people would be incredibly reluctant to abandon it for a foreign religion. The Jesuits knew that if they wanted converts, they would have to figure out how to introduce Christianity and maintain the integrity of its doctrines while not demanding a complete rejection of Chinese culture. The

Jesuits acknowledged that offering food, candles and incense to ancestors or Confucius were not practices seen in European Christianity (and in fact, Ricci wrote that though he considered these not in conflict with Christianity, "[for] those who have accepted the teachings of Christianity, it would seem much better to replace [these customs] with alms for the poor and for the salvation of souls").⁷⁵ Nevertheless, they realized that ritual was "very much a concern of the state."⁷⁶ They eliminated that which did come into conflict with Christianity (deity worship, for example), but for the most part "retained as much as possible the domestic and public ritual practice" that was such an integral part of Chinese culture.⁷⁷

The Jesuits and Mendicants also differed in their perception of Confucianism itself. The Mendicant orders saw Confucianism as a religion, not a philosophical system, and thus argued "Confucian rites and rituals smacked of idolatry and paganism, and were wholly inconsistent with the notion of a Heavenly Father and a Holy Spirit."⁷⁸ On the basis of their interactions with the literati, who were the most well-read Confucian scholars in the kingdom, the Jesuits considered Confucianism to be a philosophical system and as mentioned, frequently noted its similarities to the natural law.⁷⁹ Ricci in particular considered the veneration of Confucius "to be [a] civil rite and not [a] religious one" and believed that Confucianism was rather "a code of ethics residing within the human person."⁸⁰

Aside from the Jesuits, most missionaries and Church officials half a world away in the Vatican were "inflexible" in applying Christianity to Chinese culture.⁸¹ Interestingly, members of the literati who converted to Christianity often challenged the belief that "the Europeanized church was a universal form" of Christianity.⁸² In 1705, Zhang Xingyao of Hangzhou wrote an essay entitled "On the Ritual of Sacrifice" in which he agreed that certain rites "should be discontinued as un-Chris-

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Caitlin Lu, "Matteo Ricci and the Jesuit Mission in China, 1583-1610," *The Concord Review* (2011), http://www.tcr.org/tcr/essays/EP_TCR_21_3_Sp11_Matteo%20Ricci.pdf.

⁷³ James A. Sandos, *Converting California: Indians and the Franciscans in the Missions* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 11.

⁷⁴ Lu, 15.

⁷⁵ Ricci, 96.

⁷⁶ "The Chinese Rites Controversy: A Long-Lasting Controversy..." 5.

⁷⁷ "The Chinese Rites Controversy: A Long-Lasting Controversy..." 5.

⁷⁸ Lu, 14.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ D. E. Mungello, *The Great Encounter of China and the West, 1500-1800*, (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2013), 28.

⁸² Ibid.

tian.”⁸³ However, forbidding ancestor rites would cause converts to “be attacked by the rest of Chinese society as unfilial.”⁸⁴ Such rites were “too ingrained” in the culture to be abandoned without turning away those who may be interested in converting.⁸⁵ Xingyao suggested a solution much like the Jesuits applied in their perception of the rites; he argued that these rites must be “reinterpreted” to focus on the Christian God, and seen “as forms of reverence rather than petitions and prayers.”⁸⁶ He acknowledged the possibility of the rites being perceived as contradictory to Christianity, but believed that the rites could still be practiced legitimately and without offense to Christian doctrine if reinterpreted to place the Christian God at the center.

Several decades earlier in 1672, another member of the literati, Yan Mo, published the essay “Distinguishing Different Forms of Sacrifice” in response to a Dominican, Francisco Varo, who published a treatise “prohibiting Chinese Christians from performing ceremonies in honor of their ancestors and Confucius.”⁸⁷ Mo focused on the semantics of the word “sacrifice” in the Chinese language, noting that it “meant different things when applied to sacrifices for ancestors, the ancient sages, and the Christian God.”⁸⁸ The meaning of “sacrifice” differed in each case. If the same meaning of the word were applied to the rites, then of course “sacrifice” to ancestors and Confucius would be confused with worship and honor due to God. But, he argued, when the meanings were distinguished, it would “become clear that no usurpation of God’s authority occurred when Chinese performed veneration to ancestors and Confucius.”⁸⁹

On his deathbed, some of Ricci’s final words were, “I am leaving you on the threshold of an open door, that leads to a great reward, but only after labors endured and dangers encountered.”⁹⁰ Though he may have seen conflict on the horizon considering the tension between the Jesuits, the Vatican, and other religious orders, he never could have predicted the depth the Rites controversy

would reach in the decades after his death. The Jesuits, in their zeal for souls, did reap a reward—they gained a mere 60 converts in 1600 and had over 150,000 by 1651.⁹¹ This reward did not come easily, but for all the obstacles, the Jesuits’ accomplishments are significant. They managed to overcome a daunting language barrier that enabled them to hold deeply theological, intellectual discussions with the educated members of society. Further, they managed to embed themselves in a society typically hostile to strangers. In Ricci’s later years, a magistrate in Peking (now Beijing) reportedly informed him that “there are more than a few who frequently assert that they have no fear of foreigners such as you men, because it is impossible for anyone following your doctrine to injure the public welfare.”⁹²

The conflict over ancestor and Confucian rites ultimately ended Christian missions in China during the early modern period. The Roman Catholic Church remained staunchly reluctant to accept any non-European form of Christianity. Ricci’s approach to the mission field accepted differences, embraced those differences, and tried to find common ground. This was in stark contrast to the carnage and upheaval occurring intermittently in Europe at the time over religious differences. One wonders what the religious landscape of China, and the missionary legacy of the Jesuits, would look like if the Church had been more accepting of a Christianity that may not have looked identical to Europe’s form on the surface, but at its root held fast to the tenets of the faith. Centuries later, in 1958, Pope St. John XXIII vindicated Ricci, saying that he, along with his method of evangelization that embraced unique cultures so long as they did not conflict with the moral and theological precepts of Christianity, would “become the model of missionaries.”⁹³ Thus, perhaps Ricci was a man centuries ahead of his time.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Mungello, 28.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Ricci, 563.

⁹¹ Lu, 16.

⁹² Ricci, 541.

⁹³ Lu, 16.

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