

Natasha Reichle, ed.

China at the Center: Ricci and Verbiest World Maps. San Francisco: Asian Art Museum, 2016. Pp. 64. Pb, \$ 19.95.

This slim and elegant exhibition catalogue was the companion to an exhibition (March 4–May 8, 2016) at the Asian Art Museum in San Francisco, entitled “China at the Center: Rare Ricci and Verbiest World Maps.” The exhibition displayed two monumental and very rare maps, the so-called Ricci map of 1602 (*Kunyu wanguo quantu* 坤輿萬國全圖, A complete map of the ten thousand countries of the world), and the Verbiest map of 1674 (*Kunyu quantu* 坤輿全圖, A complete map of the world). These *mappamondi* (maps of the world) are well-known examples of Sino-Western cartography, printed with xylographic technology, and it was fitting and fortunate that they were shown together, allowing the public to compare them side by side in the original.

The copy of the Ricci map was on loan from the James Ford Bell Library at the University of Minnesota, one of six known copies in the world (the others are at the Vatican, in Japan, and France), while the Verbiest map came from the collection of the Geography and Map Division at the Library of Congress, Washington, DC. Modern portraits (1914) of the Jesuits responsible for the maps, Matteo Ricci (Italian, 1552–1610) and Ferdinand Verbiest (Flemish, 1623–88), as well as six rare books on early modern cartography and the Jesuit presentation of China to the West from the collections of Donohue Library and the Ricci Institute for Chinese-Western Cultural History at the University of San Francisco completed this intimate show.

The catalogue has been conceived for a general public, and contains a preface by the exhibition curator and editor Natasha Reichle, “Mapping the Marvelous” (xi-xiii), briefly comparing the principles of Chinese and European cartography as reflected in these maps, with notes referring to further literature on the subject. Three short chapters by specialists associated with the Ricci Institute form the bulk of the catalogue: Antoni J. Üçerler, S.J., “Missionaries, Mandarins, and Maps: Reimagining the Known World” (1–15); Theodore N. Foss, “Ricci’s World Map: The 1602 *Kunyu wanguo quantu*” (17–28); and Mark Stephen Mir, “All Under Heaven. Visions of Far Lands in the Verbiest World Map of 1674” (29–43). These well-written essays, enriched by images of the two maps and other relevant printed materials and paintings, offer a context to understand the maps and the books in the exhibition. They explain in plain language the Chinese cartographic tradition; the work of Ricci and his successors in China in the fields of cartography, geography, mathematics, and astronomy; the use of maps as missionary propaganda tools and gifts; the diffusion of these maps in East Asia beyond China (Japan and Korea); the transmission

of knowledge about China to Europe; and the kind of global imaginary these maps conveyed. The pages are dotted with drawings of mythical creatures and exotic animals taken from the Verbiest map, as well as with astronomical drawings from Chinese scientific treatises written by the Jesuits. An essential bibliography in English offers venues to further explore the topic.

The title of the catalogue refers to the position of China in these maps. Ricci and Verbiest placed China at the center, rather than in the eastern portion as usually seen in contemporary European *mappamondi*. This was an acknowledgement of the supremacy of the “Central Flowery Kingdom” (*Zhonghua*, as China was also known) in the eyes of Chinese *literati*—the audience of these maps—and of the need to adapt established Eurocentric geographical hierarchies to a new political and cultural context. The centrality of China displayed on these maps is simultaneously, even today, a challenge to Eurocentrism and a reminder of Sinocentrism, and it invites us to reflect on the pioneering nature of this Jesuit cartographic exploit, its limitations, but also the boldness of such a milestone in Chinese-Western cultural exchange.

Eugenio Menegon

Boston University

emenegon@bu.edu

DOI 10.1163/22141332-00303008-11