

Matteo Ricci

The True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven [Tianzhu shiyi 天主實義], translated by Douglas Lancashire and Peter Hu Kuo-chen, S.J.; revised edition by Thierry Meynard, S.J. Chestnut Hill, MA: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 2016. Pp. 422. Hb, \$55.

Matteo Ricci (1552–1610), known in China as Li Madou (利瑪竇), is one of the few foreigners who have gained a place in Chinese history, and whose name many educated Chinese recognize. After four years in India, in 1582 Ricci joined his confrère Michele Ruggieri (1543–1607) in Macao, at the order of the famous visitor of the Asian missions, Alessandro Valignano (1539–1606). Valignano implemented a program of cultural accommodation and linguistic immersion for missionaries in East Asia, and found allies in Ruggieri and Ricci. To stay permanently in China, the two befriended officials in Guangdong province, and at their suggestion, introduced themselves as Buddhist monks from the West, shaving their heads and wearing the monk's robes from 1583 to 1594. Ruggieri's first exposition of Catholic doctrine, *The True Record of the Lord of Heaven* (Tianzhu shilu 天主實錄, 1585), even used some Buddhist vocabulary.

By the late 1580s, Ricci assumed the cultural leadership of the mission, and started to shift towards the new identity of the Confucian *literatus*. He spent much of his time reading and translating the texts of the Confucian tradition. Following the advice of friendly *literati*, he also adopted in 1594 the silken robes and hat of Confucian scholars. Ricci's *The True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven* (Tianzhu shiyi 天主實義, 1603) emerged out of this shift in identity, but also out of a peculiarly favorable environment for new ideas in the late Ming period. Once Ricci had sufficient linguistic command, and felt comfortable in the Confucian curriculum, he set out to impress the *literati* with a mix of moral, religious, and scientific teachings, eventually dubbed *Tianxue* 天學 or Celestial Teachings. Confucian scholars in the late Ming prized the study of ethical questions, a staple of Chinese philosophy for two millennia. Some of them, moreover, were open to religious experimentation. Ricci was able to rely on his knowledge of natural and mathematical sciences, Greek and Roman philosophy, Christian theology, and the Confucian classical tradition, to engage important intellectuals, often in public fashion. By the mid-1590s, he had left the deep south, moving to central China, and he tried in 1598 to establish himself in the imperial capital of Beijing. After a setback there, he moved to the secondary capital of Nanjing, in the great cultural hub of the Jiangnan region. By 1601, however, he left again Nanjing for the north, this time succeeding

through *literati* and imperial patronage at remaining in Beijing, where he would die in 1610. During these years, he took detailed notes of his conversations with *literati*, especially in Jiangnan and Beijing, on several important moral themes: the passing of time and the meaning of life and death; the attributes of a virtuous person; the importance of self-examination; the shape of the afterlife; the harms of astrology; the evils of greed and stinginess; the fallacies of the Buddhist theories of reincarnation, vegetarianism, and the release of animal life. These themes, eventually collected in *The True Meaning*, reveal that Ricci had made a strategic choice: to ally with neo-Confucianism, the dominant intellectual ideology; to highlight components of the Confucian classics that seemed to support Christian theology and ethics; and to wage a war on many practices and conceptions of Buddhism, Daoism, and popular religions.

Ricci adopted for his text a literary form well-established both in the West and China, a fictitious dialogue between a Western and a Chinese *literatorus*. Ruggieri's earlier *True Record* had similarly been structured in the form of questions and answers, as catechisms often are, and presented philosophical demonstration by reason alone of the existence of God and the eternity of the soul, the story of revelation, the Creed, the Ten Commandments, and the basic prayers. The *True Record*, however, was only marginally engaged with Confucian thought. Ricci's *True Meaning* was instead more sophisticated. The device of the dialogue was not simply a literary fiction, but actually reproduced the flow of his actual learned conversations. While Ricci incorporated some materials found in Ruggieri's text, a decisive inspiration came from a Latin text compiled by Valignano, the *Catechismus japonensis*, published in Lisbon in 1586 for the instruction of Jesuits entering the Japan mission and their Japanese novices.

Ricci's work should also be understood in its historical context. This book was a war machine. As editor Thierry Meynard observes, "The agreement of Ricci with neo-Confucianism was tactical, temporary and limited. After destroying the intellectual foundations of Buddhism and Daoism, [...] Ricci [attacked] the foundations of neo-Confucianism [as well]" (73n93), especially what he thought was its materialistic and pantheistic bent. To our modern ecumenical sensibility, this approach looks quite suspect. Yet, in spite of these limitations, and especially the misunderstanding of some key Chinese philosophical concepts like Non-Being, interpreted by Ricci as a nihilistic "nothing," we must admit that this was an extremely sophisticated attempt to bridge two traditions, even if with a clear ulterior objective. The book continued to be admired for centuries and was republished many times and translated into several languages. It was also a labor that included many Chinese scholars. Ricci prepared

a first version of the text and circulated it as manuscript in the years between 1596 and 1601 among his Chinese friends, asking for feedback. In 1603, a finalized version was ready, and with the financial support of the renowned official Feng Yingjing, an orthodox Confucian and fiercely anti-Buddhist scholar, the printing woodblocks were carved. One last round of corrections from friends happened again before printing. Obviously, this shows that the final product, while mainly from the brush of Ricci, was in fact also a collective work, where several sympathetic scholars offered input and support. An exception might have been the conversations held with two Buddhist opponents, the monk San Huai in Nanjing in 1599, and the devout Buddhist Huang Hui in 1601. In those conversations, Ricci presented himself as a winner over his opponents' arguments. In fact, Buddhist critics took up the challenge, and wrote refutations of the anti-Buddhist rhetoric of Ricci, accusing him of misunderstanding Buddhist concepts and of ignorance about the vast Buddhist canonical literature, accusations that were well founded. Ricci, when writing about Buddhism, behaved as a Counter-Reformation polemicist, and did not take the adequate time to study what he deemed demonic doctrines.

Only one copy of the 1603 first edition of the *True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven* survives in the Casanatense Library in Rome, and it was used as the *editio princeps* for the English version published by the The Institute of Jesuit Sources in 1985, with an introduction and translation by the Jesuit Peter Hu Kuo-chen and the sinologist Douglas Lancashire. The late Edward Malatesta, S.J., founder of the Ricci Institute for Chinese-Western Cultural History at the University of San Francisco, was the editorial driving force behind that publication, jointly co-sponsored by the The Institute of Jesuit Sources (then in St. Louis, MO) and the Ricci Institutes in Taipei and San Francisco.

The 2016 revised edition preserves the best features of the original 1985 edition, but also improves it through revisions by the French Jesuit Thierry Meynard, professor of philosophy at Sun Yat-sen University in Guangzhou, China. Meynard holds a doctorate in Chinese philosophy from Beijing University and has focused his recent research on the Jesuit interpretation of Confucianism in the early modern period. In 2015, for example, he published a volume on *The Jesuit Reading of Confucius and the First Complete Translation of the Lunyu (1687) Published in the West*, in the Brill series Jesuit Studies. The 2016 edition of *The True Meaning* contains the text in traditional Chinese and English, an updated bibliography, a corrected "Translators' Introduction" with new scholarship, and most important, a great number of additional footnotes on philosophical concepts, both from the point of view of the European Scholastic tradition and neo-Confucianism. This new, handsome scholarly production of *The True*

Meaning will no doubt become the new standard in English, and will be useful to yet another generation of Anglophone philosophers, theologians, historians of Chinese-Western relations and Jesuit history, and global historians.

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