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## Images of “Jesuitical” China in the Enlightenment: irreligion, anticlericalism and anti-Jesuitism

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New Perspectives  
in the Studies  
on Matteo Ricci

edited by  
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## Contents

9	Li Madou Alli Caracciolo
15	Introduction Filippo Mignini

## New Perspectives in the Studies on Matteo Ricci

I.	New Documents in Chinese Concerning Matteo Ricci and His Interlocutors
31	Becoming Li Madou: Ruggieri, Ricci, Longobardo and the Making of the Jesuit China Mission Ronnie Po-chia Hsia
49	The Jesuits in Asia, Ricci's Accommodation Policy, and Comparing Cultures Dorothy M. Figueira
69	The <i>Tongnian</i> Network in Matteo Ricci's Intellectual Network Frederic Wang
77	A Proposal for the Identification of Ricci's "Ligiucin": not Li Bengu (李本固, 1559-1638), but Li Deng (李登, 1524-1609) Adrian Dudink
87	A Bilingual Italian-Chinese Reference Book Concerning Matteo Ricci and His Chinese Interlocutors in the Late Ming Dynasty (1579-1610) Liu Yannel

11. New Ways of Analysing Ricci's Works
- 95 New Advances in Research on Michele Ruggieri: Analysis of Separate Sheets From the *Portuguese-Chinese Dictionary*  
Zhang Xiping
- 131 Themes and Issues in *Posthumous Polemics* (Bianxue Yidu)  
Huang Ping
- 143 Introduction of the European Classics and Ethics in China at the End of the Ming Dynasty  
Wang Suna
- 153 The Italian Language of Matteo Ricci Poised Between Estrangement and Inculturation  
Diego Poli
- 183 The Imaginative Melancholy of Matteo Ricci  
Gianni Criveller
- 195 Intersubjectivity and the Self in Ricci's Writings: Construction of a Mystical Fable for a New Christian Eudemonism  
Vito Avarello
- III. The Reflection of Europe on Itself in the Light of Chinese Civilization
- 215 Images of "Jesuitical" China in the Enlightenment: Irreligion, Anticlericalism and Anti-Jesuitism  
Michela Catto
- 233 Meta-Ethical Issues in Christian Wolff's *Oratio de sinarum philosophia practica* (1721) and His *Adnotationes* (1726). A Brief Note  
Michel Dupuis
- 243 Atheism, Wisdom, Enlightened Empire and Irrationality. The Changing Influence of Jesuits' China on European Histories of Philosophy (1600-1744)  
Ambrogio Selui

163 A Brief Study of Chinese Books on Western Learning in *Fonti Ricciane*

Hu Wenting

173 Ricci and Three Early Jesuit Translations of the *Lunyu*  
Thierry Meynard

197 Index

The stories written by missionaries in China, often appropriately selected and opportunistically interpreted, fuelled observations by scientists and theologians, moralists and philosophers, ready to rework them in one way or another, through adaptations and adjustments, and at times total distortions and misconstructions, that gave rise both to sinophilia and sinophobia in eighteenth century Europe.<sup>1</sup> We are interested here not in the truth or truthfulness of such pictures from China, but in outlining how some representations handed down by the missionary literature, and particularly the Jesuits', helped to shape the narrative of the Enlightenment, beyond the missionaries' expectations and purposes, and became a double-edged sword in the hands of the Enlightenment thinkers. They were used to support irreligion, (using the Chinese's alleged atheism or superstitions or idolatry), and anti-clericalism (using the images of the Buddhist religion denigrated by the missionaries).

The stories about China were also used – as I will show here – by the Enlightenment thinkers, especially in France, to vindicate the man of letters' dignity and intellectual freedom and to demand for the *philosophes* a role in civil society.<sup>2</sup> With a process not very dissimilar from those seen in European culture during other periods, China was included in the genealogy of the Enlightenment, taking part in the *querelle* between the Ancients and the Moderns;<sup>3</sup> its ancient "philosopher" Confucius and his disciples, the mandarins, were set among the originators of the Enlightenment.<sup>4</sup> The Jesuits, as *anti-philosophes*, slowly distanced themselves from this association.

<sup>1</sup> Cf. M. Cartier (ed.), *La Chine entre amour et haine. Actes du VIII<sup>e</sup> colloque de sinologie de Chantilly* (Paris: Institut Ricci-Desclée de Brouwer, 1998), with a large bibliography.

<sup>2</sup> On Enlightenment thinkers claiming freedom of thought and dignity, see in general P. Dolpiano, *Liberté di scrivere. La battaglia per la stampa nell'età dei Lumi* (Rome-Bari: Laterza, 2015).

<sup>3</sup> D. Edelstein, *The Enlightenment. A Genealogy* (Chicago; London: The University of Chicago Press, 2010).

<sup>4</sup> On Chinese atheism in European culture cf. J. Israel, "Admiration of China and Classical Chinese Thought in the Radical Enlightenment (1685-1740)," *Tarantian Journal of East Asian Studies* 1 (2007), pp. 1-25.

*The Crooked Buddhist Monk and the "Smart" Jesuit: Images of Anti-Jesuitism*

The story of the Jesuits' first penetration in China was marked, as it is known, by a kinship between Christianity and Buddhism. Favoured by some similarities in rituals as well as in doctrine, at the beginning of their mission the Jesuits had decided to use Buddhism. It was a brief story of dialogue with the bonzes, taking advantage of the compliance that the Chinese recognized in both doctrines, but also of the efforts and adjustments that Buddhism had made in his millennial penetration in China.

In many ways, the official u-turn happened with an external act, like the abandonment in 1594 of the clothes of bonzes in favour of Confucian robes,<sup>1</sup> but it had been prepared for a long time by a systematic study of Confucian books that, with Matteo Ricci, had become not only essential elements of Jesuits' training in China<sup>2</sup> but also used as interpreters and translators of Chinese doctrine. If Michele Ruggieri's catechism, *Tianzhu shilu*, i.e. *True representation of the Lord of Heaven* (1584),<sup>3</sup> had invoked the Buddhist and Taoist doctrine to explain some of the concepts of Christianity (such as *Tianzhu* for "Lord of Heavens," *Tiantang* as "heavenly palace" to indicate "Paradise" or *sheng shui* i.e. water with healing properties for Buddhism and holy water for Christianity), Matteo Ricci – and particularly his *Tianzhu shiyi* (*The true Meaning of the Lord of Heaven*)<sup>4</sup> – had explicitly started a period of denigration of Buddhism and of its representatives which was to last for a long time in the Jesuit tradition and to affect orientalist studies deeply.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> M. Ricci, *Lettere*, ed. F. D'Arelli (Macerata: Quodlibet, 2001), letter to Claudio Acquaviva, Nanchang, November 4, 1595, pp. 308–9.

<sup>2</sup> The first guide-lines concerning the training of Jesuits in China were issued by Alessandro Valignano on February 12, 1582; according to D'Elia they are included in vol. 4 of *Fonti Ricciane* which was not published due to the situation in post-war and post-fascist Italy: *Fonti Ricciane* (Rome: La libreria dello Stato, 1949), vol. III, p. XI. About Ricci's intuition on the study of the *Four Books* of the Confucian tradition cf. F. D'Arelli, *Matteo Ricci. L'altro e diverso mondo della Cina* (Milan: Il Sole 24 Ore, 2014), pp. 119–20.

<sup>3</sup> Comparisons of the Chinese and Latin translations of Ruggieri's catechism have shown important changes in the two versions: cf. J. Gernet, "Sur les différentes versions du premier catéchisme en chinois de 1584," in W. Bauer (ed.), *Studia sino-mongolica. Festschrift für Herbert Franke* (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag GMBH, 1979), pp. 407–16.

<sup>4</sup> *Tianzhu shiyi* is divided in eight chapters, each consisting in short paragraphs (596 in total), preceded by an introduction. Recent editions: M. Ricci, *Il vero significato del "Signore del cielo"*, ed. A. Chiriacosta (Rome: Urbaniana University Press, 2006), and *Le Sem-rel de "Seigneur du Ciel"*, ed. T. Meynard (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2013).

<sup>5</sup> See U. App, *The Cult of Emptiness. The Western Discovery of Buddhist Thought and the Invention of Oriental Philosophy* (Rorschach, Kyoto: University Media, 2012), and – for the long period – Id., *The Birth of Orientalism* (Philadelphia: Oxford: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010).

In Ricci's texts and tales – and then in the tradition going from Louis Le Comte to father Du Halde<sup>10</sup> and 19th century encyclopaedists<sup>11</sup> – the Buddhist monk is the natural antagonist of the Jesuits and of their preaching<sup>12</sup> since Buddhism is of demonic origin (in the missionaries' tales, direct challenges in healing between Jesuits and Buddhists – between good and evil – are frequent).<sup>13</sup> Though deeply different, Jesuits found themselves sharing with the bonzes the same questions (about the worldly pleasures and vanities, to mention just one) and to give radically different answers, of course. Some of those questions are explicit in Ricci's writings: in *Ten Chapters of an Extraordinary Man*, he engages in answering "In your country, Buddhism is not professed, therefore the commandment not to kill animals does not exist. When you fast, why do you eat only vegetarian food?"<sup>14</sup> or "What is the difference between the learned Ricci and Gautama? Some Buddhist scholars say that Ricci has plagiarized the theories of Buddhism."<sup>15</sup>

Denigration wasn't only meant to show which doctrine was true, Christianity, and which was false, Buddhism, but also to involve *in toto* the bonzes' representation and, in doing so the Society of Jesus used the tropes and forms of an already well developed anti-clerical literature,<sup>16</sup> the allegations exchanged by conflicting religious orders or among Jesuits themselves.<sup>17</sup>

"Acquiring religious authority"<sup>18</sup> therefore implied to spread a negative image of bonzes as impostors, to underline their humble social origins, their not knowing how to read and write, and also and above all their dissembling and contrasting private and public behaviours, such

<sup>10</sup> On the success of this text, see I. Landry-Deron, *La preuve par la Chine. La "Description" de J.-B. Du Halde, jésuite, 1735* (Paris: Éditions de l'ÉHESS, 2002).

<sup>11</sup> G. Lehnert, *China in European Encyclopaedias, 1700–1858* (Leiden: Brill, 2011), pp. 304–7.

<sup>12</sup> C. Timmermans, *Entre Chine et Europe. Taoïsme et bouddhisme Chinois dans les publications jésuites de l'époque moderne (XVIe–XVIIIe siècles)* (Lille: Anrt, 1998, p. 423).

<sup>13</sup> J. Gernet, *Chine et Christianisme. La première confrontation* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), pp. 101–13. See also Yu Liu, "Adapting Catholicism to Confucianism: Matteo Ricci's *Tianzhu shiyi*," *The European Legacy. Toward New Paradigms* 19, 1 (2014), pp. 43–59.

<sup>14</sup> M. Ricci, *Dieci capitoli di un uomo strano, seguito da otto canzoni per il manicordo occidentale*, eds. W. Sun, F. Mignini (Macerata: Quodlibet, 2010), p. 155.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 380.

<sup>16</sup> See O. Niccoli, *Rinascimento anticlericale. Infamia, propaganda e satira in Italia tra Quattro e Cinquecento* (Rome-Bari: Laterza, 2003).

<sup>17</sup> Cf. M. Catto, *La Compagnia divina. Il dissenso nell'ordine gesuitico tra '500 e '600* (Brescia: Morcelliana, 2009).

<sup>18</sup> Cf. M. Catto, "Per una conquista dell'autorità religiosa. Alessandro Valignano tra 'buone maniere' e accomodamento gesuitico," in A. Valignano, *Il Cerimoniale per i missionari del Giappone*, ed. J.F. Schulte, nuova edizione anastatica (Rome: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, Roma, 2011), pp. V–XXVI.



as the practice of celibacy "but not of chastity."<sup>19</sup> In his confutation of Buddhism, Ricci tried not only to dismantle its doctrine (of reincarnation, vegetarianism, rules against killing animals etc.<sup>20</sup>), but also to create an image of a doctrine meant for the "common and ignorant" people, invented by Pythagoras<sup>21</sup> and diffused in India after having been plagiarized by Buddhists with new conjectures or, according to a later author, born from a "bizarre adventure,"<sup>22</sup> the result of an "assemblage monstrueux de toutes sortes d'erreurs,"<sup>23</sup> from superstition to metempsychosis, from idolatry to atheism.

The denigration and dismantlement also benefited the 18th century culture that indulged in the literary genre of the *lettres chinoises*, in order to highlight with wit and sarcasm the misprisions caused by humanity's diverse mentalities on a planetary scale, through the gimmick of a foreigner's gaze, looking at European customs without understanding them.<sup>24</sup> This literary form not only showed the contradictions and rows among the religious orders, the different representations of the world, but also more generally allowed for reading Europe through the lens the missionaries used for the other, whether barbarian, gentile or pagan. In the hands of the Enlightenment thinkers, the "conquest" of the Confucians that

<sup>19</sup> M. Ricci, *Della entrata della Compagnia di Gesù e Christianità nella Cina*, ed. M. Del Gatto (Macerata: Quodlibet, 2000), p. 101. The Society of Jesus' literature frequently mentions private practices that include abusing women, eating meat and lavish food.

<sup>20</sup> Particularly in chapter V of his catechism *Refutation des fautes enseignées rigueur dans la réincarnation nelle sei direzioni e la scelta della vita e spiegazione del vero significato del digiuno*: cf. M. Ricci, *Il vero significato del "Signore del Cielo"* (Città del Vaticano: Urbaniana University Press, 2006), pp. 187–212.

<sup>21</sup> Some Jesuits arriving from Japan had many doubts about the idea that Buddhism was a fake Indian doctrine which had reached China after incorporating some aspects of Greek philosophy: cf. App, *The Cult of Emptiness*, in part, pp. 91–110.

<sup>22</sup> So wrote Pierre-Sylvain Régis in a review of *Confucius Sinarum philosophus in the Journal des Savants* of May 1688, in V. Pinot, *La Chine et la formation de l'esprit philosophique en France* (1640–1740) (Genève: Slatkine Reprints, 1971), pp. 375–78.

<sup>23</sup> In *Nouveaux mémoires sur l'état présent de la Chine* (1696) by L. D. Le Comte (Paris: chez Jean Anisson, 1696), II, pp. 152–53. For context see App, *The Birth of Orientalism*, p. 126.

<sup>24</sup> On the comparisons in the *lettres chinoises* cf. M. Fatica, "Le missioni in Cina in alcuni periodici della Repubblica delle lettere del primo Seicento," in F. D'Arelli, A. Tamburello (eds.), *La missione cattolica in Cina tra i secoli XVII–XVIII. Emiliano Paladini (1713–1794). Congregato della Sacra Famiglia di Gesù Cristo, procuratore della Sacra Congregazione di Propaganda Fide a Macao. Atti del Convegno (Lauria, 8–9 ottobre 1993)* (Naples: Istituto Universitario Orientale, 1995), pp. 77–106; R. Minuti, *Orientalismo e idee di tolleranza nella cultura francese del primo '700* (Florence: Olshchki, 2006), pp. 257–330, and G. Abbati, "Quando a commencent leur sagesse? Il 'Journal des Savants' e il dibattito su antichità e civiltà della Cina," in *La formazione storica dell'identità. Studi di storia della tolleranza nell'età moderna offerti a Antonio Rotondo* (Florence: Olshchki, 2001), III, pp. 975–1007.

the Jesuits had decided to carry on also with publications that denigrated Buddhism and other religions, stressing their incongruities and imperfections, disclosing their priests' falsehoods and knavery, became a weapon and they used it to question religion, any religion, seen as false, by observing the analogies in the behaviour of the bonzes and of their European counterparts, for some authors the Jesuits particularly.

For Voltaire, Buddhist monks became a symbol of fanaticism that, in his own words, was "the effect of a false conscience, which makes religion subservient to the caprices of the imagination, and the excesses of the passions."<sup>25</sup> Their fanaticism "is subdivided in infinitum; they are supposed to expel devils and to work miracles; and they fell their absolutions to the people."<sup>26</sup> The government of bonzes, Voltaire wrote quoting Confucius, was the reason why the common people could not have a "raisonnable" religion: China's three sects were tolerated "as a coarse sort of food proper for their stomachs; while the magistrates and the learned, who are in every respect separated from the common people, feed on a purer substance."<sup>27</sup> "The common people, guided by the bonzes," he wrote in the *Dictionnaire philosophique*, "are equally knavish with our own." This was not limited to the scientific backwardness of the Chinese empire, but included the "ridiculous prejudices" that still prevailed among the populace whether in Europe or in China, although the latter's obscurantism persisted with the belief in "talismans and judicial astrology, as we long did ourselves."<sup>28</sup>

In his *Lettres chinoises* (1751), the marquis D'Argens went further. The imaginary dialogue between two Chinese travellers around the world includes an analysis of *Histoire de l'admirable dom Inigo de Guipuscoa, Chevalier de la Vierge et fondateur de la Monarchie de Inighistes*, the first edition of which was published in 1736 in La Haie (but La Haye), as written by Hercule Rasiel de Selva (apparently the pseudonym of the Dutch bookseller Charles Le Vier and Pierre Quesnel). The book has a distinctly anti-Jesuit flavour. It follows closely the black legend about the Society of Jesus and its heresy, while telling Loyola's life and of the Society of Jesus in various countries. It is a mocking story, peopled with paladins and knights (so the Jesuits are called), and from the cradle to the grave the founder seems a Don Quixote: he meets the Devil, has visions and accom-

<sup>25</sup> Voltaire, *Dictionnaire philosophique*, eds. D. Felice, R. Campi (Milan: Bompiani, 2013), p. 1441 (*fanatismo*).

<sup>26</sup> Voltaire, *Essai sur les mœurs*, chapter 2, *De la religion de la Chine*. Que le gouvernement n'est point athée; que le christianisme n'y a point été prêché au septième siècle. De quelques sectes établies dans le pays.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> Voltaire, *Dictionnaire philosophique*, p. 903 (*Sulla Cina*).

plishes supernatural feats. D'Argens summarized the main features of the work, adding that the story was permeated with supernatural elements, like the "fables" the bonzes told about the god Fo.

If the Jesuit order's founder had much in common with the Buddhist monks, for D'Argens so had the French and Chinese literati who fought against their lies: the former wanted to oppose the Jesuits' cunning and impostures just like the latter wanted to oppose the bonzes'.<sup>19</sup> Another leitmotif of Enlightenment culture was emerging: the French *philosophes* paired with the Confucian mandarins against superstition. From this point of view, according to Voltaire China anticipated Europe when it banned the Jesuit order from its kingdom.<sup>20</sup>

### *Europe for China: a System Ordered and Governed by the Pope*

The shared intents of Buddhism and Christianity and the fact that in China they had the same nature of foreign and missionary religions<sup>21</sup> drove the Society of Jesus to denigrate India as well, in an attempt to defile first of all the "cultural" image of the country from which the doctrine came. On this subject Ricci's catechism—but there are instances everywhere—explained at length the customs of the West in order to prove, as we shall see, "that our people in Europe are not ignorant people, who do not understand things or do not treat them with reason,"<sup>22</sup> and with the same energy to break the bond the Jesuits had built between Europe and the kingdom of *Tienctucuo*, *Tianzhu*, i.e. India.<sup>23</sup> In the Jesuits' writings

<sup>19</sup> J.-B. de Boyer, marquis d'Argens, *Lettres chinoises*, éd. J. Marx (Paris: Honoré d'Estienne, 2009), I, letter 12, pp. 258–59: "Quelques écrivains soutiennent que le seul nom législateur des Juifs; d'autres prétendent qu'il n'y avait que le Dieu suprême et Marie sa mère, souveraine des cieux, qui eussent le bonheur de voir l'ignace. Tu sens, cher Ya-Ché Chan, que de pareilles fables sont bien aussi absurdes que celles que les bonzes racontent de leur dieu Fo; aussi les lettrés français voulurent-ils imiter des lettrés de la Chine, et s'opposer aux fourberies et aux impostures des jésuites, de même que ces derniers avaient fortement combattu celles des bonzes. L'université de Paris condamna les expressions et les contes fabuleux de ces écrivains comme des impiétés également fausses et détestables."

<sup>20</sup> For instance Voltaire, *Dictionnaire philosophique*, p. 899 (*Sulla Cina*).  
<sup>21</sup> J. Ching, "Il buddhismo: una religione straniera in Cina. Prospettive cinesi," in H. Küng, J. Ching, *Cristianesimo e religione cinese* (Milan: Mondadori, 1989), pp. 211–14 (German edition 1988).

<sup>22</sup> Ricci, *Della entrata della Compagnia di Giesù e Christianità nella Cina*, V, chapter II, pp. 455–56 (*Del credito che si guadagna per i nostri e per la christianità con le opere stampate del padre Matteo Ricci*).

<sup>23</sup> Between 1583 and 1588, as Matteo Ricci states in *Conversazioni catechetiche del 1584* (a kind of private pro-memoria) and Michele Ruggieri in his *Catechismo*, Jesuits had described themselves as "religious who served God, Lord of Heaven, and had come from the farthest

India then became "a small place" of no reputation, "not considered a nation of the highest level," "lacking the arts of civilization, [...] rules of moral conduct to bequeath to posterity," its existence is totally ignored in "the history of many countries." How could such a country, Ricci asked, "adequately serve as a model for the whole world?"<sup>24</sup>

Buddhism's loss of authoritativeness in China also belonged to a more properly cultural vision that went along with a positive image of Europe. Supported by the scientific knowledge they were spreading in China, the Jesuits were in a privileged position to assert that Europe shone in the letters, the arts and civil behaviour. In *Della Entrata della Compagnia di Giesù e della Christianità nella Cina* as well as in his letters, Ricci said he had often entertained the Chinese about Europe and its customs and traditions, inspiring their wonder.

We shall dwell here on the description of a peaceful Europe, living in a nearly perfect harmony that had scant relation with historical facts, but was well suited to China and to her ruling class in a period of reflection and internal criticism of its society.

In *The true meaning of the Lord of Heaven*, a catechism written among other purposes to reach the Chinese where the missionaries had not yet arrived,<sup>25</sup> the last chapter (*Un sommario degli usi occidentali, una discussione sul significato e la storia del celibato tra il clero e una spiegazione della ragione per la quale il Signore del Cielo è nato in Occidente*) not only defines the Western customs that were difficult to understand in a Chinese context—particularly the incompatibility of the practice of celibacy with filial piety—but also a magnification of European "civilization" compared to the Indian civilization so reviled in those same pages. Ricci's Europe is united, shows no trace of heterodoxy, is ruled with order and harmony and enjoys a collective peace tank to the Pope's leadership.

Ricci concedes that European customs are diverse, though he does not explain why, and claims a unity of doctrine (but not of its use) obtained through the figure of the Pope: "his only task is to promulgate teachings on behalf of the Lord of Heaven and to educate the world. Heterodoxy and false teachings cannot gain a foothold in those countries. The Pope

teaches of the West," from *Tienctucuo*, *Tianzhu*, i.e. India. Taking advantage of the great regard *Tienctucuo* enjoyed among the ancient Chinese as the Kingdom of the Holy and pure doctrine, the Jesuits had equalized *Tienctucuo*, India and Europe. From 1595, perhaps as they needed to distinguish themselves clearly from Buddhism and its bonzes, the equivalence was cancelled by the introduction of the toponym *Japenolopa*, *Ouluoba* (歐羅巴), the phonetics for "Europa." See the nice and efficient footnote 5 in P. D'Elia, *Fonti Ricciane*, I, pp. 180–83.

<sup>24</sup> Ricci, *Il vero significato del "Signore del Cielo"*, p. 189.

<sup>25</sup> Ricci, *Della entrata della Compagnia di Giesù e Christianità nella Cina*, V, chapter II, p. 455.



exercises a triple authority, but since he cannot marry, he has no heirs to his estate; instead, a good man is elected to succeed him."<sup>36</sup>

The Pope's exalted meritocracy (at least, his spiritual meritocracy) is made possible by the absence of a family and children (even though Ricci must have been aware of the well-known nepotism of the papal courts) and also represents a perfect hierarchical structure in which the Pope relies on "men of talent and virtue who teach and rule on his behalf a large number of countries"<sup>37</sup> while the European nations' rulers "pay great attention to the need of safekeeping an orthodox transmission of the Way."<sup>38</sup> Again, this is inaccurate as Ricci knew of the Reformation fracture, that the state and condition of the Church were criticized, that there were wars of religions, unceasing religious dissent and a very active Inquisition.

In *Della Entrata*, a report for Europeans of his adventure in China,<sup>39</sup> Ricci states that his conversations with the Chinese provided many opportunities to underline and describe the good customs "nelle terre de' christiani,"<sup>40</sup> which included a complex network of hospitals and pawnshops, alms giving and other forms of charity, monogamy but also, once again, the existence of "prelates who stay in towns, villages, who watch and endeavour to preserve Christian Religion without any blend of error," as well as the practice of "reviewing all the books that are printed and let them divulge nothing useless or harmful for good morals." The Society of Jesus must have been particularly proud of the Congregation of the Index of forbidden books because a few years later Giulio Aleni discussed it at length in *Geografia dei paesi stranieri alla Cina* (1623), reporting that "in the libraries there are tens of thousands of books none of which contains a single word that can harm the human soul or corrupt the people's customs."<sup>41</sup>

Those lengthy tales of Western customs, Ricci wrote, were to prepare the Chinese for a papal embassy, so that they would know which honours to bestow only on the Pope, named not "by heredity, but elected by holy, earned, prudent, old men."<sup>42</sup> In a letter of May 9, 1605, he wrote that

<sup>36</sup> Ricci, *Il vero significato del "Signore del Cielo"*, pp. 287-88.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 288.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 287.

<sup>39</sup> For some information about its writing cf. G. Ricciardolo, *Oriente e Occidente negli*

*atti di Matteo Ricci* (Naples: Chirico, 2003), pp. 153 ff.

<sup>40</sup> Ricci, *Della entrata della Compagnia di Gesù e Christianità nella Cina*, IV, chapter

p. 329.

<sup>41</sup> G. Aleni, *Geografia dei paesi stranieri alla Cina*, trans., intr. and notes P. De Tola (rescua: Fondazione Civiltà Bresciana-Centro Giulio Aleni, 2009), p. 90.

<sup>42</sup> Ricci, *Della entrata della Compagnia di Gesù e Christianità nella Cina*, IV, chapter

p. 330.

of our matters, many books being printed already talk"<sup>43</sup> and among the stories told many times, there was the Christian princes' obedience to the Pope: "and already this whole Kingdom [of the Pope], which is due to virtue, than about the good government [of the Pope], which is due to virtue, letters and prudence and to a person who lives in celibacy and has no children, and after many years of exercise in various offices; and who does not wish do see this Holy Father with the College of Cardinals who, as they know, are the electors and advisors of the Pope."<sup>44</sup>

The Pope—and his doctrine—was thus represented as the keeper of the European order, endowed with a charismatic power that competed with the Chinese emperor's, and that the Chinese mentality could not conceive. An anti-Christian Chinese text of the 17th century made precisely this point, thereby confirming that Ricci's stories of Western customs had indeed found readers. According to that text, Christians "accept two rulers in their kingdoms. One is the political rule and one the doctrinal ruler. The first has in his hands the government of a single kingdom, the second's power encompasses all the kingdoms of the world. The first inherits it from his forebears and bequeaths it to his descendants. However, he depends on the doctrinal ruler whom he owes gifts and tributes. As chosen," Ricci's teaching are well understood, but the conclusion shows an awareness of the disorders that could arise: "This means having two suns in the sky, two masters of the same kingdom [...] How daring are the catastrophic Barbarians who would disturb China's (political and moral) unity by introducing the barbarian custom of two rulers."<sup>45</sup>

The *philosophes* agreed with the anti-Christian Chinese on this point, observing that the Chinese emperor had papal powers: he had legal functions and the religious ones of a pontiff in ancient Rome or in the Roman Church. "The emperor [of China] has been high pontiff for time immemorial," Voltaire wrote in his *Essai*, since he was the priest celebrating the sacrifices and the "first philosopher," his edicts were both "instructions, and lessons of morality."<sup>46</sup>

<sup>43</sup> Ricci, *Lettere*, to Fabio de Fabbii, Beijing, May 9, 1605, p. 384.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 385.

<sup>45</sup> J. Gernet, *China et christianisme*, p. 147.

<sup>46</sup> Voltaire, *Essai sur les mœurs*, chapter 1, *De la Chine, de son antiquité, de ses forces, de ses lois, de ses usages, et de ses sciences*. On the Chinese emperor as Pontiff cf. also M. Weber, "Confucianesimo e Taoismo," in *Id., Sociologia delle religioni*, ed. C. Sebastiani (Torino: UTET, 1976), pp. 408-13.

# The Chinese Mandarin's Dignity: a Model for the Philosophes

An image of China which was to have a long and complex impact on European culture was its great respect for the mandarins—officials of a state governed and ruled by ethical and moral values. The officials' (*literati*) first admiring description goes back to the writings of Matteo Ricci who not only described in detail their dress and manners, their *ratio studiorum* and hierarchical pyramid, but suggested that the *literati* were the element that, apart from religion, mostly distinguished China from Europe.

Although China was very rich and powerful, it was devoid of any interest in conquering other kingdoms. A real contradiction for the European way of thinking since, Ricci writes, "our nations [...] often lose their own reign when they want to lord over others."<sup>47</sup> According to Ricci, it would have been nearly impossible to find in China a single "literate and serious person" who would accept to rule a kingdom conquered by abuse and violence. Chinese officials' social domination was transmuted into the *literati*'s dominion of the soldiers.<sup>48</sup> This aspect obviously could not please all missionaries working in China. For instance Domingo de Navarette, the Dominican opponent of Chinese rites, stressed that the Chinese government's main flaw was the absence of a privileged place for the military in the social pyramid.<sup>49</sup>

Ricci instead praised the Confucian mandarins, their nobility and loyalty to the State, more than those of the soldiers "attending to war." He pointed to the origin of such nobility either in scholarship (because "let us ennobled their minds more") or in the antiquity of usages because the Chinese had always bestowed "more reputation to the letters than to the arms, not being driven to conquer other kingdoms, as our peoples more to the West always were."<sup>50</sup> According to the Jesuit, the State and the government were fully in the hands of men of letters; there is no one who does not shiver or bends down in a doctor or mandarin of letters' presence. In China apparently, no one bore weapons, neither the mandarins nor the captains of war: "Among us it seems fine to see an armed man, among them it seems wrong and they fear the sight of such a horrible thing; and so among them there are none of our factions and tumults, no retaliations

for insults with weapons and dead victims, but he who flees and does not want to wound someone else is held in higher esteem."<sup>51</sup>

In Ricci's writings, the mandarins' role was nearly a counterweight for the role of their emperor: China was an indeed monarchy,<sup>52</sup> but in some aspects closer to a republic. While the emperor had to rule, decide and approve, it was also true that his freedom to award offices and gifts was guided by his mandarins' proposals<sup>53</sup> and when gifts and presents were his will, they were paid for from his private purse and certainly not by the public.<sup>54</sup>

The reason for the mandarins' praise is easily stated. Matteo Ricci summarized in one sentence the missionaries' entire strategy:

...because in this kingdom, letters are much valued and consequently so are the sciences and opinions based on reason; and therefore here there is no other esteemed nobility but of the letters and of those who are in them eminent. And this is why it seems easy to convince the kingdom's principals of the tenets of our sacred faith confirmed by so much evidence of reasons, and once the most serious people among them agree with us, it will be easy to convert all the rest.<sup>55</sup>

The presence of a philosophers' ruling class, attracted to the arts, science and "reason," and their social role, made them the ideal recipients of his work of evangelization. The description was startling for those who lived in Europe (in the age of religious wars), where the highest honours were reserved for army captains – and for the saints of the Roman Catholic Church, of course. It was revived in the early systematic descriptions of China, from the *Historia de las cosas más notables, ritos y costumbres del gran reyno de la China* (1585) of the Augustinian Juan González de

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 54.

<sup>48</sup> On Ricci's political description of China for a European audience, see M. Cartier, "Aux origines de la politique des Lumières. La Chine vue par Matteo Ricci," in *Actes du colloque international de sinologie* (Chantilly, 1977). *Les rapports entre la Chine et l'Europe au temps des Lumières* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1980), pp. 39–50.

<sup>49</sup> Ricci, *Della entrata della Compagnia di Gesù e Christianità nella Cina*, I, chapter VI, p. 42.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 43: "Ed è cosa certa, nella quale ho fatto diligentia per saperla bene, che non potrebbe il Re dare ad uno, a chi egli volesse bene, un presente di danari o altra cosa, né larghi in favore di qualche offitio, o aumentargli il grado, se qualche magistrato non glielo propone, il quale non si metterà di nessun modo a far questo, senza qualche costume che vi fosse o lege per farlo. Questo non si intende che il Re non dia presente quando vuole agli eunuchi del suo Palazzo e parenti che stanno dentro, et ad alcuni Magistrati grandi che entrano la dentro nel suo Palazzo, come fa molte volte, per aver questo costume e come lege antiqua; et è come ciascheduno dare quello di sua propria casa e non beneficio publico."

<sup>51</sup> Ricci, *Lettere*, letter to Francesco Paolo, Beijing, February 15, 1609, p. 517.

<sup>47</sup> Ricci, *Della entrata della Compagnia di Gesù e Christianità nella Cina*, I, chapter VI, on the government, p. 51.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, I, chapter VI, p. 51; chapter IX, p. 86.

<sup>49</sup> Cited in D. Lach, E.J. Van Kley, *Asia in the making of Europe* (Chicago, London: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), III, 4, p. 1708.

<sup>50</sup> Ricci, *Della entrata della Compagnia di Gesù e Christianità nella Cina*, I, chapter VI, p. 52.

Mendoza to Alvaro de Smedo's *Relatione della grande monarchia della China* (Rome, 1643), becoming a source of reflections across the whole history of European political thought. Even Giovanni Botero, who had devoted much thought and observations to China, was struck by the fact that the only nobility recognized in China was born "of letters." For the author of *Ragion di Stato*, China could be considered civil and civilized precisely because of its non-expansionist policy, an example of the superiority of the State which aims at conservation and not at the enlargement of its borders.<sup>16</sup> But when he had to evaluate the role of the letters, he did not recommend their practice to the captains and the men of war.

The Confucian mandarins described by Matteo Ricci alternate between the figures of officials and of philosophers. And the latter, not at ways distinct, between the ancient and modern Confucians. But in the European tradition they became, in aggregate, the *Philosophi*. When translating Ricci's text in Latin in *De Christiana expeditione apud Sinas*, the Belgian Jesuit Nicolas Trigault not only concealed the long stories of intrigues, injustices and abuses, but he also evened out the terminology: the Confucian *literati* became the *Philosophi* or more seldom the *Senatus Philosophicus*.<sup>17</sup> The contrivance (not the only one) was used by Trigault to make China more similar and understandable to Europe: it was a means to confuse mandarins with China's ancient philosophers, as such detaching the philosophical, moral and ethical knowledge on which the government's activity was founded, in the same manner used with the Gentiles of ancient Greece and Plato's republic.<sup>18</sup> For the Europeans China became the land of knowledge: "only knowledge which elsewhere has so little value, in China is all," the Jesuit Daniello Bartoli wrote.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Botero had written about conservation being superior to "aggrandire" the State, and called it the first "endeavour of singular value and nearly superhuman" in *Della Ragione di Stato* where China becomes an example on how to assign public offices, but also on how to treat prisoners of war and for the habit of banning the Emperor's parents: F. Chaboud "Giovanni Botero," in Id., *Scritti sul Rinascimento* (Turin: Einaudi, 1967), pp. 269-418 (first edition 1934) and M. Catto, "La Cina nelle Relazioni universali di Giovanni Botero. Un' religione, civiltà e ragione," in M. Catto, G. Signorotto (eds.), *Milano, l'Ambrosiana e la conoscenza dei Nuovi mondi (secoli XVII-XVIII)* (Rome: Bulzoni, 2015), pp. 307-31.

<sup>17</sup> On this point see L. Fezzi, "Osservazioni sul De Christiana Expeditione apud Sinas suscitata ab Societate Iesu di Nicolas Trigault," *Rivista di storia e letteratura religiosa* (1999), pp. 541-566, further developed in J. Gernet, "Della Entrata della Compagnia di Gesù in Christianità nella Cina di Matteo Ricci (1609) et les remanements de sa traduction latine (1615)," *Comptes-rendus des séances de l'Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres* (1974) (2003), pp. 61-84.

<sup>18</sup> Edelstein, *The Enlightenment. A Genealogy*, pp. 77-78.

<sup>19</sup> D. Bartoli, *Scritti*, ed. E. Raimondi (Turin: Einaudi, 1977), p. 290 (from *Della geografia trasportata al morale*).

In Matteo Ricci's description, mandarins were set to guarantee the peaceful coexistence of China's three religions: Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism could coexist peacefully also thanks to the deep indifference (Ricci had called it atheism,<sup>65</sup> and the *Confucius Sinarum philosophus* political atheism<sup>66</sup>) of his officials for whom religions were a tool of government. In *Letteres chinoises*, an imagined dialogue between two Chinese travelling around the world, the Marquis D'Argens argued that the great diversity of religions existing in Europe was suitably concealed in China because had the Chinese—who "held religious Wars in abhorrence"—known about it, they would have immediately expelled the missionaries at the mere thought that their teachings could one day endanger the life of the State.<sup>67</sup>

Therefore the pacifist image of a well governed and ordered China was also supported by its alleged religious indifference, by its atheism, in contrast with what was happening in the West (about China's alleged atheism, the more cautious Voltaire observed that the reproach had long been addressed to those who thought differently).<sup>68</sup> But religious indifference was well suited to the figure of philosophers who "have dared to overturn the sacred boundaries established by religion, and have broken the shackles by which faith bound their reason [...]. Reason is to the philosopher what grace is to the Christian. Grace determines the action of the Christian; reason determines that of the philosopher."<sup>69</sup>

The figure of the Chinese intellectual (a mandarin who has studied the texts of the Confucian canon, selected through stringent competition

<sup>65</sup> Ricci, *Della entrata della Compagnia di Gesù e Christianità nella Cina*, I, chapter X, pp. 91, 106.

<sup>66</sup> *Confucius Sinarum Philosophus* (1687). *The First Translation of the Confucian Classics*, ed. Th. Meynard S.J. (dir.) (Rome: Institutum Historicum Societatis Iesu, 2011), p. 167.

<sup>67</sup> De Boyer, *Letteres chinoises*, I, letter 8, p. 227: "Tu seras peut-être étonné que dans les lieux européens que t'ont prêtés les missionnaires, et dans les conversations que tu as eues avec eux, tu n'aies jamais été instruit de cette différence si considérable qui se trouve entre les savants français; je vais t'en apprendre les raisons. Tu sais qu'on hait mortellement les persécutions à la Chine, et qu'on y abhorre les guerres de religion; on n'y souffrirait plus les missionnaires, si l'on était instruit que les opinions qu'ils enseignent, puissent un jour nuire à l'État."

<sup>68</sup> Voltaire, *Essai sur les mœurs*, chapter 2, *De la religion de la Chine*: "The reproach of atheism, which we in this part of the world are so apt to bestow upon every body that is not of the same way of thinking as ourselves, has been lavished on the Chinese."

<sup>69</sup> C.C. Du Marsais, "Philosopher," in *The Encyclopedia of Diderot & d'Alembert Collaborative Translation Project*, trans. D. Goodman (Ann Arbor: Michigan Publishing, University of Michigan Library, 2002), [hdl.handle.net/1027/spo.did222.0000.001](http://hdl.handle.net/1027/spo.did222.0000.001) (10 Jan. 2009). Trans. of "Philosophie," *Encyclopédie ou Dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers*, vol. 12, Paris, 1765.



tems, and is a repository of an ethical-moral virtue totally subservient to the government and society) was a cross between a philosopher, a legislator and a state official.

The "Jesuitical" description of this man of government made it possible to interpret the Chinese rites as political and civil ceremonies, the remnants of the "good works" practiced by the ancient Chinese for "the love of country, the common good and the people's usefulness."<sup>65</sup> For quite a while, this aspect fascinated the Enlightenment thinkers. In the *Esprit lois*, Montesquieu, who certainly did not always admire the Chinese, showed his appreciation of its legislation with views that were echoed by Du Halde's *Description de la Chine*. The French *philosophe* wrote that "China's legislators [...] fused religion, laws, customs and manners: all of this was morality, all of this was virtue. The precepts concerning these four points were what are called the rites," thus praising the essentially practical nature of its religions, philosophies and laws,<sup>66</sup> together with the necessity of a civil religion.

Although the mandarins' image was not always positive and many are the stories about their cunning and knavery,<sup>67</sup> in a Europe of State Church censorship the Chinese official-intellectual's figure was abundantly used by the Enlightenment thinkers (and by the various Enlightenments) to claim tolerance, freedom of opinion, and also the recognition of the *philosophe's* figure (in a broad sense, i.e. as a large class indicated by Jesuits in the libertines and the philosophers who fed on this polemic constant opposition) and thought.

The Confucian mandarins' glory was contrasted with the persecution of censorship suffered by the *philosophes*, accused of being the public enemies of religion, society and the State. The *philosophes* were particu-

larly attracted by the idea that Confucius' China was a meritocracy, not a land ruled by aristocrats and autocrats but where philosophical merit and experience were trusted criteria for choosing public administrators. An image particularly useful for those who wanted to assert the man of letters' dignity, his public role as well as that of philosophy. As the long "philosopher" entry of the *Encyclopédie* said: "Man is not a monster who must live only in the abyss of the sea or into the depths of a forest: the very necessities of life make commerce with others necessary to him; and in whatever state he may find himself, his needs and well-being draw him to live in society. Thus reason compels him to know, to study, and to work to acquire sociable qualities."<sup>68</sup>

A diverse group of men, as were the *philosophes* — perhaps defined as such more by their enemies than by themselves — began to use the image of the Confucian mandarins to support the possibility of developing another form of political and, mostly, cultural life. Voltaire, a supporter of the Jesuitical myth of China, in his *Lettres philosophiques* claimed that letters were superior to arms: "That man claims our respect who commands over the minds of the rest of the world by the force of truth, not those who enslave their fellow-creatures: he who is acquainted with the universe, not they who deface it."<sup>69</sup> According to the marquis D'Argens, again in the imagined dialogue between the two Chinese travellers of his *Lettres chinoises*, the problem in Europe was the neglect of morals (while in China's political life they were paramount) and such neglect was caused by the fact that morals had been appropriated by theologians. In his charge against revealed religion, he argued that the Chinese had no natural superiority but in their practice of virtue,<sup>70</sup> a virtue that even if pursued self-interestedly (to obtain an office) led by its nature to the practice of tolerance. In D'Argens's book, the fictitious dialogues are a device to assert the total autonomy of philosophy, to disconnect it from theology and religion. For him, Europe (particularly France, and excluding Great Britain and Holland) had become brutish, devoid of any freedom of thought, while for millennia China maintained its "grandeur or its glory" because the Chinese "have always thought freely and because the Chinese have been allowed to make use of the only Talent which distinguishes Man from beast."<sup>71</sup>

<sup>65</sup> Ricci, *Della entrata della Compagnia di Gesù e Christianità nella Cina*, I, capitolo 3, 90.

<sup>66</sup> See for instance Montesquieu, *Lo spirito delle leggi*, ed. S. Corta (Turin: Einaudi, 1982), III, XIV, p. 389; III, XIX, p. 503. Cf. J. Pereira, *Montesquieu et la Chine* (Paris: Larmandin, 2008).

<sup>67</sup> For instance Daniello Bartoli (*La Cina*, in *Scritti*, p. 132): "E percióché la Cina è, com'è, l'imperio de' pretendenti, non ve n'essendo altro simile al mondo dove ogni no, e di qualunque, avvegna che abbitissima condizione, abbia inviolabil diritto a poter far oltre agli altri e, se vel portano i meriti del sapere, salir fino a quelle eminentissime virtù oltre alle quali non v'è di più sublime altro che la corona reale, non può di meno che a cosa non sia pieno d'emulazione, d'invidia, di rancori [...]" But about the Jesuitical interpretation of mandarins see P.-E. Will, "Le mandarinat entre admiration et détestation," Ricci à Magalhães à Du Halde, in *Rencontres et méditations entre la Chine, l'Occident et Amériques. Missionnaires, chamanes et intermédiaires culturels*, sous la direction de S. F. Laugrand, N. Peng (Québec: Presses de l'université Laval, 2013), pp. 153-87.

<sup>68</sup> Du Marsais, "Philosopher," in *The Encyclopedia of Diderot & d'Alembert Collaborative Translation Project*.

<sup>69</sup> Voltaire, *Lettres philosophiques*, letter XII, Sur le chancelier Bacon.

<sup>70</sup> De Boyer, *Lettres chinoises*, I, letter 31, pp. 304-5.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, I, letter 30, pp. 366-7.

The philosopher pictured in the controversial and continually rewritten entry of the *Encyclopédie*, was not only preceded by a torch, but was also particularly "zealous for all that which is called *honor* and *probity*. For him civil society is, as it were, a divinity on earth; he flatters it, he honors it by his probity, by an exact attention to his duties, and by a sincere desire not to be a useless or embarrassing member of it. Feelings of probity enter as much into the mechanical constitution of the *philosophe* as the enlightenment of the mind."<sup>71</sup>

China had never stopped to honour, meditate and think about the virtues, and to respect its ancient philosopher Confucius; in France instead, whose philosophers—or some of them at least—"had nearly equalled Confucius," they were mocked or ignored, deprived of recognition only because they had a different religion or they were prevented to speak out by censorship and punishments.<sup>72</sup>

Voltaire too agreed with this interpretation, stressing that Confucianism had no room for superstitions, "absurd legends," "dogmas insulting both to reason and nature": the Chinese "are contented to adore one God in communion with the sages of the world, while Europe is divided between Thomas and Bonaventure, between Calvin and Luther, between Jansenius and Molina."<sup>73</sup> Or in the marquis D'Argens's summary "the Europeans seem to be as uncertain in the affairs of religion as the Indians."<sup>74</sup> The Enlightenment thinkers' use of the figure of the Confucian intellectual (and of ancient philosophy) led the Society of Jesus itself to change the definition of "intellectual" in order to draw a neat distinction between those who could be recognized a true men of culture on one hand and the Enlightenment's *philosophes* and *lettrés* on the other. The distinction was made particularly clear in *Mémoires concernant l'histoire, les sciences, les arts, les mœurs, les usages des Chinois*, 17 volumes edited by Jean-Joseph-Marie Amiot (1718-1793) and Pierre-Martial Cibot (1727-1780), published between 1776 and 1840. Throughout this large collection, the term *philosophe* is never used for the Confucians. Chinese intellectuals are called *savants* and less often *beaux-esprits* or *hommes de génie*, but never

*philosophes* or *lettrés*.<sup>76</sup> It was necessary to distinguish those independently-minded Europeans from the philosophers of the past, renowned for their wisdom and respect for the political and social order; but it was above all necessary to sever, at least from a linguistic point of view, any possible link between the Confucian philosophers and the *philosophes*.

China entered fully into the *querelle* between the Ancients and the Moderns which was the narrative backbone of the Enlightenment. Its past and in part its present was brandished as a model for the European future or at least a part of it. Progress and the pursuit of happiness were possible through the practice of virtue, and as to morality Chinese had no rivals, but the path did not appear linear in all fields. The entry on Chinese philosophy of the *Encyclopédie* concluded: "The most amazing thing is that even though the Chinese are more ancient, we have surpassed them by far."<sup>77</sup>

<sup>71</sup> Du Marsais, "Philosopher," in *The Encyclopedia of Diderot & d'Alembert Collaborative Translation Project*.

<sup>72</sup> De Boyer, *Lettres chinoises*, I, letter 46, pp. 472-3.

<sup>73</sup> Voltaire, *Dizionario filosofico*, p. 907 (*Sulla Cina*).

<sup>74</sup> De Boyer, *Lettres chinoises*, I, letter 8, pp. 225-6: "Il y a à Paris trois sectes principales, qu'on peut comparer à ces trois chinoises, et dont le parallèle me paraît fort juste. Tu connaîtras par celui que je vais faire, si cette prétendue union entre les chrétiens dont les missionnaires parlent si souvent, est telle qu'ils disent. Je t'assure d'avance que les Européens paraissent aussi peu certains dans les matières de religion que les Indiens."

<sup>76</sup> P. Bianchini, "Un mondo al plurale: i gesuiti e la società francese tra la fine del Settecento e i primi decenni dell'Ottocento," in *Morte e resurrezione di un Ordine religioso. Le strategie culturali ed educative della Compagnia di Gesù durante la soppressione (1773-1814)* (Milan: Vita e Pensiero, 2006), pp. 53-88, 78.

<sup>77</sup> "Chinois (philosophie de)," in *Encyclopédie ou Dictionnaire raisonné des sciences...*, III, Paris, Briasson-David-Le Breton-Durand, s.d., III, p. 348, gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k50331/f349.image