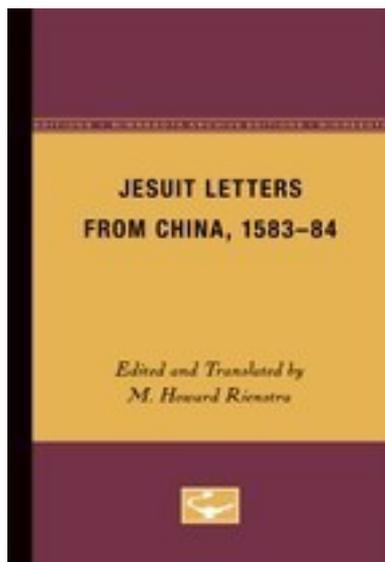


# Jesuit letters from China, 1583-84



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著者:M. Howard Rienstra, editor

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The first eight letters from Jesuit missionaries on mainland China were written in 1583-84 and published in Europe in 1586. M Howard Rienstra's translated marks their first appearance in English. The letters chronicle the patient efforts of Michele Ruggieri and the famed Matteo Ricci to learn Chinese, to gain acceptance in Chinese society, and to explain Christianity to a highly sophisticated non-Christian culture. They also described the China of the late Ming dynasty (1368-1644), a country whose immense size and population had excited the imagination of Europeans for generations.

It was Francis Xavier's dream that this mighty kingdom and civilization be opened to the Christian gospel. His dream was at least tentatively fulfilled when Michele Ruggieri was granted residence first in Canton and then in Chao-ch'ing in 1583. Accompanied first by Francesco Pasio and later by Matteo Ricci, Ruggieri initiated the Christian mission in China. Their letters, published initially as an appendix to a volume of Jesuit

letters from Japan, were abbreviated and censored by their European editor. In edited form, the letters appeared in 1586 in one French, one German, and three Italian editions.

The China of Ruggieri and Matteo Ricci had remained, however, both suspicious of, and closed to, foreigners - a fact which the original letters do not gloss over. Rienstra was carefully compared the abbreviated and censored versions of these letters in their originals, still preserved in the Jesuit archives in Rome. The letters in general indicate how tenuous the Jesuits' situation was and note candidly that only two baptisms had been performed on the mainland during their stay. These results stand in marked contrast to the reports from Japan of tens of thousands of baptisms and to the reports from Portuguese Macao, where Chinese converts were compelled to wear European cloths and to take European names.

Such Europeanization was thought to be inappropriate to a successful Christian mission in China. Though criticized at the time by their colleagues in Macao, Ruggieri, Pasio, and Ricci committed themselves to a program of cultural respect and accommodation. They learned both written and spoken Chinese, ingratiated themselves with the ruling classes by exhibiting their learning and courtesy, and appeared to have become Chinese themselves. When Matteo Ricci became Ruggieri's successor and his name became synonymous with the success of the Jesuit mission in China, it was to these methods that its success was owed. Unfortunately, the prevailing European ethnocentrism could not accept the concept of cultural accommodation. The editors thus censored the letters to convey the impression of a triumphant and culturally superior Christian mission in China.

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M. Howard Rienstra was a professor of history at Calvin College and Director of the H. Henry Meeter Center for Calvin Studies.

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