Matteo Ricci and "the parable of the friendly king". An evangelisation mission to China: a diplomatic bridge and the spread of Mediterranean world's classical history and knowledge

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Matteo Ricci's Jesuit mission: from The Way of Friendship (*youdao* 友道) to the The Way of Faith

Matteo Ricci is one of the most important figures in international history. He dedicated his entire life to his mission of evangelisation, creating a truly peculiar way to establish a dialogue between West and East and, in particular, between Italy and China[1].

During his mission in China, he focused on direct human contact with Chinese people, learning their language and culture, to tune in to that peculiar sensitivity inherited from Chinese ancient culture and the Chinese way of thinking[2]. It is evident from his works and especially from the *Jiaoyou lun* 交友論 (*Treatise on Friendship*) that, thanks to his mission, he established a milestone in the process of inculturation of the Gospel. In the Jesuit approach, aimed at conversion, in fact, an attempt was made to combine cultural and moral elements that could establish a starting point for the creation of a common vision with Chinese people of the values underlying the faith. The presentation of European science and the Mediterranean world in the circles of the cultural elite aroused considerable interest to the point that the Jesuits began to consider the opportunity to use the diffusion of science as a useful tool to get closer to the Chinese to convert them[3].

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1 Among the innumerable studies on Father Matteo Ricci, I will limit myself to cite *New Perspectives in the Studies on Matteo Ricci*, ed. F. Mignini, Macerata 2019; R. Sani, *The Society of Jesus and the Missionary Experience of Father Matteo Ricci in China between Reformatio Ecclesiae and Inculturalisation of the Gospel*, in "History of Education & Children's Literature" 5, 2 (2010), pp. 61-92; G. Criveller, *Matteo Ricci. Missione e ragione. Una biografia intellettuale*, Milano 2010; Idem, *The Missionary Method of Matteo Ricci*, in "Tripod" 158 (2010), pp. 13-54.

2 A. Nicolás S.I., *Matteo Ricci: l'amicizia come stile missionario*, in "As" 03 (2010), p.172.

3 Han Qi, (translated by L.M. Paternicò), *La legittimazione della Trasmissione della Scienza Occidentale: la proposta di riforma del Calendario di Xu Guangqi,* in "Sulla Via del Catai" 11 (2014), p. 33.

In his conversion strategy, Ricci applied the so-called "top-down" approach: the missionary aimed to spread the Christian faith in the highest cultural circles of the Empire close to the emperor to, eventually, approach the great popular masses[4]. Moreover, thanks to the appreciation he enjoyed at the imperial Ming court, he led a work of apostolate and evangelisation based on the criterion of respect for local cultural values and on the penetration of Christianity into the intellectual Chinese class. In fact, he introduced himself into the Chinese cultural circles, first by presenting himself as a Buddhist monk and then as a Confucian scholar[5]. His natural disposition to cultural adaptation forged the so-called "accommodation" he practiced in China, developed in a sort of Confucian-Christian synthesis[6].

Jiaoyou lun and its inspirations

Research on the *Jiaoyou lun* has highlighted how the composition of Ricci's text was influenced by Cicero's *Laelius de amicitia* (106-43 BCE), a literary dialogue composed in 44 BCE.

Cicero's innovative approach consists in the adoption of the Hellenic ideal of philanthropy; he tries to broaden the social basis of friendship beyond the inner circle of the *nobilitas*. Friendship becomes an expression of a system of social and philosophical values: exactly like Matteo Ricci's *Jiaoyou lun* intended to impress the literati circles in Ming China interlacing friendship in the political and social context[7].

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[4] R. Scartezzini, *Gesuiti in Cina nel solco di Matteo Ricci*, in "Sulla Via del Catai" 6 (2011), pp. 19-23.

[5] In his letter of 29 August addressed to Father Duarte de Sande, Ricci writes: «[...]*avevamo pensato di lasciare i nomi di bonzi che tra i cinesi sono tenuti in bassa considerazione e assumere quello di letterati [...]*». See *Matteo Ricci. Lettere* (1580-1609), ed. F. D'Arelli, Macerata 2001, p. 217; «[...] *passando quindi per bonzi siamo stati trattati come gente molto bassa e insignificante, né avremmo avuto modo di venire a contatto con i mandarini e altre persone che contano; mentre adesso invece con questo cambio, abbiamo cominciato ad avere la strada spianata verso tutti e siamo trattati con molta cortesia*» (*Matteo Ricci…*, 2001, p. 264).

[6] On the accommodation, see D.M. Figueira, *The Jesuits in Asia, Ricci's Accommodation Policy, and Comparing Cultures*, in *New Perspective*…, 2019 pp. 49-57; Liu Yu, *The Intricacies of Accomodation: The Proselytizing Strategy of Matteo Ricci*, in "Journal of World History" 19, 4 (2008), pp. 465-487; D.E. Mungello, *Curious Land: Jesuit Accommodation and the Origins of Sinology*, Wiesbaden 1985. Already in Saint Ignatius of Loyola, the need to adapt to different contexts in the work of evangelisation appears: see G. Mongini, *Maschere dell'identità: alle origini della Compagnia di Gesù*, Roma 2016, p. 193. See also A.C. Hosne, *Friendship among Literati. Matteo Ricci SJ (1552–1610) in Late Ming China*, in "The Journal of Transcultural Studies" 5, 1 (2014), pp. 190-214.

[7] *Laelius de amicitia* VI, 20: «*Est enim amicitia nihil aliud nisi omnium divinarum humanarumque rerum cum benevolentia et caritate consensio*». See *Cicerone. L'amicizia*, ed. E. Narducci, Milano 2025, p. 98. Some maxims in Ricci's *Jiaoyou lun* were also inspired by Plato for the dialogical form; his philosophical speculations on friendship must have been influenced also by Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*. For a comparative vision of Aristotle and Mencius views on human nature, see M. Sim, *Self-Determination and the Metaphysics of Human Nature in Aristotle and Mencius*, in *Dao Companion to the Philosophy of Mencius*, eds. Yang Xiao-Kim-chong Chong., Cham 2023, pp. 635-649.

Studies on Cicero's *De Amicitia* have often referred to a sort of coexistence of dialogic inspirations from both Stoic and Aristotelian sources[8]. Cicero praises the virtues of a friendship that goes beyond the clientelistic patterns of Roman political society, a more noble friendship in its most Greek sense, free from utilitarianism[9]. In a lecture given at the Association of "Sino-Hellenic Studies" Lisa Raphals remarked that Ricci's mediation was fundamental in the transmission of Western pagan *sapientia*, reconciling it with the Christian faith and its context, in the same way as a neo-Stoic.

Moreover, friendship is a fundamental Christian principle introduced by Matteo Ricci in the Confucian social system. As the Gospel of John reports about what Jesus said: «I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you» (*John* 15:15).

As a disseminator of Mediterranean *sapientia*, Ricci was aware of the success of Cicero's work in the West and in Christian schools[10]. In his evangelization strategy he drew inspiration from the work to use it as a tool, not in contrast with the Church, to spread values, virtues and the cultivation of Ignatian friendship.

Shaping minds and souls in China with the gift of faith: friendship to get closer to the *xin* 心

Thanks to his sensitive disposition that allowed him to get closer to the *xin* 心 (that in Chinese language could be translated as heart/mind) of many Confucian scholars, Matteo Ricci carried on his Jesuit mission focusing on shaping souls and minds of people with the gift of faith.

Ricci demonstrated that one of the most significant methods for conversion was the cultivation of friendship, as Ignatian friendship, and thus proximity to other people was strictly fundamental. It has often been remarked that Ricci created a cultural bridge between East and West, necessary to prepare the ground for friendship; he presented himself to the Chinese world as a literatus from the Farthest West sharing his Western cultural and scientific knowledge with the Chinese literati to become their friend. He spread the Gospel in China with the so-called "adaptation" method «maintaining the

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[8] It has often been hypothesized that Cicero's work was inspired by the Greek Stoic Panaetius (2nd century BCE), author of *On duties* (Περί τοῦ καθήκοντος), and by the lost treatise *On friendship* by Theophrastus (c. 371-c. 287 BCE). However, Cicero does not refer to the sources of his work: see E. Narducci, *Le ambiguità della* Amicitia, in *Cicerone…*, 2005, pp.11-12.

[9] As for the return to a more noble type of friendship to which Ricci seems to refer, that is, disinterested friendship, far from political interests and pertaining to the private sphere (but which for this reason is above political questions and therefore reconciles them), a more ethical friendship and faithful to the virtues expressed in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, its apex can be seen in the closing of *Laelius.* Cicero praises this type of friendship by expressing a certain nostalgia: it is similar to that which Scipio showed towards Laelius; in it there was agreement on political questions, advice on private affairs and a rest filled with delightful diversions (XXVII, 103: *Cicerone…*, 2025, pp. 180-183).

[10] F. De Marchi, *Genesi del Trattato*, in *Trattato sull'Amicizia*, Trento 2008, p. 93.

balance between doctrinal clarity and prudent pastoral action»[11], and spread the Gospel through direct (cathechism) and indirect (Christian doctrine) preaching[12]. Since the beginning of his preaching in China the Jesuit offered explicit references to the sacred Scriptures, to the tradition of the Church, to the lives of the saints and to the faith and customs of Christians[13]. As Ricci explains in his *Tianzhu shiyi* 天主實義: «la ragione dell'uomo è un'impronta del Signore del Cielo»[14]. In my opinion, it can be considered that precisely by virtue of human natural predisposition towards the divine, or rather, manifestation of the divine in every man – created in the image and likeness of God – the Jesuit appealed to the universal values of benevolence and human goodness also exposed by the classical Confucian texts[15].

In this regard, in Ricci's works, it is possible to discover real-life experiences and even statements heard from people he met during his mission in China appearing in the form of quotations. Reading his *Letters* I have had the opportunity to identify certain events or sentences that profoundly influenced the Jesuit. It is from his experience that one can discern certain divine insights and reflections on human nature that have transformed into broader visions of the path of evangelization, particularly on the feasibility of accommodation and interculturality[16]. In fact, in chapter VI of his *Catechism* it is said: «[...] Il paradiso non è altro che il luogo glorioso dove si incontrano gli uomini, del passato e del presente, che hanno praticato la benevolenza e la rettitudine; l'inferno non è altro che il sudicio luogo dove vagano coloro che hanno agito male, nel passato e nel presente. Chi è salito in paradiso ha fissato il suo cuore nel bene, è immutabile; chi è sceso all'inferno ha ormai rivolto il suo cuore al male, è invariabile[...]»[17]. This statement can be found in a letter he wrote in Nanchang on August 29, 1595, addressed to Father Duarte de Sande. In the letter, the Jesuit recounts how he had been able to avail himself of the friendship of Chinese scholars to secure guarantees that would allow him

[11] Benedetto XVI, *Preghiere e stima per la Chiesa e per il nobile popolo cinese*, in "L'Osservatore Romano", 30 maggio 2010, 8 (Cit. in A. Olmi OP, *La teologia del catechismo ricciano*, in *Matteo Ricci. Catechismo*, Bologna 2013, p. 53).

[12] G. Criveller, *Matteo Ricci…*, 2010, p. 74.

[13] A. Olmi, *La teologia…*, 2013, p. 83.

[14] 人物之理皆天主跡也: *Matteo Ricci. Catechismo*, Bologna 2013, pp. 242-243. On the *Tianzhu shiyi* di Ricci, see Liu Yu, *Adapting Catholicism to Confucianism: Matteo Ricci's Tianzhu Shiyi*, in "The European Legacy", 19, 1 (2013), pp. 43–59.

[15] The Confucian Mencius (Mengzi 孟子, c. 371-c. 289 BCE) developed speculations on the concept of *ren* (humanity or benevolence). The concept of *ren* is strictly connected in Mencius' conception of innate goodness of human nature (*xing* 性). See Tu Weiming, *Humanity and Self-Cultivation*, Boston 1998; Xu Bo, *Mengzi's Theory of Human Nature and Its Role in the Confucian Tradition*, in *Dao Companion…*, 2023, pp. 79-98.

[16] The term inculturation appears in the Exhortation *Cathechesi Tradendae* by John Paul II (1979, paragraph 53): see https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_16101979_catechesi-tradendae.html (accessed 5 October 2025).

[17] "[...]天堂非他，乃古今仁义之人所聚光明之字；地狱亦非他，乃古今罪恶之人所流秽污之域。升天堂者，已安其心乎善，不能易也；其落地狱者，已定其心乎恶，不克改也 [...]。*Matteo Ricci. Catechismo…*, 2013, p. 372.

to travel through China[18]. Pasquale D'Elia emphasises how the friendship of Chinese scholars elevated Ricci's status, allowing him to remain in China and spread the divine message[19]. Among them, Zhang Benqing 章本清 stands out. In 1592, he was elected to lead the White Deer Grotto Academy (Bailudong shuyuan 白鹿洞書院). He had found common ground in classical Chinese culture with the western concepts of heaven and hell for the good and the bad[20]. Some sentences in chapter VI of *Catechism*, in fact, constitute a reformulation of a quotation from a Song-era text by Yu Wenbao 俞文豹 (fl. 1240), the *Chuijian lu* 吹劍錄, that Zhang Benqing had reported to Ricci, after a dispute in the presence of his disciples on the concepts of heaven and hell, that, according to Ricci, were denied by Chinese people: «Se c'è il paradiso, l'uomo buono là andrà, se c'è l'inferno, l'uomo malvagio là discenderà. Cerchiamo di essere uomini buoni e non malvagi»[21]. In my opinion, it is from this type of comparative experience and reflection between ancient cultures that the strategy of evangelization took on unique paths, first and foremost on the shared values of friendship.

Friendship in Ancient Mediterranean World

Thanks to *Jiaoyou Lun*, Ricci spread Mediterranean world's classical knowledge in China as a device to shape a background to the Christian religion. His cultural heritage allowed him to create an effective narrative of the West that supported the imaginative scenario of the values and virtues of some western historical figures such as the Macedonian king Alexander the Great. These maxims represented a significant supporting tool bringing the Christian faith into the Chinese literati circles.

Ricci emphasised that also in the ancient Mediterranean world friendship was a fundamental value: the concept of *philia* in ancient Greek culture is a virtue that in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* takes on as a potential interpersonal value reflected in the

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18 *Matteo Ricci…*, 2001, pp. 197-267.

19 *Matteo Ricci. Fonti ricciane. Vol. I: Storia dell'introduzione del Cristianesimo in Cina*, ed. P. D'Elia, Roma 1942, p. 371.

20 *Ibidem*, footnote 5.

21 *Matteo Ricci. Fonti…*, 1942, p. 257. The original passage of *Chuijian lu* reflects the critic opinion of the Neo-Confucian Yu Wenbao about the Buddhist funerary rituals: «Lord Wen said: The world believes that Buddhists must perform the minor memorial's rituals on the seventh day, the forty-ninth day, the hundredth day, and the major memorial's rituals after death. Through merit, sins are extinguished and one ascends to heaven; otherwise, one descends into hell to suffer the torments of dismemberment, pounding, burning, and grinding. When a person dies, the body decays and the spirit disperses. Even if subjected to dismemberment, pounding, burning, and grinding, how could one possibly know? Li Zhou of the Tang Dynasty said: Heaven exists for the virtuous, hell for the wicked. Today, praying to the Buddha after the death of one's own parents is to treat one's own parents as petty criminals and sinners» (溫公曰。世俗信浮屠。以初死七日至七七日百日小祥。大祥必作道場。功德。則滅罪生天。否則入地獄。受刲舂燒磨之苦。夫死。則形朽腐而神飄散。雖刲舂燒磨又安得知。唐李舟曰天堂無。則已有。則賢人生。地獄無。則已有。則小人入。今以父母死而禱佛。是以其親為小人。為罪人也。). Lord Wen is Sima Guang 司馬光 (1019-1086), famous historian and politician of the Bei Song dynasty. Li Zhou 李舟 was the author in 8th century of a revision of the rhyme dictionary *Qieyun* 切韻.

broader social scale. It is an altruistic wish for the good of the other and it represents the relation among *philoi*, which requires that each *philos* has the corresponding wish for the other[22]: «For without friends no one would choose to live[…]; even rich men and those in possession of office and of dominating power are thought to need friends most of all; […]; those in the prime of life it stimulates to noble actions – "two going together" – for with friends men are more able both to think and to act»[23].

Friendship as social value formed a cultural bridge with China; Ricci created a parallelism with the world of Chinese feelings and institutions in the scale of social relations.

In fact, in the context of Confucian society, friendship (*you* 友) was one of the fundamental virtues, because it was one of the five bonds of Chinese society and one of the "five cardinal human relationships" (*wulun* 五倫): between husband and wife; among parents; between elder and younger brothers; between ruler and subject; and among friends[24]. Some passages of the *Mengzi* 孟子 are a *locus classicus* on the subject: «Friendship should not depend on one's superior age, or status, or familiar relations. Friendship [with a man] is friendship with his virtue and does not allow relationships of dependance»[25].

In Chinese society, friendship was the only bond that was freely chosen and that was not dependent on hierarchy[26]. This typical Chinese virtue can be considered as an important agent employed by Ricci to develop a dialogue with Chinese people, because it had copious parallelisms with the classical Mediterranean culture; it was also a norm in civic coexistence among individuals in the ancient Greek world: Mediterranean peoples had already experienced multicultural dialogue thanks to the contacts that took place in the *Mesogeios Thalassa*; Ricci could convey this cultural background within the dialogue between West and East.

In this regard, it is worth mentioning a series of terms that could somehow show how it was possible from the Mediterranean cultural point of view to find a counterpart in the Confucian system. The first expression that can be found in ancient Greek society is the civic friendship, the *politiké philia*, πολιτικέ φιλία[27]. Starting from Aristotle's belief that man is a social animal, friendship is a fundamental factor because

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[22] See D. Konstan, *Aristotle on Love and Friendship*, in "Schole" 2, 2 (2008), pp. 207-212; for some antecedents of Aristotle's position, D. El Murr, *Friendship in Early Greek Ethics*, in *Early Greek Ethics*, ed. D. Wolfsdorf, Oxford 2020, pp. 566-92. For a general view of friendship in Greek civilisation, see *Friendship in Ancient Greek Thought and Literature: Essays in Honour of Chris Carey and Michael J. Edwards*, eds. A. Efstathiou-J. Filonik- C. Kremmydas-E. Volonaki, Leiden 2023.

[23] Aristot. *Nic. Eth.* VIII, 1-2; English translation in The *Nicomachean Ethics of Aristotle*, ed. D. Ross, Oxford 1925, p. 192. «Two going together» is a reference to Hom. *Il.* X, 224.

[24] A. Lambert, *Friendship in the Confucian Tradition*, in *The Routledge Handbook of Philosophy of Friendship*, ed. D. Jeske, New York-London 2022, pp. 11-23.

[25] 不挾長。不挾貴。不挾兄弟而友。友也者。友其德也。不可以有挾也。 *Mengzi*, in *Shisanjing zhushu*, eds. Ruan Yuan et alii, Beijing 1980, vol. 2, p. 2742c

[26] On the crucial role of male friendship already in sixteenth-century China, *Jinshi jiazu yu zhengzhi bijiao lishi lunwen ji*, ed. Zhongyang yanjiu yuan Jindai shi yanjiu suo, Taipei 1992, pp. 67-96; M.W. Huang, *Male Friendship and Jiangxue (Philosophical Debates) in Sixteenth-Century China*, in "Nan Nü" 9 (2007), pp. 146-178.

[27] P.W. Ludwig, *Rediscovering Political Friendship: Aristotle's Theory and Modern Identity, Community, and Equality*, Cambridge 2020.

man never acts and lives alone. Relationships with others are inherent in the human being's orientation. Through friendship, man fulfills his nature, and his personality; he practices virtue and achieves happiness[28].

With reference to the relationship with well-deserving foreigners, the decrees of *proxenia* προξενία can constitute an example of civic friendship with strangers.

Euergetes Εὐεργέτης was one of the honours and privileges that, as the numerous Athenian honorary decrees testify, were bestowed to foreigners who, individually or in groups, had shown themselves to be particularly well-deserving or standing out for their benevolence in the relations they had established with the city in a private capacity[29]. A well-known occurrence in Greek historical sources of the two titles refers to a Macedonian ancestor of Alexander the Great: Alexander I is defined as the *proxenos* and *euergetes* of Athens (Hdt. VIII, 136, 9)[30].

In conclusion, we can consider Matteo Ricci as a Western foreign *euergetes* in a Confucian style: he was considered a Ru 儒, a Confucian scholar coming from the great and distant West, *Taixi daru* 泰西大儒, or *Taixi Rushi* 泰西儒士. His profound knowledge of Chinese language allowed him to translate Western concepts and values inherited from classical Mediterranean culture. Ricci can also be considered a forerunner of classical Chinese and Greco-Latin modern comparative studies[31]. In fact, his philological knowledge of Chinese allowed him to speculate on the concept of *you* 友, "friendship", restoring the ancient logographic form *you* 叒, which presents two identical elements to represent the *alter idem*[32].

Matteo Ricci's portrait of Alexander: "the parable of the friendly king"

In previous publications, I have already addressed the reception of the legends of Alexander the Great in the Middle East and especially in the Far East (China and Mongolia)[33]. However, in this contribution, I will not focus on the historical figure of Alex-

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28 See C. Mazzarelli, *Introduzione*, in *Aristotele. Etica nicomachea*, Firenze 2017, p. 31.

29 «The daily duties expected of a *proxenos* also include acting as an intermediary between the two communities of reference»: E. Culasso Gastaldi, *Le prossenie ateniesi del IV secolo a.C. Gli onorati asiatici*, Alessandria 2004. See also the seminal study of A. Wilhelm, *Proxenie und Euergesie*, in "Attische Urkunden V" ("SBWien" 1942[E], 220, 5), pp. 11-86 = Akademieschriften zur griechischen Inschriftenkunde, I, Leipzig 1974, pp. 627-702.

30 On the role of Alexander I in diplomatic mediation between Greece and Persia, see F. Fariello, *La Macedonia e la Persia tra Alessandro I e Filippo II: realtà storica e propaganda*, in *La lettera di Filippo agli Ateniesi*, Alessandria 2021, pp. 44-50.

31 See for example M. Sim, *Remastering Morals with Aristotle and Confucius*, Cambridge 2009, pp. 194-212.

32 As stressed in aphorism n. 18 of *Jiaoyou lun*: «The [friend] word 叒 is simply a double word 又. The other is another me, and I another other» (叒也，双又耳。彼又我，我又彼。). All the translations from *Jiaoyou lun* are mine. See also the English translation of the text in *Matteo Ricci. On Friendship: One Hundred Maxims for a Chinese Prince*, ed. T. Billings, New York 2009; and the Italian translation in *Matteo Ricci. Dell'amicizia*, ed. F. Mignini, Macerata 2010.

33 F. Fariello, *Alessandro Magno nelle fonti orientali. Dal Medio Oriente alla Cina*, in "Historika" 11 (2021), pp. 115-158; F. Fariello-L. Gallo, *Alessandro Magno eroe dei due mondi. La storia, le fonti, l'archeologia*

ander the Great but rather emphasize his character in Matteo Ricci's *De Amicitia*, where his name appears for the first time in a transliteration derived from the Mediterranean world: Lishan Wang 歷山王, King Lishan. The Jesuit's choice can be interpreted as a reference to the etymological meaning of Μακεδονία[34].

The literary character of the Macedonian ruler stretched to territories that his military conquest did not reach. Since the first dissemination of Alexander's *Romance* – from the late Hellenistic period to the Middle Ages and on – we have evidence of the constant activity of adaptation of the narrative plots as a consequence of the process of translation, which has also involved the introduction of new episodes of Alexander's *Romance*.

Southern Song era (1127-1279) Chinese sources on Alexander can be seen as a product of indirect knowledge of Mediterranean culture[35].

Ricci decided to include some anecdotes about Alexander that appear in the second version of his work (3rd edition, 1601), when he added 25 maxims to the 75 he wrote in 1595[36]. It is possible that these concrete experiences influenced Ricci to write a true "parable of the friendly king": Alexander became a virtuous ruler, an ancient model, important paradigm within the five fundamental relationships of Confucian society, not only in the relationship between friends but also between ruler and subject. It has often been argued that *De Amicizia* constituted a sort of model for regulating relationships among individuals in a spirit of friendly respect. Relevant coherence was seen between the religious faith Ricci proclaimed and his sincere of virtuous behavior, to the point that the work received great appreciation and was copied by the Chinese themselves[37].

In his *Proemio* to the treatise, the Jesuit himself, in the context of the admiration expressed for the Chinese ecumene since antiquity and for the virtues of its kings and the "buoni costumi lasciati dagli antichi imperatori", shows his implicit intention to find a parallel in his "farther West" with other ancient Westerners whose virtues he transmitted. By establishing a sense of equivalence in the principle of friendship, he aims to illustrate, through *exempla*, that it is possible to establish a mutual interpenetration between individuals who are "close" in the strictest sense, where the Western friend and the Chinese friend can truly transcend stereotypes of otherness.

Friends no longer recognise each other as an *alter ego* but as an *alter idem*: not only in the sense of a faithful Ciceronian inspiration from a literary point of view, but in the highest sense of the divine mutual love of "love your neighbor as yourself" (*Levitic*, 19,

e il mito, Milano 2023; F. Fariello, *Alexander the Great: Homo Mirabilis within Chinese and Mongolian Sources. The Transmission of Legendary Narratives from West to East*, in *La ricezione dell'ultimo Alessandro.* Mirabilia *e violenza al di qua e al di là dell'Indo*, eds. F. Piccioni-D. Poddighe-T. Pontillo, Berlin-Boston 2024, pp. 273-293.

[34] Regarding the traditional connection between Mount Lishan and the legendary and virtuous rulers Yao and Shun, see Fu Yaliang, *Matteo Ricci's depictions of Alexander the Great in Late Ming China*, in "Renaissance Studies" 38, 2 (2024), pp. 227-244.

[35] F. Fariello, *Alessandro Magno…*, 2021; F. Fariello-L. Gallo, *Alessandro Magno…*, 2023, pp. 149-180; F. Fariello, *Alexander the Great…*, 2024; Fu Yaliang, *Matteo Ricci's depictions…*, 2024.

[36] See F. De Marchi, *Genesi…*, 2008, pp. 94-95. See also *Matteo Ricci…*, 2010; Fu Yaliang, *Matteo Ricci's depictions…*, 2024.

[37] F. De Marchi, *Genesi…*, 2008, pp. 94-95.

18; *Mark* 12, 28-34); Ricci's cultural transposition of friendship is a sort of expression of: «you must love one another» (*John* 13, 34)[38].

But Matteo Ricci's innovation acted through the interpenetration of the "friend", elevated on the universal level, in a condition of human and cultural reciprocity, even in the hypothetical encounter among the ancient Western and the Eastern rulers. It might not be entirely far-fetched to hypothesise that perhaps he imbued himself with Alexander's human condition: a stranger who reached the Eastern gates. In Ricci's Chinese rendering of the name Lishan Wang, the Macedonian ruler was associated with the Mountain: we can interpret it as a reference to the mountainous region of Macedonia or to the mountains he passed through[39] or as a comparison of the Macedonian Mountains with the mountain range of the Li *shan* – Mount Li –, linked to the ancient Chinese rulers Yao and Shun.

In Ricci's *Preface*, we find a reference to his home located "outside the mountain": «Io, Matteo, dall'ultimo [Occidente] navigai il mare et entrai nella Cina alla fama del grande regno e delle nobili virtù del loro Re e dei buoni costumi lasciati dagli antichi Imperatori. Scielsi la mia habitatione fuori del Monte e stetti in essa molti inverni»[40].

Sources in Comparison

Here are the three passages of the work that explicitly refer to the sovereign mentioning his name, followed by classical sources that can be considered as the main inspiration for the text[41].

> *De amicitia*, 91:
> «King Lishan 歷山 (ancient universal ruler of the great Western Territories) found himself in a critical situation, and he personally entered a battle formation. At that moment, an advisor stopped him and said, "Since the situation is so dangerous, how can Your Majesty keep himself safe?". The king said, "You set me free from betraying friends; as for open enemies, I am capable of protecting myself from them»[42].

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38 On the role of love in *Jiaoyou lun* see also M.K.S. Cabural, *The Role of Love in Ethical Development Beyond Family and Friendship in Confucianism: Insights from Matteo Ricci's On Friendship*, in "Religions" 2025, 16, 5, 554.

39 "Go/travel through" is one of the common translations of character *li*.

40 *Matteo Ricci…*, 2010, p. 45.

41 Aphorism no. 94, which does not explicitly mention Alexander, is not considered here, even though some scholars believe it to be thematically linked to aphorism no. 93. See Fu Yaliang, *Matteo Ricci's depictions…*, 2024, p. 239. For the classical sources of *Jiaoyou lun* aphorisms, see *Matteo Ricci…*, 2010, pp. 147-185; C. Harbsmeier, *Matteo Ricci on Friendship: Some Latin Sources for his Chinese Book*, in *Reading the Signs: Philology, History, Prognostication: Festschrift for Michael Lackner*, eds. I. Amelung-J. Kurtz, München 2018, pp. 175–212.

42 歷山王。大西域古總王。值事急。躬入大陣。時有弼臣止之曰。事險若斯。陛下安以免身乎。王曰。汝免我於詐友。且顯仇也。自乃能防之。 Cfr. the English translation in *Matteo Ricci. On Friendship…*, 2009, p. 129.

> Curt. *Hist. Alex.* IX, 6.6-7:
> «But Craterus [...] replied: "Do you imagine that we are more disturbed by the coming of the enemy [...] than through care for your safety, on which you seem to set little store?"».
>
> Curt. *Hist. Alex.* IX, 6.24:
> «Do you only keep me safe from intestine treachery and domestic plots; I meet unterrified the hazard of war and of Mars»[43].

A similar reference can be found in *Laelius de Amicitia* (VII, 64 - VIII, 66): it is difficult to find true friendship, especially for those who are engaged in public office and public life. One is advised to be wary of untrustworthy and unstable people, with whom one must be cautious and not form friendship[44]. Mutual trust between parties is fundamental to the Roman concept of *fides*, which encompasses relationships between two parties, including friendships.

But perhaps even more intriguing is to imagine how the fear of false friends probably haunted Alexander the Great during the last years of his life. His obsession and fear of conspiracies are reflected in certain traditions – such as the Alexander's *Romance* – which claimed that the king's death had been caused by poisoning.

Linking the theme of betrayal of false friends to the Passion of Christ in this context is obviously natural, but even in this case, one might perhaps glimpse a hint of Ricci's autobiography, a real-life experience that probably inspired him to introduce the theme of betrayal in order to emphasise (in aphorism 91) the real danger of false friends. A similar experience is mentioned in the letter addressed to Father Duarte de Sande (29 August 1595): Mr Zhu, a very important mandarin with whom Ricci had sought contact, suddenly changed his friendly behaviour after he discovered that Ricci had travelled from Guangzhou to Nanjing, a city closed to foreigners. Although Ricci reiterated that he had the necessary credentials for his staying, Zhu became furious: first he sent him away from his home and then arranged for him to be checked so that he would be sent away from Nanjing, preventing him from travelling anywhere other than Guangzhou, where he had come from. Ricci wrote about this in his letter:

> «Ecco, Padre mio, come finì la grande amicizia che avevamo con questo mandarino; da qui possiamo farci un'idea di quanta poca fiducia possiamo avere sulla parola e sulle promesse dei cinesi […]. Dopo quanto accaduto, rimasi non solo triste perché vedevo che si accorciavano le mie speranze di rimanere qui, ma anche molto confuso con tutti quelli che qui erano miei amici e conoscenti, ai quali a piena bocca avevo detto quanto questo mandarino era mio amico [...]»[45].

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[43] *Quintus Curtius. History of Alexander, Volume II: Books 6-10*, english translation ed. J.C. Rolfe, Cambridge 1946.

[44] *Cicerone…*, 2025, pp. 144-149.

[45] *Matteo Ricci…*, 2001, pp. 240-241. On the psychological aspects of Ricci's experience, see Lo Yuet Keung, *My Second Self: Matteo Ricci's Friendship in China*, in "Monumenta Serica" 54 (2006), pp. 221–41.

De amicitia 92:
«King Li Shan was hoping to make friends. There was a talented scholar named Shan Nuo, so (the king) at first sent messengers to offer him tens of thousands of gold coins. But Shan Nuo said angrily: "Since the king bestowed me with this, what kind of man does he think I am?" The messenger replied: "No, the king knows that the Master is extremely honest; this is only an offering to him!" He replied: "If such is the case, then he must permit me to be honest!", and made a gesture of rejection to him. Historians judge this by saying that the king wanted to buy the scholar's friendship, but the scholar did not sell it»[46].

Plut. *Phoc.* XVIII, 1-3:
«The story about the money, indeed, is generally admitted, namely, that Alexander sent him a present of a hundred talents. When this was brought to Athens, Phocion asked the bearers why in the world, when there were so many Athenians, Alexander offered such a sum to him alone. They replied: 'Because Alexander judges that thou alone art a man of honour and worth.' 'In that case,' said Phocion, 'let him suffer me to be and be thought such always.' But when the messengers accompanied him to his home and saw there a great simplicity, – his wife kneading bread, while Phocion with his own hands drew water from the well and washed his feet, – they were indignant, and pressed the money upon him still more urgently, declaring it an intolerable thing that he, though a friend of the king, should live in such poverty. Phocion, accordingly, seeing a poor old man walking the street in a dirty cloak, asked them if they considered him inferior to this man. 'Heaven forbid!' they cried. 'And yet this man,' said Phocion, 'has less to live upon than I, and finds it sufficient. And, in a word,' said he, 'if I make no use of this great sum of money, it will do me no good to have it; or, if I use it, I shall bring myself, and the king as well, under the calumnies of the citizens.' So the treasure went back again from Athens, after it had showed the Greeks that the man who did not want so great a sum was richer than the man who offered it»[47].

The name Shan Nuo 善諾has been identified as a rendering of a nickname of the famous Athenian general and politician Phocion Φωκίων (402-318 BCE), "the good" (Φωκίων ὁ χρηστός: Plut. *Phoc.* X, 4). In this case the adjective *shan* 善 (good) is associated with *nuo* 諾, "promise", and the proposed translation could be: "good at keeping promises".

In Plutarch's narration, Phocion refuses a large amount of money that Alexander wished to donate to him. He is idealised as a great example of righteousness and poverty. Phocion is described as a φίλος τοῦ βασιλέως, as a loyal and precious friend of Alexander, who does not flatter the ruler, a friend and advisor who talks freely to Alexander without fear, but Plutarch's narrative is based on unreliable information[48].

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[46] 歷山王亦冀交友。賢士名為善諾。先使人奉之以數萬金。善諾怫而曰。王貺吾以茲。意吾何人耶。使者曰。否也。王知夫子為至廉。是奉之耳。曰。然則當容我為廉已矣。而麾之不受。史斷之曰。王者欲買士之友。而士者毋賣之。See also the English translation in *On friendship…*, 2009, p. 131.

[47] *Plutarch's Lives. Vol. VIII*, english translation by B. Perrin, London 1919, pp. 185-187.

[48] See C. Bearzot, *Focione* φίλος τοῦ βασιλέως. *Il tema dell'amicizia con Alessandro nella tradizione biografica focioniana*, in *Alessandro tra storia e mito*, ed. M. Sordi, Milano 1984, pp. 75-90.

De amicitia, 93
«At the time when King Li Shan had not yet obtained his universal position, there was no State Treasury; he generously donated all the wealth he obtained by distributing it among the people. There was the rich king of an enemy kingdom, whose only business was filling his own Treasury; he mocked him and said: "Where is your Treasure?". (Li Shan) replied: "It is in the hearts of my friends!"»[49].

Plut. *Alex.* XV, 2-3
«But although he set out with such meagre and narrow resources, he would not set foot upon his ship until he had enquired into the circumstances of his companions and allotted to one a farm, to another a village, and to another the revenue from some hamlet or harbour. And when at last nearly all of the crown property had been expended or allotted, Perdiccas said to him: "But for thyself, O king, what art thou leaving?" And when the king answered, "My hopes", "In these, then", said Perdiccas, "we also will share who make the expedition with thee". Then he declined the possessions which had been allotted to him, and some of the other friends of Alexander did likewise. But upon those who wanted and would accept his favours Alexander bestowed them readily, and most of what he possessed in Macedonia was used up in these distributions […] »[50].

In passage 93 from the *Jiaoyou lun*, Alexander stands out for his virtue: he is a generous and friendly king who offers all his riches to his friends. The *topos* of Alexander as a generous friend who gives all his riches became also very popular in the Italian Medieval literary tradition[51]. In this context Alexander was portrayed as a generous and virtuous knight, like Saint George: great in his values, mirroring the christian tradition (we can in fact find some examples in Giovanni Boccaccio's short stories and other works like the *Novellino* and *Conti di antichi Cavalieri*)[52].

Focusing on the popularity of Alexander's character in Plutarch's narrative tradition we can find an interesting coincidence, a parallelism during the same years of composition of the *De amicitia*. In Shakespeare's *Henry* V (1599), in the same way as Plutarch's *Parallel Lives*, the paradigm of Caesar/Alexander inspired the new parallelism between Henry V and Alexander. But even if Shakespeare glorifies Alexander's qualities and virtues of friendship, in the dialogue between the two captains, Gower and Fluellen, although he insists on comparing Henry to Alexander, he finally discredits him: in

[49] 歷山王未得總位時。無國庫。凡獲財。厚頒給與人也。有敵國王富盛。惟事務充庫。譏之曰。足下之庫在於何處。曰。在於友心也。 See also the English translation in *On friendship…*, 2009, p. 131.

[50] *Plutarch's…*, 1919, pp. 261-263.

[51] This quality of Alexander appears also in Ricci's *Jiren shipian* 畸人十篇 (Ten Chapters by a Strange Man), a dialogic collection composed between 1605 and 1607. See *Dieci Capitoli di un Uomo Strano*, ed. Wang Suna, Macerata 2010. For the diffusion of this motive, from Seneca *De beneficiis* to Dante's *Convivio* and beyond, see Fu Yaliang, *Matteo Ricci's depictions…*, 2024, pp. 242-243.

[52] F. Fariello-L. Gallo, *Alessandro Magno…*, 2023, pp. 186-187. See C. Frugoni, *La fortuna di Alessandro Magno dall'antichità al Medioevo*, Firenze 1978.

fact, the dialogue between the generals ends with the statement that Henry would have never killed a friend like Alexander did instead[53].

Conclusion

Today, a sculptural bronze group portraying Matteo Ricci and his friend disciple Xu Guangqi stands at Largo Li Madou in Macerata, reminding us of Matteo Ricci's Jesuit mission: a gift of faith, friendship and peace. *Jiaoyou lun* became particularly popular among Ming scholars: it has been pointed out that the work may have served as a stepping stone for Ricci to pave the way for his descendants, a diplomatic bridge between cultures but above all between men.

Isolated in distant China, when expressing his happiness at receiving, for example, Ludovico Maselli's letter (letter of 29 November 1580), he hinted at the melancholy that animated his spirit, fearing that his fathers and brothers at his college would forget him; tears moistened his eyes with emotion as he thought of them, so alive in his memory[54].

Jiaoyou lun is a work that has been extensively studied and analysed in terms of the sources that inspired it, its pedagogical techniques and evangelisation methods; but Ricci's importance and depth probably overshadow the fact that friendship, an important tool for conversion in China, also became a divine gift that Ricci longed for, allowing him to get closer to his neighbour. In the collection of letters, we often read of his sense of loneliness as the most human feeling that resurfaces in the souls, but especially in many missionaries who are constantly on pilgrimage, called to the mission of evangelisation[55]. The sadness he felt when he found himself alone in China, always waiting to be joined by his fellow missionaries, emerges from the letter in which he recounts the incident that took place on the Gan River, when his boat was swept away at the area designated as the "celestial column current" (*tianzhu tan* 天柱潭) or "eighteen currents" (*shiba tan* 十八灘). That day, his friend and acolyte João Barradas drowned and disappeared in the waters, and his body was never found. In a letter to Fr. Duarte de Sande (29 August 1595) Ricci wrote: «[...]caddi nella tristezza e nello sconforto, perché oltre ad essere ancora un ragazzo, tanto virtuoso [...], morì in modo tanto disgraziato e nel momento in cui avevo tanto bisogno di lui [...]»[56].

On 13 October 1596, Ricci wrote enthusiastically that the previous year «per esercitio feci in littra cina alcuni detti De Amicitia, scielti i migliori de' i nostri libri»[57]. In a letter dated 14 August 1599, he wrote joyfully: «Questa Amicitia mi ha dato più credito

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53 C. Frugoni, *La fortuna…*, 1978, pp. 193-194. See also J.A.K. Thomson, *Shakespeare and the Classics*, London 1952.

54 *Matteo Ricci…*, 2001, p. 19. For the cultural differences as motivating factors for cross-cultural exchanges between Jesuits and Confucians, see Xu Dongfeng, *Friendship and Hospitality. The Jesuit-Confucian Encounter in Late Ming China*, Albany, NY 2021.

55 G. Criveller, *La Malinconia Immaginativa di Matteo Ricci*, Milano 2016.

56 *Matteo Ricci…*, 2001, p. 209.

57 *Matteo Ricci…*, 2001, p. 337.

a me e alla nostra Europa di quanto abbiamo fatto; perché l'altre cose danno credito di cose meccaniche et artificiose di mano e di instromenti; ma questa dà insieme credito di lettere, ingegno e di virtude; e così è letta e ricevuta da tutti con grande applauso, e già la stampano in due luoghi»[58].

The message of friendship was well received, because it was in perfect harmony and consistency with Ricci's virtues, which were praised by the Chinese themselves. They increasingly appreciated him and felt great sympathy for him, thanks to numerous anecdotes about his life in China, including, most notably, the famous episode in which he refused to tell a lie because, as he was ill, he was advised to say that he was not at home to avoid people who came to visit him; but Ricci said that he could not lie, being a religious man, and that in general in the West it was not considered good manners to lie[59].

This episode became memorable because it demonstrated that the virtuous theories expounded by the Jesuit were perfectly consistent with his way of life. Probably, when Ricci referred to the composition of the treatise as an "exercise", he was referring to the moments when he filled his solitude by researching friendship among ancient men in classical Western texts; but in the end, his aspiration in the exercise of research was fulfilled with the gift of the work itself, which became a concrete tool that allowed him to find friendship among many people in that distant land. As emphasised in the *Jiaoyou lun*, «My friend is none other than myself, but is my other half, and therefore a second me: for this reason, I must look upon my friend as myself»[60].

[58] *Matteo Ricci…*, 2001, pp. 363-364.
[59] *Fonti Ricciane…*, 1942, p. 372.
[60] (吾友非他。即我之半。乃第二我也。故當視友如己焉 。). Cfr. the English translation in *On friendship…*, 2009, p. 91. Some Western correspondences with this passage can be found in Augustine, *Confessions* 4, 6, 2; Aristot. *Eth. Nich.* 9.4. For further considerations see C. Harbsmeier, *Matteo Ricci on Friendship…*, 2018, p. 176.

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