

Jesuits: The holy men who stayed

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On one occasion Ricci is believed to have given to the decadent Ming Emperor Wanli (1563-1620) three things: a portrait of the Virgin Mary, a tin musical instrument and a chime clock. "Wanli was so infatuated with the clock that when his mother, the empress dowager, asked to have a look, the emperor, fearing that he might have to surrender his newly gained fetish, had the clock's inbuilt mechanics removed before presenting it to the old lady," Li says. "Not surprisingly the empress dowager was wholly unimpressed and returned the clock to her son. I've also read that Ricci had previously tried to present the emperor with other stuff, through one of his eunuchs, of course. However, as shrewd as Ricci was, he failed to take into account the eunuch's greed."

Getting nothing in return, the angry eunuch is said to have managed to have Ricci thrown into prison, if only briefly, before taking everything for himself.

"If this anecdote is true, then it seems that the Western missionaries had a lot more to adapt to than they had imagined," Li says.

These attempts at gaining attention were followed by significant and often prolonged efforts, efforts aimed at "bringing down the arrogance of the Chinese and bringing them into God's fold," Li says.

When Emperor Chongzhen (1611-1644), the last emperor of the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644) peered into the infinity of the universe through a telescope in about 1641, with Schall von Bell at his side, the beleaguered man, whose vast empire was being eyed by powerful foes and who may have felt he needed heaven's help more than ever before, must have experienced moments of amazement and profound lamentation.

Seven decades later, when the French Jesuit missionaries including Pierre Jartoux and Guillaume Bonjour-Favre traveled all over what was then the Empire of Qing (1644-1911), working on the most comprehensive and accurate map ever produced of the Middle Kingdom, they may still have had their predecessors in mind.

"They were hard workers before they were 'shepherds,' going about their job, be it making calendars or surveying land, with a passion and dedication just as impressive as the skills they harbored," Li says.

"And the way they worked — performing astronomical observations to verify and determine the latitudes and longitudes of various locations — ushered in a new era of cartography in China."

However, the iconoclastic nature of their work, especially in areas that directly challenged the conventional Chinese view of the cosmos, made them targets for attack, often by court officials who felt that their own hold on the emperor's imagination — and on power — was being undermined by these latecomers.

The suspicion and antagonism, once dipped in the gall of court politics — could be fatal. Late in his life, the Qing court sentenced Schall von Bell to death. This was after the death of Emperor Shunzhi, father of Kangxi, who died at the young age of 23 and whose respect for von Bell's counsel was such that he called the old man "mafa", or grandpa.

The sentence was never carried out. An earthquake in Beijing sent an alarm to the powerful Empress Dowager Xiaozhuang, mother of Shunzhi and grandmother of Kangxi, who intervened on von Bell's behalf.

"The incident that ultimately led to von Bell's death, soon after, in 1666, is believed to have had a lot to do with the intense power struggle triggered by the death of Emperor Shunzhi five years earlier," Li says. "A few years later, von Bell saw a posthumous restoration of fame, partly thanks to his peer Ferdinand



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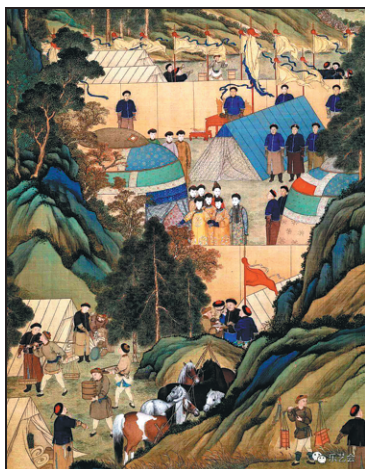


THEY NEEDED TO IMPRESS, AND EVEN TO ASTONISH. ARMED WITH KNOWLEDGE GAINED FROM THOSE 15TH-CENTURY VOYAGES ... AND LATER FROM THE INVENTION OF THE TELESCOPE, THEY WERE READY TO DO EXACTLY THAT."

Zhang Xiping, a professor at Beijing Foreign Studies University, who specializes in cultural exchanges between China and the West



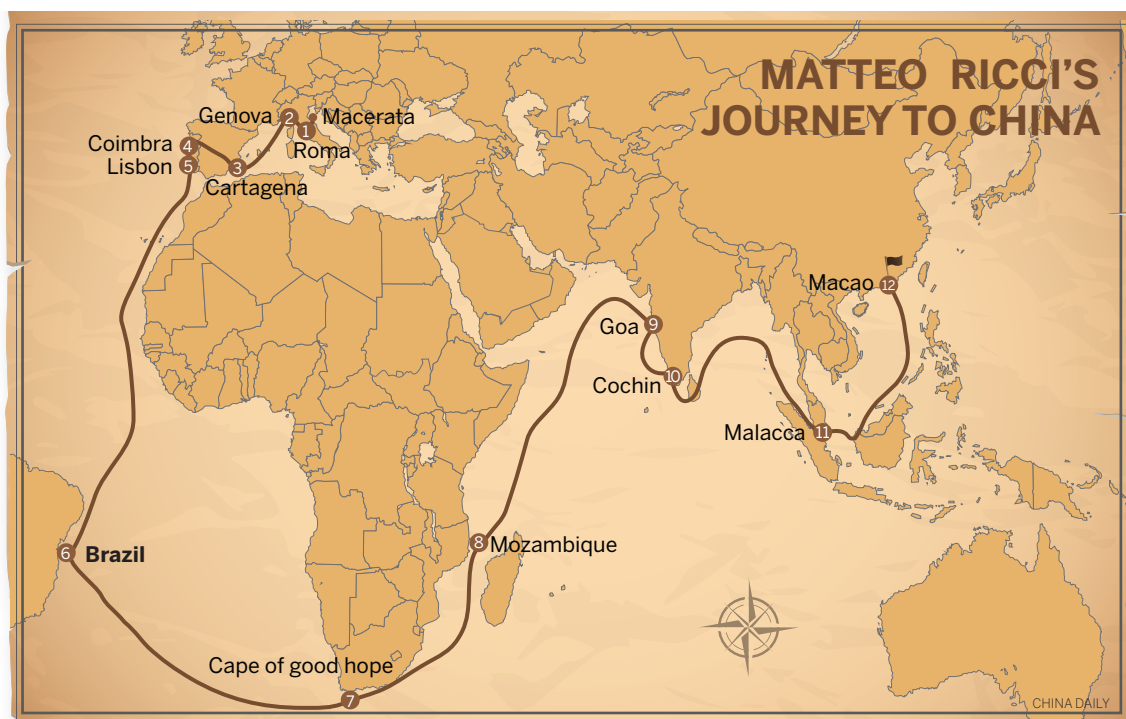
From left: Nantang, or the Southern Church built by von Bell in 1680 is the first Catholic church in Beijing. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY; the gravestones for Western missionaries on the campus of the Beijing Administration Institute. JIANG DONG / CHINA DAILY



Part of a painting by Giuseppe Castiglione, featuring a royal outing. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

Verbiest, who came out triumphantly in a showdown with the Chinese scholar and astronomer Yang Guangxian, and partly because of a change of the political climate at court."

The contest, in which the two sides were required to predict the length of the sun's shadow at midday, went ahead at the order of Emperor Kangxi. Verbiest's win heralded a 200-year period during which Western missionaries in effect controlled what was known as the Qing Empire's Astro-Calendar Bureau.



It is worth noting that while the 74-year-old von Bell was in prison, Verbiest was at his side. He still is today, since the tombstones of the pair are separated only by the one belonging to Ricci, in whose footsteps they all followed.

When I visited the tombstones, early on an autumn day, I was with Li. The plants were still lush, and

viewed from a certain distance the tiny walled graveyard resembled a little corner of Louis XIV's Versailles.

One type of tree is the little leaf box, a precious species believed to have been first planted here, before appearing in other parts of Beijing. About 2005 Li moved two ginkgo trees here, and when I was there a

small patch of white flowers was in full bloom, half-hidden by broad leaves.

"Their color and shape resemble a jade hairpin, which of course is why they are called jade-hairpin blossoms," Li says.

In that sense, they seem to be the perfect flowers for Giuseppe Castiglione, the Italian missionary bur-

ied here. In his five decades in China he served mainly as a court painter for the Qing emperor Qianlong and his impeccably dressed and delicate-looking consorts and concubines.

Apart from the rustling of tree leaves, quietness reigned that morning. Occasionally a stray cat or two would come and curl themselves up either on the low wall or beside the gravestones.

Castiglione left behind a sizable number of works, but for some buried here, the gravestones are the only physical reminder of their remarkable lives. The day of my visit, blinding autumnal sun turned the stone monuments into gray canvases for the interplay of light and shadow, an interplay that helped to accentuate the relief carving on the stone's surface.

While the centers of the tombstones are often inscribed — sometimes in both Chinese and Latin — with the name and major life events of the deceased, the heavily-carved base often features traditional Chinese patterns of water and clouds, from which a winged horse like one from Western mythology might arise.

Almost without exception, the tops of the tombstones are occupied by two writhing dragons, the symbol of royal power. Just below, as if protected by the ferocious animals, is a cross.