

COVER STORY

Men on a mission

Jesuits who arrived in China to preach the gospel between the 16th and 19th centuries left an indelible mark on the country, and it was there that they spent the rest of their natural lives

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Li Xiumei loves snow. "It purifies and silences everything, especially in this part of the campus," says the associate law professor at the Beijing Administration Institute.

"After one snowy night I came here early in the morning to sink my footsteps into the spotless white sponge cake, footsteps that took me to a group of men that has occupied my imagination and much of my time for the past decade."

To be precise it is repeat visits to the tombstones of these men that have kept Li in their thrall. These tombstones, standing quietly on a patch of land measuring about 200 sq meters, are in tight formation. The intimacy is evocative, because centuries ago, when those to whom these monuments are dedicated arrived in China after months, or even years, at sea, they were essentially alone, with almost no one to turn to but themselves and their God.

They were Jesuit missionaries who journeyed to China from countries including Portugal, Spain, Italy and France between the 16th and 19th centuries, and they had at least two things in common: undoubted talent, including personal and diplomatic skills, and unwavering dedication to spreading the gospel message.

"The Society of Jesus, a religious congregation of the Catholic Church whose members are known as Jesuits, was founded by Ignatius of Loyola, a nobleman from northern Spain, in the mid-16th century," Li says. "Soon after, Francis Xavier, one of the society's core members, made the very first attempt to reach China."

Xavier never set foot on the mainland, dying only a year after arriving on the Chinese island of Shangchuan, off the country's southeastern coast. Missionary work would not resume until 30 years later and lasted until the mid-20th century.

"In that time more than 1,000 Jesuits, not to mention other missionaries who had come under different banners within the Catholic Church, came to China," Li says. "But most of those buried here are either the forerunners of the Jesuit mission or its most active members."

Of all the 63 gravestones on the campus, three stand relatively apart, on a lot separated with the rest by a low wall. And their prominent position is indicated by the symbolic earth mounds behind each monument.



From left: Jesuit missionaries to China Schall von Bell (Germany), Matteo Ricci (Italy) and Ferdinand Verbiest (Belgium).
PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY



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“AMONG THEM THEY SHARED NOT ONLY LEGENDS, MYTHS AND ANECDOTES, BUT ALSO TRIUMPHS AND TRAVAILS, AND HERE, THEIR FINAL RESTING PLACE.”

Li Xiumei, associate law professor at the Beijing Administration Institute, on the Jesuit missionaries who came to China

"The middle one belongs to Matteo Ricci, the Italian believed to have been the first Jesuit to enter Beijing," Li says. "To its left is that of Johann Adam Schall von Bell, a German whose eventful life mirrors the tumults of his time; and to its right is that of Ferdinand Verbiest, a Belgian who became a de facto mentor for Kangxi, one of Chinese history's greatest emperors and a contemporary of the Sun King of France."

"Among them they shared not only legends, myths and anecdotes, but also triumphs and travails, and here, their final resting place."

Zhang Xiping, a professor at Beijing Foreign Studies University, has spent most of his academic life researching the cultural exchanges between China and the West and has published books on the Jesuit mission in the country's history.

"From the very beginning they realized that in recruiting in the name of God they had to be very flexible, to 'become all things to all,' to use the words of Loyola himself," Zhang says.

Ricci, the Italian who, in the eyes of Emperor Kangxi set an example for all missionaries who wished to stay in China, understood these words. Having learned Chinese language in Macao, he went on to stay in Guangdong province, where Buddhism had a strong tradition, for more than a decade, before moving north to the cities of Nanchang and Nanjing, and ultimately to Beijing.

"Before reaching Nanchang, where he would acquaint himself with members of the local literati, Ricci slipped out of his monk's gown and into an official robe," Zhang says. "If nothing else, this provides a metaphor for his entire career in China, and for those who considered themselves his followers."

If a high level of adaptation is what the Western missionaries needed to disarm a people whom Ricci believed "deeply distrusted" outsiders, then a demonstration that these men possessed the finest minds became necessary to break what the American historian Jonathan Spence has described as Chinese society's "serene indifference to foreigners".

"They needed to impress, and even to astonish," Zhang says. "Armed with knowledge gained from those 15th-century voyages that led to the discovery and colonization of the New World, and later from the invention of the telescope, they were ready to do exactly that."

But before any serious business, there was often a display of intellectual curiosities, including trinkets to tickle the imagination.

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