Matteo Ricci's Translation under Multiple Identities

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Abstract: Matteo Ricci was one of the prominent missionaries who came to China during the late Ming Dynasty. His translation practices in China marked the beginning of equal cultural exchanges between China and the West, making his work highly valuable for research. This paper focuses on Ricci's translation practices, summarizing his content, strategies, and models to explore his translation behaviors at different stages of cultural exchange and their impact on Sino-Western cultural interaction. The study reveals that as a disseminator of science and technology, Ricci innovated the local knowledge structure and thinking through his translations. As a builder of cross-cultural trust, he facilitated equal cultural exchanges between China and the West through his translations. As a mediator of religious differences between China and the West, he bridged cultural conflicts and promoted the integration of diverse cultures through his translations. Studying Ricci's translation practices not only provides insights into the history of equal cultural exchanges between China and the West but also offers practical implications for promoting cultural exchange today through translation.
Key words: Matteo Ricci; Missionary Translation; the Spread of Western Learning to the East

1. Introduction

Matteo Ricci was a pivotal figure in the history of cultural exchange between China and the West. He opened a new chapter in Sino-Western cultural exchange and was therefore described as “the first world citizen to appear on the earth” (Hirakawa Yosuke, 1999: 3). His missionary activities in China gave rise to two major currents, namely the spread of Western learning to the East and the transmission of Chinese learning to the West, setting a milestone-like example for subsequent cross-cultural exchange, while his translation activities played a crucial role in this process. Through translation, Ricci not only introduced religion, science and technology, and art from Western learning, thereby updating local systems of knowledge in mathematics and astronomy, but also aroused a “Sinology fever” in the West through the translation of Chinese classics and infused Enlightenment thought with Eastern wisdom. Existing research on Ricci is extensive. Some scholars have studied him from historical (Niu Li, 2017; Gong Yingyan, 2019), cultural (Zeng Zheng, 2013; Zhou Hongcheng, 2015), religious dissemination (Sun Guozhu, 2018; Mao Liya, 2019; Zhang Jian, 2021), and philosophical exchange (Wang Suna, 2020; Hu Cuie, 2020) perspectives. Others have focused on his works, such as the ideas embodied in The True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven (Ren Yichao, 2019; Wang Jiadi, 2022; Wang Ge, 2024), while some have examined his contribution to cultural exchange (Lei Qiang, 2004; Qiao Yanna, 2013). However, the fact that Ricci is widely known as an emissary of cultural exchange often obscures his identity as an accomplished translator. Some scholars have noticed his translation practices and examined his choice of translation strategies (Mei Xiaojuan, 2008; Wang Jiadi, 2017). For example, Gao Shengbing (2019), taking the translation and dissemination of The True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven as his object of study, argues that Ricci possessed three cultural identities: a Western missionary, a Confucian scholar, and an external “Other.” However, he does not further investigate how these identities were manifested in the process of cultural exchange or how translation practices shaped by different

identities systematically advanced Sino-Western cultural exchange. In fact, translation is a core medium of cross-cultural communication, and the translator, as the subject of translation activity, is both acted upon and acting. On the one hand, translators assume different identities and undertake different tasks in cross-cultural communication, and naturally adjust their translation activities under the influence of these identities in order to achieve multidimensional goals of cultural exchange. On the other hand, translators' active adjustments of translation activities under the guidance of different identities provide an ongoing impetus for cross-cultural communication.

This paper takes Matteo Ricci's translation activities as its object of study. By examining his translation content, translation strategies, and translation models, it summarizes how the translator manifested multiple identities in cultural exchange through a series of translation practices and how translation activities guided by different identities contributed to Sino-Western cultural exchange. This study not only enriches the perspectives from which Ricci is examined, but also draws lessons from history and provides practical reference for the transregional movement of culture at a time when exchanges between China and other countries are increasingly frequent.

2. Matteo Ricci as a Translator

2.1 Disseminator of Science and Technology

The objective fact that Chinese and Western cultures differed means that contact between heterogeneous cultures would inevitably generate conflicts. Missionaries led by Matteo Ricci, in particular, were committed to spreading Catholicism, and their activities in China were ultimately intended to secure a place for Catholicism in the local context. However, the orthodox status of Confucianism repeatedly obstructed direct missionary efforts. Late-Ming emperors such as the Wanli and Chongzhen emperors maintained a consistent attitude toward the Western learning brought by missionaries: “adopt useful skills while prohibiting the transmission of doctrines” (Tu Guoyuan, 2005: 22). To avoid direct conflict, Ricci's missionary work in China was not confined to religion but began with science and technology. He discovered that, compared with religion, Chinese people were more interested in novel and advanced things from the West. In fact, as early as Ricci's predecessor Michele Ruggieri's missionary attempts, it had become apparent that Chinese people were interested in Western novelties. Ruggieri gained permission to enter Zhaoqing by presenting Ming officials with “sundials, feathers, striking clocks, triangular glass mirrors, and other exotic objects” (Feng Tianyu, 1979: 69). Likewise, the clocks, maps, and Western books displayed in Ricci's reception room repeatedly amazed Chinese officials. Ricci realized that “to conquer the Chinese literati spiritually, one must first attract them intellectually” (Zou Zhenhuan, 2001: 50). He therefore began with scientific translation, introducing scientific and technological knowledge from Western learning, including astronomy, geography, and mathematics, in what may be called “missionary work through science and technology.”

Ricci became well known as a missionary of science, and the Western scientific knowledge he introduced remains influential today. In geography, mathematics, astronomy, and other fields, he promoted the introduction of new knowledge through translation, challenged the intellectual stagnation of the late Ming period, updated the knowledge structures of local scholars, and altered their established systems of thought. In geography, the world maps drawn by Ricci broadened Chinese horizons and paved the way for the subsequent dissemination of Western learning in China. The first Chinese-language world map was produced in 1584, financed by Wang Pan and translated jointly by Ricci and Chinese assistants. The original map came from a map displayed by Ricci and Ruggieri on the reception-room wall of their residence, Xianghuasi, in Zhaoqing. Literati were attracted to the map when they visited, so Ricci translated and adapted it into a Chinese version, producing the first edition of the Shanhai Yudi Map. During the translation process, Ricci “consulted his travel diaries and other Western books and, with the assistance of interpreters, compiled a small booklet annotating the map, inserting records of Catholic rituals and local customs” (Xiao Junhua, 1936: 278). This shows that, while using Western knowledge as a vehicle, Ricci's underlying purpose was to make Catholicism gradually acceptable to local society. On the map, Ricci placed the five continents within an oval, with Asia at the center. He named the continents and oceans in Chinese and marked longitudes, latitudes, and the equator. The impact

of the first map on China was undoubtedly enormous. One observer commented that it was only after seeing “the map annotated by Ricci” that he “noticed for the first time how vast the sky and earth were” (Fontana, 2011: 32). In 1600, at the invitation of Wu Zhongming, Ricci revised the Shanhai Yudi Map, incorporating features of Chinese maps and adding more detailed annotations. Copies were distributed from Nanjing to various parts of the country. In 1604, Guo Zizhang, governor of Guizhou, described it as “a complete sphere without an original distinction between up and down, a statement never heard in China through the ages” (Zou Zhenhuan, 2011: 41). In 1602, Li Zhizao engraved and published Ricci's final Chinese world map, the Complete Map of All the Countries of the World (Kunyu Wanguo Quantu). The map consisted of a main map, four corner maps, and explanatory texts. Notably, the main map presented the relative positions of the five continents, with China located at the center. The reason is not difficult to infer: “Chinese people have always believed that China lies at the center of the world and that China alone is great, while all other countries are small and cannot compare with China. When they saw world maps made by Westerners that placed China in a corner, they were displeased” (Zhang Weihua, 1978: 199). Ricci's translation was guided by a strategy of “cultural accommodation.” To make the translated content acceptable, it was necessary to respond to the traditional Chinese concept of the “Five Domains” and accommodate the mentality of the upper classes. The texts on the complete map can be roughly divided into five categories: “first, place names, numbering more than 850; second, inscriptions, including six pieces by Matteo Ricci, Li Zhizao, Wu Zhongming, Chen Minzhi, Yang Jingchun, and Qi Guangzong; third, explanations of the whole map, the nine celestial spheres, the four elements, the lengths of day and night, the celestial globe, the measuring scale, solar and lunar eclipses, the solar terms, and the northern and southern hemispheres; fourth, tables, including a general table of longitude divisions and a table of the sun's movement in relation to equatorial latitude; and fifth, notes explaining the physical and human geography of each continent” (Zou Zhenhuan, 2011: 44). Large amounts of geographical knowledge entered China through the translated maps, with longitude and latitude used to mark coordinates precisely and thus making geographical space quantifiable. Traditional geographical theories such as “round heaven and square earth,” the distinction between “Chinese and barbarians,” and the “Five Domains” were challenged. The world was presented to Chinese people in a more realistic form, while the concepts of “all nations” and the “five continents” were incorporated into the History of the Ming, promoting the renewal of local geographical knowledge and broadening the world view of the Chinese.

2.2 Builder of Cross-Cultural Trust

During the formal contact between China and the West in the late Ming and early Qing periods, Ricci used precise positioning within the social hierarchy and translation to establish trust and friendship with the local literati class, paving the way for the subsequent entry of Western learning into China and the transmission of Chinese learning abroad. Since the Chenghua reign of Emperor Xianzong, the Ming dynasty had enforced strict maritime prohibitions. Before Ricci, the activities of early missionaries such as Francis Xavier had ended in failure, and some had not even been able to enter inland China, remaining confined to Macao. The reason was that China, as a highly organized feudal country, had developed over thousands of years a firmly established system ranging from political institutions to intellectual and cultural traditions, with a strong tendency toward exclusion of outsiders. Ricci arrived in Macao in 1583 and did not enter Beijing until 1601, spending the intervening years engaged in missionary work in southern China. During his stay in Zhaoqing, although Wang Pan helped him establish a residence near Chongxi Pagoda, local people believed that the “foreign devils” would damage the pagoda's feng shui, resulting in the Chongxi Pagoda incident, in which the church was attacked and local resistance to missionaries was revealed. In 1595, Ricci happened to meet Zhu Duojie, the fourth Prince of Jian'an. The prince said: “Whenever a virtuous gentleman honors our land with his presence, I always invite him to become a friend and respect him. The Great Western Country is a country of morality and justice; I wish to hear what it says about the way of friendship” (Tang Kaijian, 2017: 119). The prince's attitude led Ricci to realize that “understanding friendship and affection could very likely become a key point of communication between the two great cultures of East and West” (Zou Zhenhuan, 2001: 50). In the same year, Ricci translated the first Western book he produced in China, On Friendship (Jiaoyou Lun). “Whether in the number of reprints or the frequency of citations, this work may be regarded as the most influential among Ricci's Chinese translations” (Zhu Weizheng, 2001: 106). The work

compiled Western discussions of friendship from antiquity to the present in the form of sayings and presented a Western conception of friendship.

The content and strategies of Ricci's translation of On Friendship both revealed his subjective intention of using the "way of friendship" to transmit "Western learning" and objectively opened the door to equal cultural exchange between China and the West. The first draft contained 76 maxims and had increased to 100 by 1601. When discussing the content of On Friendship, Ricci stated that the translated work was "compiled from Western maxims and famous sayings of philosophers found in the books of our college, revised and adapted to the minds of Chinese people" (Luo Yu, 1986: 258). In other words, the translation changed Ricci's passive position as a foreign missionary who faced rejection and suspicion, paved the way for his subsequent missionary work, established a solid popular foundation, and became a theoretical bridge for Sino-Western cultural exchange.

2.3 Mediator of Religious Differences

Ricci took advantage of the strong local interest in Western science to disseminate scientific knowledge, translating works on astronomy, mathematics, and other subjects to attract Chinese attention; he then used On Friendship to gain support from the social elite. Ultimately, Ricci revealed the fundamental purpose of his arrival in China as a missionary: to introduce Christianity into China. His earlier translation practices already reveal his true missionary intention. In On Friendship, Ricci described friendship as "an arrangement of God," and when translating and adapting maps, he inserted annotations concerning Catholic rituals. These measures were intended to gradually Christianize local society. Ricci's identity as a missionary determined his task of propagating religion, but Christianity and local Confucianism were objectively different. Directly introducing unfamiliar concepts through literal translation would inevitably produce cultural conflict, while the entrenched position of Confucianism made the literati largely overlook subtle missionary efforts. Under these circumstances, Ricci eventually turned to religious translation. Through specific translation strategies, he compiled and translated The True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven, Twenty-Five Sayings, and Ten Essays of the Extraordinary Man, explaining common ground between Christianity and Confucianism and interpreting Catholicism through Confucian concepts. In other words, he employed a form of "conceptual matching" or ge-yi in a broad, non-strict sense, alleviating cultural conflict, promoting cultural integration, and providing Confucian support for the dissemination of Christianity in China.

Ricci's strategy of "interpreting Christianity through Confucianism" can first be seen in his translation of On Friendship. In that work, Ricci drew on classical Confucian concepts such as benevolence, righteousness, propriety, wisdom, and trust to explain the Western conception of friendship, thereby reducing Chinese readers' wariness and opening the door to Sino-Western cultural exchange through the shared "way of friendship." The True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven, Ricci's core exposition of Catholic doctrine, likewise employed Confucian thought in its interpretation. Ricci believed that Chinese people regarded "Heaven and Earth as supreme," and that "from ancient times to the present, rulers and subjects have known only to honor Heaven and Earth and revere them as they would their parents" (Ricci, 1986: 414). He therefore characterized Chinese belief as a form of "dual theism," whereas Catholicism was monotheistic, and the two were clearly different. To explain the Catholic concept of the Lord of Heaven, Ricci drew on discussions of "Shangdi" (the Lord on High) in the Chinese classics. In this way, he grafted the concept of the Lord of Heaven from a foreign culture onto the local cultural system, alleviating the conflict between Christianity and traditional Chinese doctrines.

3. Conclusion

This paper examines representative translations by the missionary Matteo Ricci and summarizes the different identities he displayed in three states of Sino-Western relations: cultural contact, cultural dissemination, and cultural conflict, together with the translation practices guided by these identities and their effects on Sino-Western cultural exchange. In the early stage of cultural contact, Ricci laid the foundation for cultural exchange through map translation and scientific and technological translation. To advance his missionary work, he used the translation of On Friendship to resonate with local people's desire for equal and friendly exchange and opened the door to cultural communication. In the face of the

inherent conflict between Christianity and Confucianism, Ricci adopted a translation strategy combining Confucianism and Christianity in works such as The True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven, promoting the integration of heterogeneous cultures and facilitating the dissemination of Christianity in China.

Overall, Ricci's translations not only became a successful model of equal Sino-Western cultural exchange in the late Ming period, but also offer practical lessons for the contemporary world. As global communication becomes increasingly frequent, translation can reduce friction between heterogeneous cultures, convey signals of friendly exchange, further promote equal cultural communication, and facilitate cultural integration.

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