Matteo Ricci’s demise
as narrated in his first Chinese biography (1630)
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(Macau, 10th November, 2011)

The sources about Matteo Ricci’s death

The main sources on the illness, death burial and funeral of Matteo Ricci are his contemporary confreres: Nicolas Trigault, Niccolò Longobardo, Gaspar Ferreira and Sabatino De Ursis. The latter wrote in Portuguese a report (Relação) on May 20 1610, just few after Ricci’s death, an event that he witnessed personally. Gaspar Ferreira wrote about Ricci’s illness, death and virtues in the 1610 Annual Letter, also written in Portuguese. Niccolò Longobardo, Ricci’s successors as China Mission Superior, is the implicit author of 1611 Annual Letter, which Trigault wrote, or translated, into Latin under the Superior’s directive. The letter narrates the aftermath of Ricci’s death: the quest for a piece of land where to bury Ricci; the transport of the corpse and its inhumation; the funeral, epitaphs and tomb inscription.

Nicolas Trigault has arrived in Beijing one year after Ricci’s death, and was heavily involved in the transmission of Ricci’s heritage to the posterity. In 1612 Trigault left Beijing for Europe, with many commissions to be carried out on the order of Superior Longobardo. The latter gave him, besides the famous Ricci’s portrait by You Wenhui, the manuscript Della entrata della compagnia di Giesù e Christianità nella Cina (On the Entrance of the Society of Jesus and Christianity into China), a lengthy text written in Italian by Ricci in the last two years of his life, 1608–10. During his journey (1613–15), Trigault translated it into Latin and published it in Augsburg in 1615 under the title De Christiana expeditione apud Sinas suscepta ab Societate Jesu (On the Christian Expedition in China Undertaken by the Society of Jesus). Trigault occasionally changed the original and added substantial material, one fourth of the entire text. Ricci’s death and its aftermath are narrated in the last two chapters of the De Christiana expeditione: the numbers XXI and XXII of Book V. The sources of Trigault are the Annual Letters of 1610 (i.e. Ferreira) and 1611 (i.e. Longobardo), the Relação by De Ursis and other firsthand information he himself gathered while in Beijing.

The book De Christiana expeditione was a great success. The second edition was published the following year (1616), and it was soon available in various European

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2 Roman Archives of the Society of Jesus, ARSI, Japonica-Sinica, 106, a.
languages. Ricci’s original manuscript text was deposited Jesuit Roman archives and forgotten. It re-emerged only in 1909 thanks to Jesuit archivist Pietro Tacchi Venturi and published by the same in 1911. It was published again, with sumptuous commentary and annotations, by the Jesuit sinologist Pasquale D’Elia in 1942-49 under the title Fonti Ricciane, a masterpiece of erudition. D’Elia translated in Italian the Latin text of Trigault. The last two chapters (numbers XXI-XXII of Book V), devoted to Ricci’s death and the subsequent events, are located in the second volume of Fonti Ricciane (pages 530-632). In this article I will present another early source on Ricci’s demise, the semi-unknown Ricci’s first Chinese biography, published in 1630 in Fuzhou by his confère Giulio Aleni.

Matteo Ricci and Giulio Aleni, two intertwined lives

The first Chinese account of the life and death of Matteo Ricci, The Life of Master Ricci, Xitai from the Great West (大西泰利先生行蹟 Daxi Xitai Li Xiansheng Xingji), was authored by Giulio Aleni 20 years after the death of the founder of China’s mission.

Aleni was one of the most important Jesuit missionaries of the late Ming period. Born in Brescia in 1582, he arrived in Macao in 1610 (or early 1611) and permanently moved to China in 1613. He authored several important books on science, philosophy, ethics and religion, including the Life of the Lord of Heaven Incarnate (天主降生言行紀略 Tianzhu Jiangsheng Yanxing Jilüe) in 1635 and the Illustrated Life of the Lord of Heaven Incarnate (天主降生出像經解 Tianzhu Jiangsheng Chuxiang Jilüe), in 1637. After working in various provinces, having Hangzhou as his base, in 1625 he moved to Fujian, where he was the first to bring the Christian message in modern era. He died there in 1649, during the unrest following the collapse of the Ming dynasty and the Manchu conquest of South China. Thanks to his exceptional culture and personality, Aleni was known by the extraordinary title of Confucius from the West, Xilai Kongzi 西来孔子.

Ricci and Aleni never met. Yet their lives are deeply inter-connected. Perhaps no one, as Aleni, was similar to Matteo Ricci in personality, education, spirituality, ingenuity, versatility, erudition, zeal, missionary style and method. Among the many missionaries who have succeeded Ricci, arguably no one has inherited Ricci’s legacy better that Giulio Aleni. Aleni was able to complete the work begun by Ricci, who could only open the way, gain legitimacy and security for the Christian presence, so that other missionaries, such as Aleni, could put in action the apostolic activity through the preaching of Gospel in freedom.

Aleni recalls his own homage to Ricci’s tomb in Beijing, just three years after his death.

(119) Then I, Giulio, along with two or three companions, [...], commenced a journey by sea to come here [in China] from a distance. It was the same year

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4 There are two copies of the first edition, dated Fuzhou 1630: one at the Roman Archives of the Society of Jesus (ARSI, Japonica-Sinica, III, 23.3b) and one at the Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana (Borgia cinese, 350-3).
when Master Ricci died. Although I have not been able to meet him even once, I went in person to Beijing to pay homage to his grave, an imperial gift.  

儒略始偕二三友朋[...]，浮海遠來。而利子是年殁矣，然雖不及一面，亦躬造燕京，瞻拜賜塋。

1630’s Aleni first edition, 8500 characters-long was published along with five other writings, all closely related to Ricci. Before his Life of Master Ricci, Aleni presents a brief and a somewhat difficult text, the Life of Xitai Ricci, from the Great West, 大西利西泰字傳 Daxi Li Xitai Zichuan, by Zhang Weishu 張維樞, a literate who met Ricci in the last years of his life. The second writing added by Aleni is the post-face by Li Jiubiao 李九標, one of the most important of Aleni’s collaborator from Fujian. There are then three documents as appendixes. The first document is the petition for obtaining a piece of land for Ricci’s burial, presented on June 14th 1610 by Wu Daonan 吳道南, the Rites minister ad interim, to the throne. The second document is the text of the tombal inscription in honor of Matteo Ricci written by the Prefect Wang Yinglin 王應麟, dated March 29th 1615. The third document is a short work composed by the same Ricci in 1601: Eight songs for a Western Harpsichord, 西琴曲意八章 Xiqin zhuyi bazhan.

We return now to Aleni’s Life of Master Ricci, noticing that it is particularly important for the history of the reception of Christianity in China as it allows the identification of sixty scholars and Chinese officials with whom Ricci came in contact. Aleni also mentioned 14 fellow Europeans. There are some inedited episodes. One is the episode where it is narrated that the emperor never met Ricci face to face: Wanli looked at Ricci standing behind a curtain during the imperial audience in January 1601. Interesting and a bit mysterious is the information that the wife of Ricci’s good friend Qu Taisu 瞿太素 (his birth name was Qu Rukui 瞿汝夔) kept with her some of Ricci’s manuscripts: what were they?, letters in Chinese?, or drafts of his Chinese books? Or something else? Another surprising news is that Matteo kept a personal diary where he wrote down spiritual reflections. We will return on this point.

In 2010, with the collaboration of Savio Hon Tai-fai and Stanislaus Lee, I republished Aleni’s book, providing an introduction, a commentary, annotations and a translation into Italian. The Chinese text was reproduced twice: the facsimile of the copy of the original edition kept at Roman Archives of the Society of Jesus (ARSI, Japonica-Sinica, III, 23,3b) and its transcription, which was endowed with division in sentences and paragraphs and the relative punctuation. The Chinese passages included in this article are from that book, and similarly the English rendition of the passages is based on the Italian translation. I also divided the book in 120 paragraphs.

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6 See Vita del Maestro Ricci, p. 15.
7 Chinese text and Italian translation in Vita del Maestro Ricci, pp. 127-133.
8 Chinese text and Italian translation in Vita del Maestro Ricci, pp. 135-141.
9 See Vita del Maestro Ricci, p. 15.
10 See Vita del Maestro Ricci.
The illness and death of Master Ricci

The biography written by Aleni gives significant space to Ricci’s illness, death and after-death events. The last 32 paragraphs are dedicated to Matteo’s demise and virtues. Starting from number 89, Aleni narrates Ricci’s short illness and last days.

(89) Master Ricci fell ill due to excessive fatigue. On the first day he immediately said to his confreres: “The time of leaving this world is approaching, please do everything, without any omission, according to the rules of the church, for obtaining for me a good death.”

As we know from Jesuit sources, Ricci became ill on May 3, 1610. His illness lasted just over a week. Aleni has confirmed what is unanimously considered the cause of Ricci’s illness and early death: fatigue. In spring 1610 thousands of literati (a term Ricci coined for the scholar-official class) converged to Beijing for the imperial examination. Many of them did not renounce to the opportunity of visiting the famous Xitai, the master for the West, whose books and maps were disseminated all over China. Ricci was overwhelmed in receiving them and reciprocating the visit of the most distinguished among them. This extra exceptional effort took an heavy toll on Ricci, whose was overworking even during the ordinary days.

Aleni continue his narration informing about the visitors to the sick missionary:

(90) Then all the faithful came to visit him. There was no one who was not received with joyful face by Master Ricci, and was by him consoled and exhorted.

In the subsequent paragraph Aleni reports a prayer that Ricci has elevated for China.

(91) And also he prayed to the Great Lord to protect China from above, so that everyone could know the holy religion and obtain special graces. Recalling the benevolence of the emperor, he wished fervently to express his gratitude. As a small drop of water and a speck of dust he expressed only one hope: that the grace of the Great Lord would protect him (the emperor) and inspire him that the great religion could be widespread.

The narration of Gaspar Ferreira and Sabatino De Ursis, on which Nicolas Trigault based his own account, does not mention this thanksgiving to the emperor. It is reported

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11 Vita del Maestro Ricci, p. 74.
12 Vita del Maestro Ricci, p. 74.
13 Vita del Maestro Ricci, p. 75.
however, that Ricci, in a state of delirium, spoke of the conversion of the emperor. It is possible that Ricci has expressed gratitude and respect towards the emperor speaking to the officials who had visited in the early days of his malady, and that Aleni was informed about this by Leo Li.

On paragraph 92 Aleni describes Ricci’s affection for the people anxiously flocking at his bed

(92) And so in the course of the sickness, although he was in such a miserable state, he showed [to everyone] his great affection.14

From Jesuit sources we know that Ricci made his last confession on the evening of May 8th. It was heard by Sabatino De Ursis, who testified that he was greatly impressed by the "goodness and the holiness of Matteo’s life". He received his Last Communion on the morning of May 9th. Here it follows Aleni’s description of Matteo’s last hours

(93) A few days later Master Ricci, close to his death, had again his Confession and asked to receive the Holy Communion. As the priest brother was near the bed and about to give the Communion, according to the rite, Master Ricci tried to get up to receive the Communion, incessantly bowing in reverence. The confreres wanted him to omit [these bows] because of the severity of the disease and wanted him returning to bed to rest. Master Ricci, however, did not want lightly transgressing even the smallest rule of reverence.15

What follows is a sober description of Matteo’s demise. As we know from De Ursis, he died at seven on the evening of May 11th, 1610. He was 57 years and seven months old.

(94) Soon after, suddenly, he closed his eyes, as if was absorbed in thought, sat quietly and died. It was the fourth month of the year gengxu of Wanli.16

The aftermath of the Master’s death

Now it is one of Ricci’s most important collaborators and disciples, Li Zhizao 李之藻 (courtesy name: Li Wocun 李我存), to assume the initiative. No one of the few Jesuits present in Beijing at the time of Ricci’s death had the prestige and experience of the illustrious deceased. It was then necessary that the most trusted Chinese converts present in Beijing would help the missionaries to deal with the sophisticated and uncertain aftermath. At that moment, Li Zhizao was certainly the most prestigious Catholic present in Beijing, as Paolo Xu Guangqi 徐光启 was back in Shanghai, for the customary three

14 Vida del Maestro Ricci, p. 75.
15 Vida del Maestro Ricci, p. 75.
16 Vida del Maestro Ricci, p. 75.
years long mourning of his father. Leo Li organized the purchase of the coffin and took the lead in appealing to the authorities for a piece of land for the burial. Sabatino De Ursis reported that Li Zhizao, after the insistence of the Jesuits, agreed to buy a coffin of only 15 taels, against his original intention to buy a coffin of 200 or even 1000 taels.

Li Zhizao is known in the Jesuit sources with the Christian name of Leo. Together with Xu Guangqi, he was the highest ranking Christian official to be friend and supporter of Ricci. He was baptized in early 1610 by Ricci, and continued to collaborate with other Jesuit missionaries after Ricci’s death. Leo Li financed the construction of the South Church (Nantang, today the Cathedral of Beijing), took care of Ricci’s funeral and wrote for him two epitaphs. From 1611 he spent the three years long period of customary mourning for his father in his hometown of Hangzhou. On that occasion he introduced there the Christian faith and gave permanent hospitality to the Jesuits.

17 Vita del Maestro Ricci, p. 76.
18 Vita del Maestro Ricci, p. 76.
Valignano, however their contents clearly indicate that the correspondence between the two missionaries was frequent. It is fair to assume that Ricci might have written a letter every month to Valignano, for a period of about twenty years. The surviving letters to family members are only six, while he certainly wrote at least once year, over a period of about 30 years.

Even more regretfully, Ricci’s entire Chinese correspondence has been lost. In 1608 Ricci wrote to Superior General Claudio Acquaviva as follows:

One of the major occupations of mine in this land is to answer, in Chinese, the letters I continuously receive from various places and from important people. People I have met long ago or even people I have never met, who nevertheless write to us because of our good reputation.\(^9\)

Unfortunately not even one of these letters (there must have been a few hundred) have surfaced so far. Ricci was quite busy already in writing Chinese books (nearly thirty, half of them written in collaboration), and, in the last year of his life, the account of his mission: *Della entrata della compagnia di Giesù e Christianità nella Cina* (On the Entrance of the Society of Jesus and Christianity into China). This exceptional input of literary work must have been one of the cause who have exhausted Ricci, leading to his early death.

In Jesuits’ circles, virtuous persons occasionally experienced the anticipate knowledge of the date of one’s own death. Matteo Ricci, being an exceptionally holy missionary, was also endowed with such a gift. This is how it is reported by Aleni:

\(^{(97)}\) *In a letter to Lazzaro Cattaneo a few months before his death, Maestro Ricci said, among other things: ”This will be my last letter, from now there will be no more letter. Farewell forever!”\(^{20}\)*

\(^{(99)}\) *Aware that his illness would come when he would no longer have the strength to arrange the necessary things, Master Ricci arranged them a few months before. So the confreres realized that he had knew long before the time of his good death.*\(^{21}\)

Ricci’s outstanding virtues are described from paragraphs 100 to 111, where we read the startling information of the existence of a Matteo’s spiritual notebook, which did not survive till us. According to a Jesuit early practice, private spiritual notes should have been destroyed after one’s death. Nevertheless Aleni read this ‘spiritual diary’ a few years after Matteo’s death.

\(^{(101)}\) *The root of the ten thousand merits for us men is the silent spiritual contact with the Lord from High. Master Ricci stood in continuous silence to*
receive the divine strength. He also meditated in silence the Word for a few hours every morning, and wrote everything that the Lord from High inspired him, as not to forget Lord’s protection. And gradually [these thoughts] became a book. Until now, all his confreres liked to familiarize with it, to draw some teaching. I, too, Giulio, after reading it, had experienced a great awakening within.22

吾人萬善之根，在默與上主神接，利子常默默對越，以沾神力。且每晨默道數時，所得上主默啟者，即下筆記之，以不忘主佑，漸而成帙。至今諸會士多喜熟玩，領其訓誨，即儒略讀之，亦大有醒悟也。

An unprecedented privilege

Aleni narrates the complex process that lead to the official burial of Ricci on a piece of land granted by the imperial authority. To obtain such a privilege, a submission to the throne had to be written. The petition signed by Diego De Pantoja and written in name of Sabatino De Ursis as well, was submitted on May 18th, 1610.23 Leo Li Zhizao, as we have seen, played a key role in leading the missionaries into the complexity of imperial bureaucracy. The suggestion of presenting the petition might have come, according to Pasquale D’Elia, from the important Catholic literate, then still a neophyte, Sun Yuanhua 孫元化. On his part, Leo Li not only advised about its content, but also took on himself the task of writing the text, formally signed by De Pantoja.24 As is known, the piece of land grated to the Jesuits for the burial of Ricci was a property confiscated to a disgraced eunuch surnamed Yang. In Aleni’s narration, reported below, Yang’s property was a Buddhist temple. But according to the other Jesuit sources, the residence of eunuch Yang was not a Buddhist temple. Yang imposed such a name in the attempt of avoiding its confiscation.25

(112) After Master Ricci’s death, the court officials discussed about presenting a petition to obtain a place for burial. So Master Diego de Pantoja and Master Sabatino de Ursis prepared a memorial to the throne. They pleaded that an order should had been given to the Ministry of Rites to respond to their petition.

(113) The grand secretary, the Honorable Wu Daonan, at that time was holding the interim as deputy minister of the Rites. He then together with the director of ministerial office, Honorable Lin Maohuai, the director of ministerial services, the Honorable Hong Shijun, and the secretary of the tribunal, the Honorable Han Wanxiang declared that [Ricci] had come from far away for the sake of justice; he was diligent in learning and wise in understanding the principles and that he became famous for writing many works. He (Wu) humbly begs [the throne] to be allow to proceed to the burial of the corpse,

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22 Vita del Maestro Ricci, p. 77.
23 Latin and Italian translations of the memorial are in Fonti Ricciane II, pp. 568-572.
24 See Fonti Ricciane II, p. 567.
25 See Fonti Ricciane II, p. 597.
with all that it entails, submitting the formal request for obtaining such a permission.

(114) The honorable Wu then issued an order to the prefect of the capital, the honorable Huang Jishi, who had confiscated the Buddhist temple of Erligou with thirty-eight rooms, built without permission by the eunuch Yang on a land of twenty mu. [The ordinance gave order to allocate the land] for the burial of Master Ricci and the residence of the Masters De Pantoja and De Ursis and of other colleagues. There they could worship the Lord of Heaven, burn the incense, cultivate the virtue, pray and practice asceticism.  

The following episode about the unprecedented privilege granted to Ricci, gained a considerable fame, especially in Chinese writings. The earliest source is this biography by Aleni, and the episode was subsequently reported by D’Elia in Fonti Ricciane.  

The two protagonist of the interesting dialogue are the Prefect Wang Yinglin 王應麟, better known by his courtesy name Wang Yusha 王玉沙, and Grand Secretary Ye Xianggao 葉向高, to whom Aleni refers by his posthumous name of Ye Wenzhong 葉文忠.

In 1615 Wang Yusha composed the text of an inscription in honor of Ricci. Aleni included the text in his 1630’s publication.  

It is quite extraordinary that a high official, not Catholic, wrote such a highly laudatory text in honor of Ricci. Ricci and Wang met in 1592, when the latter was vice-prefect of Nanxiong 南雄 and an admirer of Ricci’s world map. After various prestigious assignments, he was appointed Prefect of Beijing in 1613.

Ricci and Ye Xianggao met for the first time in Nanjing in 1599, where Ye was deputy Minister of the Rites. He later moved to Beijing for ever more prestigious assignments, until he became Grand Secretary of the Empire. He was one of the most senior officials who had a favorable approach toward the foreign missionaries. According to Jesuit sources, Ye had considered building a temple and a statue in honor of Ricci after his death. He played a crucial role in the concession of a place of burial for Ricci as it was exactly to him that Diego de Pantoja’s petition for a burial ground was addressed. He was later closely associated with Giulio Aleni. Originally from Fujian, Ye took Aleni back with him when he retired in his native land in 1625, opening the evangelization in the southern province.

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26 Vita del Maestro Ricci, pp. 80-81.
27 Fonti Ricciane, II, p. 630.
28 The text is reproduced in Fonti Ricciane, III, pp. 9-19 and by the present author in Vita del Maestro Ricci, pp. 135-141.
When the prefect of the capital, the honorable Wang Yusha recorded everything on a plaque, an officer asked the Grand Secretary Ye Wenzhong: "Since ancient times, none of the visitors who came from afar had received an imperial concession for a burial place. Why should we grant this privilege only to Master Ricci?" The Honorable Wenzhong said: "Master, have you ever seen, from antiquity until today, a visitor as learned and virtuous as Master Ricci? Even without mentioning other things, his translation of the *Elements of geometry* deserves the grant of burial on imperial land."^29

The Jesuit missionaries in Beijing realized very clearly the immense positive significance of having obtained the permission to bury Ricci in Beijing. It was the sign of emperor’s acceptance of their presence in the Middle Kingdom and its capital. Being buried in Beijing meant allowing Ricci’s descendents, i.e. the members of the Society of Jesus, to remain in the capital to perform the rituals of respect at his tomb. In few occasions Ricci asked the throne for the official permission for the Christian preaching. However, the emperor never bestowed such a concession, as such a authorization was not contemplate in the imperial protocol. The grant of a burial land was the closest result to a formal permission for Christianity in China. Finally Matteo Ricci realized the purpose of his “ascent to Beijing”: obtaining the permission to stay and the freedom for him and his confreres to found Christian communities.

The memory of Master Ricci for the posterity

^116^ After the death of Maestro Ricci, many painted his image to pay him reverence. The minister of the imperial stables, the honorable Li ordered a portrait to be painted on the left side of the church.^30

On the paragraph above Aleni certainly refers, among others, to the most famous of his portraits, painted by Jesuit brother 游文辉 You Wenhui (known also by his Portuguese name Manuel Pereira) right after the death of Ricci. The portrait was brought to Rome by Nicolas Trigault and still remains in the sacristy of the Chiesa del Gesù.

In the last paragraph, though adopting the rhetoric of literary humbleness, Aleni pays an heartfelt homage to the man that opened China to apostolate of the Society of Jesus:

^120^ Ah, poor me! Master Ricci came to the East, bringing with him the doctrine of Heaven, and for more than thirty years has been totally dedicated to spreading the true religion and I, due to my inadequacy, wrote a biography

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^29^ Vita del Maestro Ricci, p. 81.
^30^ Vita del Maestro Ricci, p. 82.
of my departed friend extremely unsatisfactory! Yet I wrote it as a service to the sages who come after me and that want to know him.\footnote{Vita del Maestro Ricci, p. 83.}

於戲，利子挾天學東來，矢志宣揚正教，幾三十年余不敏略次先友行蹟。以待後之君子，有志而願知者。

Author’s Profile, cf. CCC 6.4, p. 96.