

## A Cultural Dialogue between China & Europe on the Topic of Michele Ruggieri

© Chan Ieng Hin/2012.12.28



The exhibition *Journey to the Ends of the World: Michele Ruggieri and Jesuits in China* recently hosted by the Macao Museum reveals the earliest history of Macao, in which not only the beginnings of Catholicism in Macao are recorded but the beginning of the cultural dialogue between China and Europe in Macao.

As Ji Xianlin, a reputable professor from Peking University, puts it: ‘In the Chinese history of more than 5,000 years, cultural exchanges reached their peak several times. The last zenith, and the most important, was the introduction of Western culture. In terms of timing, this introduction started from the late Ming and early Qing Dynasty. In term of geographic location, it started in Macao.’

Ji Xianlin also emphasised that: ‘It is a pity that Macao *does not get the attention* it deserves as it plays an important role in the cultural exchanges between East and West. What I’m saying is totally based on historical fact. The Portuguese, in fact, were the ones who introduced Western culture to China and their base was Macao.’

This exhibition - included in the 2012 China-European Union Year of Intercultural Dialogue - is indeed deserved.

Regarding the early history of the Jesuits, most people know of the achievements of Matteo Ricci but may not know about the contribution made by Michele Ruggieri. In fact, not only did Michele Ruggieri arrive in China earlier than Matteo Ricci, the most important thing is that he is the first person to have initiated the cultural dialogue between China and Europe.

## **Saint Francis Xavier, Far East missionary pioneer**

Saint Francis Xavier, not Michele Ruggieri, was the first missionary to China. Co-founder of the Jesuits, he was also the first missionary to arrive in the Far East. Acclaimed 'the greatest missionary in history' by the Catholic Church, Saint Francis Xavier left Lisbon for India in 1541. After preaching in India, Malacca, Maluku and Japan, etc., he reached Shangchuan Island,



*The strappy shoes of Saint Francis Xavier*  
- collected by Society of Jesus

Guangdong in August 1552, the first Catholic missionary to arrive in China during the Ming Dynasty. At that time, however, the government of the Ming Dynasty did not permit him to land, so he could only stay on the deserted island to view the territory. On 3<sup>rd</sup> December 1552, he died from illness on Shangchuan Island. On 3<sup>rd</sup> December, 2012 marked the 460<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Saint Francis Xavier's death, this exhibition specially showcases the leather strappy shoes, which had been worn by Saint Francis Xavier. These relics have been collected by the Society of Jesuits in Portugal, and they are the highlight in this exhibition.

## **Michele Ruggieri, the first Sinologist from Europe**

Why is Michele Ruggieri described as the first person to initiate the dialogue between China and Europe, rather than Saint Francis Xavier? Michele Ruggieri (1543-1607) was one of the earliest Jesuit missionaries to arrive in China. He reached Macao in the year 1579, investing much effort in learning Chinese. Within several years, he was able to use Chinese to translate the Latin Catholic doctrine, and published *The True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven in Chinese*. He was also able to write poetry in Chinese. Hence, he was the first European Sinologist to be proficient in Chinese; to assist those Europeans in China to study Chinese he began to compile the first Portuguese-Chinese Dictionary, which was eventually completed by Matteo Ricci.

With his excellent Chinese language skills plus his profound knowledge of European science and technology, Michele Ruggieri won the respect of Guangzhou officials and was permitted to travel without restriction between Macao and Guangzhou, where he was allowed to stay for many years. In 1582, he finally gained approval to take two other missionaries - Matteo Ricci and Pasio Francesco - into Zhaoqing, an important administrative centre and seat of the Viceroy of Guangdong and Guangxi.



*Letter sent by Pope Sixtus V to Wanli Emperor*  
- Collected by National Library of France

The three of them built churches there for preaching, accomplishing the unfulfilled wish of Far East missionary pioneer Saint Francis Xavier. The cartography skills of Michele Ruggieri later became a strategic tool for contacting the literati and scholar-officials.

In order to legally preach in China, and at the suggestion of Alessandro Valignano, Inspector of the Jesuit missions in the Far East, they planned to request the Pope to issue an official letter to the Ming Dynasty Emperor. This letter was written in Chinese and engraved in a woodblock. In 1588, Michele Ruggieri took this engraving to Europe via Macao for the Pope's signature. He also organised the Roman mission to visit Beijing to meet the Ming Dynasty Emperor.

He returned to Rome in 1589. Due to bad health, Pope Sixtus V died in August 1590. Two succeeding Popes died in September and October of the same year, thus the task of Michele Ruggieri could not be completed; consequently, he was unable to return to China. This Chinese engraving ordinarily resides in the Bibliothèque Nationale de France (National Library of France). Having witnessed this period of history - and having now returned to Macao, its place of departure, after more than 400 years - it is displayed in this exhibition, both rare and precious.

### **The Atlases of China by Michele Ruggieri**

Upon returning to Europe, Michele Ruggieri insisted on finishing the task he considered most important, regardless of poor health; this task was to draw the Atlases of China in accordance with the related ancient books and records and the understanding he had of different provinces in China. He introduced the geographical features of China that introduced



*'Tamincvo' in the Atlases of China by Michele Ruggieri*  
- Collected by the National Archives of Rome in Italy

graphics, illustrations and detailed description to Europe. These works

played a vital role in helping Europe in the early period have a fuller understanding of China. These maps enabled Europeans to comprehend that China was not just in

their imagination and not small like European countries but actually a highly civilized Asian country of comparable size to all of Europe.

Europe's understanding of China was based on several hundred Jesuits that Europe had sent to China, most of whom were famous scientists, artists and philosophers and other cultural ambassadors from high society. Their arrival further promoted the summit of far-reaching cultural exchanges between China and Europe. If the China trip made by Francis Xavier was the overture to cultural exchanges between China and Europe, then Michele Ruggieri would be the first person to have conducted these cultural exchanges. Having disappeared for nearly four centuries, this batch of original manuscripts - Atlases of China by Ruggieri - was found in the National Archives of Rome at the close of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, and can now be showcased in this exhibition for exhibition-goers for the first time.

The temporary exhibition Journey to the Ends of the World: Michele Ruggieri and Jesuits in China showcases several Latin maps, files, original manuscripts, ancient literature, etc., never seen before, from the National Archives of Rome, the Library of Alexandria, the National Central Library of Rome and the National Library of France. These significant and precious cultural relics, gathered for this exhibition, form a historical picture of the 16<sup>th</sup> to 17<sup>th</sup> centuries for us.

This exhibition's highlights also include the early oil painting portraits of Jesus and the wood sculpture statues of Ignacio de Loyola, the founder of the Society of Jesus, and the precious relics from Ruggieri's hometown during this period loaned by the State Archives of Napoli. The exhibition also displays the precious historical relics of Macao's early oil paintings and sculptures loaned by the Diocese of Macao and Museum of the Holy House of Mercy, plus early Macao books and literature from the Macao Central Library and the Historical Archives of Macao, etc. All these are important for the understanding and study of the history of early Macao.

By watching the documentary short films specially produced for this exhibition in the studio prior to visiting the exhibition one may gain a clearer grasp of the periods referred to and better understand the essence of this exhibition.