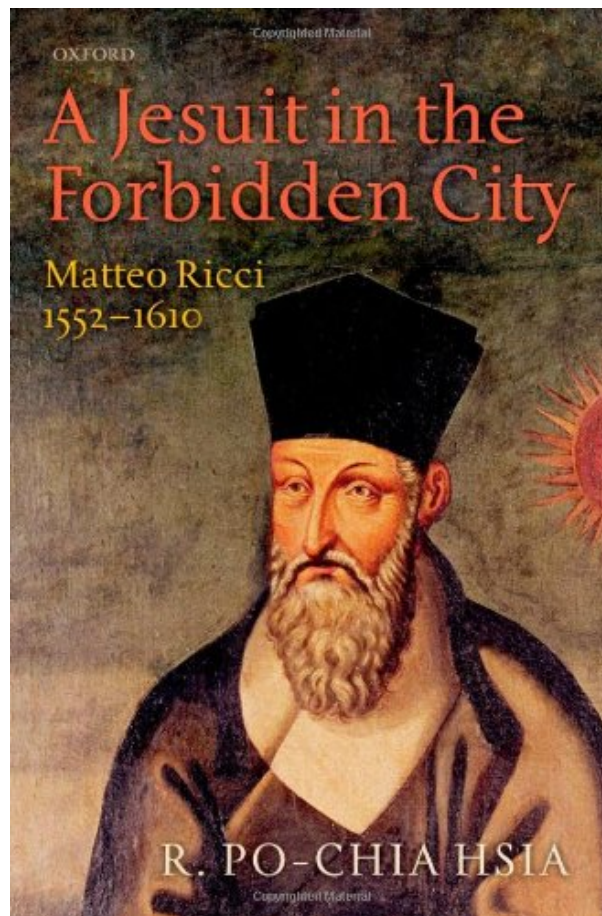
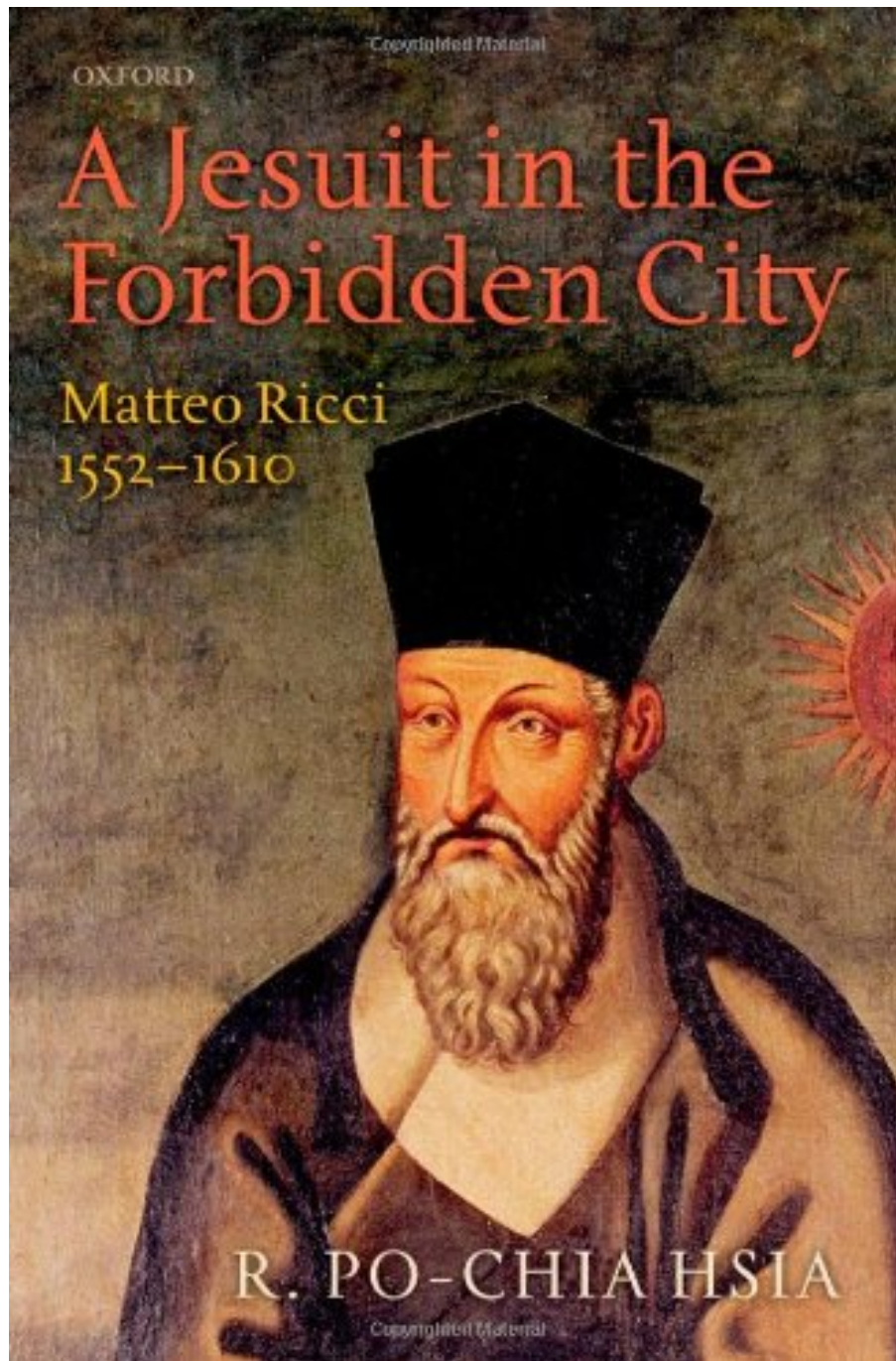


**A JESUIT IN THE FORBIDDEN CITY:
MATTEO RICCI, 1552-1610 BY R. PO-CHIA
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About the Author

A native of Hong Kong, R. Po-chia Hsia was educated in his home town, the United Kingdom, Germany, and the United States. He is a specialist on early modern Europe and on the social and cultural exchanges between China and the West. Author and editor of a dozen books, with translations into Chinese, Japanese, Italian, Spanish, and German, Hsia has received signal academic honours in many countries. He is a member of the Academia Sinica and the Edwin Erle Sparks Professor of History, Religious Studies, and Asian Studies at the Pennsylvania State University, USA.

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A 16th century Italian Jesuit, Matteo Ricci was the founder of the Catholic Mission in China and one of the most famous missionaries of all time. A pioneer in bringing Christianity to China, Ricci spent twenty eight years in the country, in which time he crossed the cultural divides between China and the West by immersing himself in the language and culture of his hosts. Even 400 years later, he is still one of the best known westerners in China, celebrated for introducing western scientific and religious ideas to China and for explaining Chinese culture to Europe.

The first critical biography of Ricci to use all relevant sources, both Chinese and Western, *A Jesuit in the Forbidden City* tells the story of a remarkable life that bridged Counter-Reformation Catholic Europe and China under the Ming dynasty. Hsia follows the life of Ricci from his childhood in Macerata, through his education in Rome, to his sojourn in Portuguese India, before the start of his long journey of self-discovery and cultural encounter in the Ming realm. Along the way, we glimpse the workings of the Portuguese maritime empire in Asia, the mission of the Society of Jesus, and life in the European enclave of Macau on the Chinese coast, as well as invaluable sketches of Ricci's fellow Jesuits and portraits of the Chinese mandarins who formed networks indispensable for Ricci's success.

Examining a range of new sources, Hsia offers important new insights into Ricci's long period of trial and frustration in Guangdong province, where he first appeared in the persona of a foreign Buddhist monk, before the crucial move to Nanchang in 1595 that led to his sustained intellectual conversation with a leading Confucian scholar and subsequent synthesis of Christianity and Confucianism in propagating the Gospels in China. With his expertise in cartography, mathematics and astronomy, Ricci quickly won recognition, especially after he had settled in Nanjing in 1598, the southern capital of the Ming dynasty. As his reputation and friendships grew, Ricci launched into a sharp polemic against Buddhism, while his career found its crowning achievement in the imperial capital of Beijing, leaving behind a life, work, and legacy that is still very much alive today.

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Beijing revisited

By reader 451

No doubt motivated by growing international interest in China, two books have just come out (2011) on Matteo Ricci, the Jesuit who took residence in Beijing in 1601 and the first European to do so since Marco Polo. These two books, however, give a quite different treatment to their material. Po-Chia Hsia's *A Jesuit in the Forbidden City* is essentially a biography of Ricci, while Mary Laven's *Mission to China* is a book about cultural encounters. The results are interestingly complementary even if, or perhaps especially because, the books occasionally clash, whether in their overall portrayal of the famous Jesuit or in their rendering of specific scenes. (A comparative review of both books follows.)

A Jesuit in the Forbidden City has now become the most up-to-date and complete biography of Ricci (it certainly isn't the first). Tracing Ricci's life from his birth in Macerata in the Papal States to his death in Beijing, this offers an exhaustive if traditional account of the missionary's life and accomplishments. Hsia has given close attention to the Italian and Latin material, which are the most abundant, but his advantage is that he is able to read Chinese, and he has managed to unearth new snippets from Ming gazettes and other contemporary materials - this is all the more important that the source material is unsurprisingly weighted towards Ricci's own writing, with all the distortions and gaps this implies. Hsia was also prepared to delve

more thoroughly than was done before into the lives of the various Chinese protagonists, and he sheds new light on key turning points in the mission's progress, for example the Jesuit's crucial first permanent move to Zhaoqing. He is able to provide extra background on the intellectual equipment, Buddhist and Confucian, of many of Ricci's interlocutors, bringing to life debates which, in the Jesuit's published Journal, are given an expectedly one-sided treatment. Hsia's Epilogue, finally, tracing Ricci's legacy from his death to the present, is particularly forceful and interesting.

For all the scholarly quality of *A Jesuit in the Forbidden City*, though, Laven would disagree (up to a point) with its portrayal of the Ricci mission. *Mission to China* places its argument both within the historical debate on Ricci - to what extent Ricci was intellectually honest with the Chinese in adapting Christianity to the Confucian philosophy cherished by the mandarins who were his friends, supporters, and patrons - and without it. Ricci was undoubtedly a man of exceptional intelligence: he was capable, after all, not just of learning Chinese but of holding his own in debates with China's intellectual elite, scholars and men who had gone through the most competitive and difficult examination process ever conceived, or of performing such feats as reciting the Confucian classics backwards and writing books on mathematics in his hosts' language. But Laven argues this has misled historians into giving too much credit to his mission's intellectual dimension and not enough to the role of objects, shared social norms, and images. Hers is a wider point about cultural dialogue, and East-West dialogue in particular: 'We therefore cannot limit the history of encounter to the history of encounter between learned ideas [...] We need to acknowledge a world of rituals, images, and objects, which often speak more eloquently about the interplay between East and West than the learned texts for which the missionaries became famous.' (*Mission to China*, page 30).

Laven's book is more entertaining if less thorough in discussing Ricci's life than *A Jesuit in the Forbidden City*. Beginning with a weird and disquieting Soviet secret-service geographical survey of Cambridge, it makes a whole set of unexpected points about the meeting of cultures past and present. It goes through, for example, the Jesuits' shopping list for the Chinese emperor, complete with ostrich feathers, astrolabes, fabric cuts, and folding screens, drawing intriguing conclusions as to the Jesuits' keen sense of dress. It shows how European and Ming Chinese notions of friendship curiously intersected at the time of Ricci's mission, and pays close attention to the role of gifts within them. It also explains how coincidental booms in book-printing in Europe and China aided the Jesuits. And it ultimately demystifies Ricci, though without necessarily subtracting from his achievements. *A Jesuit in the Forbidden City* and *Mission to China* are likely to appeal to different readers, and Hsia's biography may be essential for students looking for a full and complete chronological account, but they form a wonderful pair: challenging, interesting, and colourful.

18 of 18 people found the following review helpful.

Fascinating biography of an extraordinary personage

By M. J. Sweet

Matteo Ricci, the "Jesuit Mandarin" who established the Catholic mission in China and was a key figure in Chinese-Western cultural contact, first came to the attention of non-specialist English readers with Jonathan Spence's wonderful short book "The Memory Palace of Matteo Ricci," about 25 years ago. Hsia has written the fullest and most scholarly biography of Ricci to date, which is likely to remain the standard English language source for a long time. Far from being a hagiography, Hsia shows Ricci as a brilliant networker and self-marketer, in his moments of despair and pettiness, and his bigotry regarding Buddhism as well. Ricci's achievements were nonetheless monumental, starting from his complete mastery of Chinese and his literary works in that language, his introduction of Western cartography, astronomy, and mathematics to China, and his creative synthesis of Confucian texts and Christian theology. This is an intellectually sophisticated book, and Hsia fully covers the part played by gift-exchange and social rituals in Ricci's success, as are the achievements of his fellow missionaries, European and Chinese. Ricci was a fearless and tenacious person of faith, and the story of his travels and life in China before his eventual residence in Beijing, and his deft

handling of the intrigues of greedy eunuchs and other opponents, make for an exciting read. Highly recommended for anyone with an interest in the encounter of Chinese and Western culture.

8 of 8 people found the following review helpful.

Fascinating read even if you're not sure why you're reading it

By Andrew Gilbert

I was doing research for a project and came across this book and got sucked into the story. Of course it's packed with historical details, but it's so interesting and well put together. I loved it. Great book for anyone curious about what China was like when they first began interacting with the West in the sixteenth century.

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