

SPATIAL MOBILITIES AND CONCEPTUAL IMMOBILITIES:  
THE WRITINGS OF ALESSANDRO VALIGNANO AND  
MATTEO RICCI (JAPAN AND CHINA, 16TH CENTURY)

*Movilidades espaciales e inmovilidades conceptuales: las escrituras de Alessandro Valignano y Matteo Ricci (Japón y China, siglo XVI)*

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**ABSTRACT:** Starting from the concepts «Spatial mobilities and conceptual immobilities», we reflect upon and analyze the writing of two Italian missionaries who moved between the ‘Cinquecento’ and ‘Seicento’ where spatial mobility (territorial expansion of the Catholic orb) and conceptual immobility (fascination, suspicion and fear of the new) converge. We concentrate on the writings of Alessandro Valignano through his missionary manual and Matteo Ricci’s letters as they proceed to decipher alterities by means of the conceptualization of «the barbarian» and the language of «others».

*Keywords:* Valignano; Ricci; Japan; China; missions; Society of Jesus.

**RESUMEN:** A partir de los conceptos de «movilidad espacial e inmovilidad conceptual», este artículo presenta una reflexión y análisis de dos misioneros italianos que entre el ‘Cinquecento’ y el ‘Seicento’, hacen converger la movilidad espacial (expansión territorial del orbe católico) y la inmovilidad conceptual (fascinación, sospecha y temor ante lo nuevo). Nos centraremos en el manual misionero de Alessandro Valignano y las cartas de Matteo Ricci en sus procesos de desciframiento de las alteridades por medio de la conceptualización de la barbarie y el idioma de los «otros».

*Palabras clave:* Valignano; Ricci; Japón; China; misiones; Compañía de Jesús.

## 1. INTRODUCTION<sup>1</sup>

This article aims to explore the beginning of a missional reflection about the forms of comprehension of the «ones,» the «others» and, between the two, the «barbarians» through the concept of *writing in movement*. This *writing in movement*, we hold, produces tensions related to the distances with others, the remoteness, the incapacity to formulate linguistic-conceptual schemes which materialize, for example, in understanding what is barbarian, who the barbarians are, or, by default, to question oneself regarding the impossibility of ever leaving off being barbarian (Prosperi, 1992, 2005). In this sense, *writing in movement* implies a contingency regarding otherness which is contingent and continuous, a relationship. We propose to consider the writing of Alessandro Valignano on Japan and of Matteo Ricci on China at a moment of planetary expansion of the Society of Jesus, and as their search to understand «others» by means of a dense cultural and linguistic deciphering (Boxer, 1951; Dunne, 1962; Elison, 1988; Brockey, 2007). Valignano and Ricci march to the beat of a world in movement in so far as it is part of a project of Catholicism in expansion. From this starting point we believe that the originality of its conceptual proposals of alterity is rooted in that immobility represented in that same writing, in a simultaneous manner as the mobility of Catholic expansionism occurs (Masini, ed., 1996; Standaert, ed., 2000; Garrod and Haskell, 2019).

We reflect upon and analyze the writing of two Italian missionaries who moved between the ‘Cinquecento’ and ‘Seicento’ where spatial mobility (territorial expansion of the Catholic orb) and conceptual immobility (fascination, suspicion

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and fear of the new) converge. We concentrate on Valignano's text *Advertimentos e avisos acerca dos costumes e catangues de Jappão*, known by the name given by Joseph Schütte in the 1946 edition, *Il ceremoniale per i missionari del Giappone* (1946) and in the extraordinary edition of the letters of Ricci named *Lettere* (1580-1609) (Ricci, 2001; D'Elia, 1942-1949)<sup>2</sup>. Their historical dimensions include their biographic itineraries (Marino, 2017a, 2017b; Moran, 1993; Lisón Tolosana, 2005; Tamburello, Üçerler, and di Russo, 2008; Üçerler, 2013), their difficult relations with Rome, the unsuccessful trip to Rome of the Japanese princes organized by Valignano, or also, the interpretations of Confucius, Epictetus or Euclid, and the mnemonic device used to fix Christian doctrine in the «palace of memory» of Ricci (Spence, 1984; Fontana, 2005; Brockey, 2007; Hsia, 2009; Po-Chia Hsia, 2010; Laven, 2011; Hosne, 2013; Cheng, 1997). Furthermore, both had studied many subjects and literature precisely because of the complexity and relevance of their historical experiences in Asia; it is nearly impossible to report everything written about these Jesuits during the last years. In the context of the decade of 2020, we take on the historical problem of spatial mobility and the written representation of the immobilities in their processes of conceptual deciphering of alterities, as Valignano himself wrote about China:

The kingdom of China is so different to all the other kingdoms and nations to be found in all this Orient, both in the quality of the people and their customs, as also in the quality and the fertility of the earth, that it hardly bears a resemblance to the others, but it exceed them all; and is the most important and richest thing to be found in all the Orient (...) (Valignano, 1944: 214-215).

This spatial and cultural excess is expressed later by Ricci in a revealing letter from his early missionary days in Macao on February 13th, 1583, sent to Martino de Fornari in Padua, explaining the conceptual immobility produced in him by his lack of in-depth knowledge of the Chinese language:

I began immediately to study the Chinese language and I promise V.R. that it is something quite different to Greek or German; it is so confusing so far as speaking is concerned because it has many words that have more than a thousand meanings, and sometimes there is no difference between one and another than to pronounce one with a higher or a deeper voice in four different tones; and thus when they speak to each other sometimes they have to write down what they want to say; because in writing one is different from the other (Ricci, 2001: 45)

2. In this text, we do not work on the texts of the missionaries in Chinese. This would be interesting to develop in future work, especially as writing in another language, using different concepts, can also be explored and analyzed as conceptual mobility.

To write about the two Jesuits is to think about a Europe in transit toward other spaces. It is to write about a Catholic world in expansion. Their experiences are the traces of the mondialization of the problems of religious conversion in the East and West Indies in the modern age (Ronan and OH, 1988; Ross, 1994; Clossey, 2008; Worcester, ed., 2008; Fabre and Vincent, 2007; Castelnau-L'Estoile, et.al., 2011; Marcocci, et. al. 2014; Osterhammel, 2018; Županov, 2019). The recognition, acceptance, study, of the «other,» but also the search for religious conversion, finds in the actions of these Jesuits important clues to decipher this context.

Their capacities to adapt, missionary audacity, and their theology and science in the vanguard, confirm them as relevant missionaries of the early modern age. Their strategies of Christianization «from above» and their *sui generis* translation of Japanese and Chinese rituality were called into question not only by Pontifical and Jesuit Rome but also in the theological discussions of the Dominicans and Augustinians calling forth a great body of documentation from nuncios, detractors, visitors, missionaries and followers. The religious, scientific and historiographic production on Valignano and Ricci from that same XVII century is overwhelming. In the last 20 years, both missionaries have been used by historiography as an effective and concrete part of the *englobement* (Romano, 2016; Wendt ed., 2016; Yun-Casalilla, 2019) of the world and as an example of the connected histories produced by the expansionism of Catholic missions. The very entry of Confucius into the culture and debates of the Europe of the Enlightenment are due to Ricci (and Michele Ruggieri and Nicolas Trigault). Valignano in Japan, Roberto dei Nobili in India and Ricci in China all became models of the «desire for the Indies» which, moreover, completed the missionary action of Francis Xavier in Asia (O'Malley, 1984, 1993, 1994; Gaune and Montt, 2021).

To reflect on Valignano and Ricci is also to think on the complexities and ambiguities of the notion «barbaric.» With the classical tradition behind them, in the modern age they asked themselves, moved by the difficulty of finding adequate linguistic-conceptual schemes, what it meant to be «barbaric.» Certainly not everything could be justified by the language or being beyond the *limes*. In this context, the notion was also redefined indirectly in their discussions, their thoughts and their writing. Among them, Michel de Montaigne with his sentencing that «each calls 'Barbarian' what is foreign to his customs» (Montaigne, 2007). Another important text was *De procuranda indorum salute* written by the Jesuit José de Acosta, published in 1577, made known, according to him, the three categories of barbarity (Acosta, 1954).

We do not know whether Valignano or Ricci read Montaigne and Acosta. Nevertheless, it is likely that their texts were discussed as controversies or accepted as hypotheses. In the case of Montaigne, to paraphrase Carlo Ginzburg, if the missionaries did not travel with the essays in their pockets, at least they were on

their minds (Ginzburg, 2000, 2006; De Certeau, 1981). Beyond any doubt, both Montaigne and Acosta altered the notion of «barbaric», since, for the Frenchman, the cannibals could also be considered another culture. On the other hand, for the Jesuit, there was not only one kind of barbarity but rather three classes or categories that descended according to sociocultural complexity. The Chinese and the Japanese were situated in the first category because:

... they do not stray far from right reason and common practices of mankind; and to these belong a stable republic, public laws, fortified cities, magistrates who are obeyed and most important of all, the use and knowledge of letters, because wherever there are books and written monuments, people are more humane and political. To this class belong, in the first place, the Chinese, who have characters for writing similar to the Syriac language, which I have seen, and they say they have reached great prosperity in abundance of books, splendor of academies, authority of the law and magistrates, and magnificence of public buildings and monuments. They are followed by the Japanese and many other provinces of Eastern India (Acosta, 1954: 392).

Valignano took up the challenge of making Christians out of some «barbarians,» presenting more complexity to the European imagination than the Christianization of America. He was born in Chieti (Italy) in 1539 and died in Macao (China) on January 20, 1606, Rector in 1572 of the Jesuit College of Macerata, and, in reference to his relationship with Japan, in 1573 he was named Visitor to the East Indies; in 1583 he was elected Provincial of the East Indies. He arrived in Japan on July 25, 1579, a date that marked the beginning of his first residence that lasted until 1582. His second residence was from 1590 until 1592. During his first residence in October 1581 in Bungo, after his trip through Miyako and Nagasaki, he wrote the *Advertimentos* in a day and a night according to his letters.

Ricci was born in Macerata (Italy) in 1552, and died, as did Valignano, in China (Peking) on May 11, 1610, marking a before and after for relations between Europe, China and the world. On that day, Ricci dies, known in China as Li Madou (利瑪竇), one of the most esteemed Jesuit missionaries in the world to this day. Ricci traced out a continuity with the trips and explorations of Marco Polo, the Venetian and the writing of the Augustinian Juan González de Mendoza in his monumental *Historia de las cosas más notables, ritos y costumbres, del gran Reyno de la China* (1585; Sola, 2018). Nevertheless, there was also discontinuity, in his deepening the European idea of China as a world of literati with a cultural elite fond of the study of mathematics, astronomy and philosophy. On the same lines, after his death, something we could even call «orientalism» developed as regards China, since there arose a cartography that was curious, imaginary, imagined, represented, and an object of scientific knowledge, and which no doubt, has many roots in Ricci's

texts which circulated in Europe after 1610. In Ricci, otherness is constructed partly on the decisive distance of language.

Ricci emerges many times historiographically as the *telos* of a project and of a continuous process; his death appears as a corollary and the beginning of a process of continuous dialogue between «East» and «West» interrupted by the theological parenthesis of the «Chinese rites» (Minamiki, 1985; Mungello, ed., 1994; Zupanov and Fabre, 2018). Nevertheless, the historic journey of the Jesuit and the Jesuits in China, as that of those who followed them, is marked by the great problem of the language they struggled to understand, by the distance from Rome, and the economic problems to keep up the missions and their missionary strategies which situates them geographically in a space that is «other» to Europe.

## 2. THE CERIMONIALE OF VALIGNANO AND RICCI'S MIRRORS

Written in Portuguese and accepted by the General in 1585, the *Advertimentos* generated a great discussion within the Order which we can even track down obliquely over a long lapse of time to the controversy over the «Chinese rites» which occurred during between 1634 and 1742. In this work, product of three years of study and trips to Japan, Valignano tried to decipher the culture and its rites. A general exhortation and seven chapters which, taken together, make up the material of one of the most original missionary texts written in the modern era.

In what way, did Valignano come to analyze, from a missionary perspective, these sociocultural problems of a Japan controlled by feudal princes? Could one conjecture that the Jesuit had to begin from a redefinition of a concept such as «barbarian» or rather «the barbaric» that, according to his experience, was structured in a more complex manner than the one we saw described by, for example, Montaigne or Acosta. As stated above, what happened when the perception of the barbarian was directed at the Westerners? From this analytic and methodological premise Valignano began to map out possible replies to his project of social, cultural and religious discipline. He confirmed it thus in a letter written in Spanish and sent from Goa to Rome on November 19, 1595, pointing out to Claudio Acquaviva a few lineaments of his missionary proposal:

... to carry out the operations we have in various provinces that cultivate Christianity and carry forward conversion, help is necessary not only from foreigners from the Provinces of Europe who might come to our aid, but so are the Portuguese as well loved and as helpful as the foreigners. This is proved also very clearly as far as the 2nd, because with Christianity and conversion in our charge in various provinces, one is as much a foreigner as another because they have no communication nor system of symbols, neither in their customs nor in their language, neither in their manner of proceeding are some more than others, neither do the inhabitants of

those places understand or differentiate between Castilians, Italians, Portuguese, but those who are more virtuous and learn the language better and were better able to accommodate themselves to them, these are the most beloved, most useful and most esteemed of them, as experience clearly shows (Wicki, 1988: 214)

From this cultural premise, that we can consider acknowledging what is barbarian as though it were one's own, the Jesuit understood two key points from the Japanese context: the importance of customs as artefacts to be studied, and in so far as they are artifacts, they must above all, be assimilated. Valignano accepts the *katagi* so as not to be considered «barbarian» and to be able to participate in the Japanese ceremonials. For this reason, it was necessary to learn the language and points of courtesy, a beginning of the assimilation that would bring the missionaries to a much more sophisticated strategy: the *accommodatio* (Funkestein, 1986; Standaert, 2003; Mungello, 1985; Proserpi, 1999; Rubies, 2005, 2012). In a fragment from a letter written in Spanish from the province of Bungo, on October 7, 1581, the Jesuit offers hints about his chronology of adaptation to the General of the Society. From the state of being «mute as a statue» to «understanding how to manage Japan,» is how Valignano sketches out the three years he spent studying Japanese culture. In his words:

... the first year went by completely, and I was as dumb as a statue. I only understood what was said by the others. Each one, as can easily be understood, said things as they understood them, because intelligence regarding important things is not a gift given to all in equal measure. Because of this, during that first year I found no solution to my disorientation. In the second year, with some more experience, I began to evaluate the situation with more clarity. And now, in my third year, I am able to understand how Japan must be managed (ARSI, Roma, *Jap. Sin.*, 9 I, f. 36)

What was it the Jesuit understood? Apparently, he understood one radical element, and at the same time, one limitation: they would continue to be considered barbarians unless they adopted the traditions and customs of Japan. In the same way, he was conscious of the usefulness of language so as not to be a statue. However, Valignano added a more subtle strategy consisting of applying the hierarchy of *Zenshû* Buddhism to the organization between Jesuits and in their relations with the Japanese. It is here where Valignano's interpretation of the figure of the *bonzo*, or the Buddhist religious, gains importance and that will be the most controversial and discussed of his principles. This can be observed in a letter sent from Rome, by Acquaviva, on December 24, 1585, where a criticism and some preoccupation are revealed concerning the adaptation of the Jesuit missionary:

Nevertheless, I feel great difficulty and am afraid to damage something, that is, in what V.R. says, that as far as honors go and the way of treating each other with courtesy we must be happy to follow the Bonzi, so as not to become contemptible,

both ourselves and much more so, our laws, there not being other prelates, we have to take the place of prelates, pastors, etc. and keep up our ecclesiastic dignity; because since Our Lord God no longer arrives with [...] miracles and the gifts of prophecy, and these people are so moved by these exterior things, it is necessary to accommodate ourselves to them and yield, to later win them over (Valignano, 1946: 317-318)

Rome feared that the Japanese, because of the Jesuit adaptation to *bonzi* Buddhism, would think that Christianity was another school of Zen Buddhism (Vu Thanh, 2011). This was later redefined by Ricci, understanding that in China the *bonzi* were not particularly esteemed, and that therefore, the adaptation of the Jesuits should be among the Chinese literati and not the Buddhist priests. In the case of Japan, Valignano never held the *bonzi* in low esteem, a difference with Ricci's interpretation in China. Once again, local contexts shaped missionary practices.

In this sense, Valignano, in his Chapter I, «Del modo che si ha da tenere per acquistare e conservare autorità nel trattare coi giapponesi», explained his option for adaptation to the *Zenshû*. The fragment was controversial for Roman orthodoxy but at the same time it was an extremely original, bold and avant-garde fragment as far as strategies for Christianization were concerned:

Therefore, so that the Fathers and Brothers should know how to proceed, it is necessary above all to determine and know well, which is their position, and the respective level that corresponds to the dignities and honors the bonzos have, to be able to interact with them and other Japanese lords.

To this end, it seems that the Fathers and Brothers, who are the bonzos of the Christian religion, should at least situate themselves at the very same levels as the bonzi of the *Zenshû* sect. This sect is held in Japan to be the principal one among all of them and it has the most contact with every kind of people in Japan. Among these [*Zenshû*], the principal leaders are called Tôdo or Chôrô, which is the same thing (Valignano, 1946: 123-125)

In the Jesuit's reading, missionaries had to become *bonzi* of the Catholic religion to obtain, in the Italian's words, authority, respect, love, and trust. In this way the three sources of religious adaptation—biblical exegesis, classic rhetoric and prudence, and the development of the modern mission—were to be linked with a complex local context where the intellectual formation of a Jesuit and his missionary practice, came together with the spaces dominated by the *Daimyo* and by Buddhism. The «gentle way» was defined by Valignano as a new strategy of Christianization, becoming at the same time, a new form of cultural survival. Valignano's premise was that the Japanese ritual must be assimilated and adapted, or the expansion of Christianity in Eastern Asia was at an end. Following this logic, Valignano applied the hierarchic codes of Buddhism, while the process of the «gentle way» considered priesthood



training for the youth of the Japanese ruling elite. This is demonstrated by the trip to Rome planned for the young Japanese ambassadors so they could become acquainted with the benefits and advantages of Catholicism. This inverse trip, that is, the «others» (from Valignano's point of view) travelling to Rome (West), also produced a text written in Latin by Valignano, called *Catechismus Christiannae Fidei*, published in 1586 (Valignano, 1586; Bernard, 1938, pp. 378-385; Cooper, 2005) where he explained the «truths» of the Catholic religion to the youth of the Japanese ruling class.

Notwithstanding this opening toward cultural differences, the Jesuit also outlined harsh criticisms of the Japanese for being gentiles and not knowing the true God. In this sense, his intellectual openness is also a product of the search for religious conversion as an unquestionable end. In this sense, there is no interest in abandoning the notion of «otherness» on which the relationship with the Japanese is built. In his Chapter II, «Del modo che si ha da tenere per rendere familiari i cristiani,» there appear harsh criticisms of Japanese gentiles as well as of ignorant persons lacking in doctrine making use of the sacraments:

Although inducing Christians to confession and to receive the Holy Sacrament on the Altar is the best way to make them true Christians, nonetheless, since these are new Christians, and everyday there are persons becoming new Christians, one should not be in too great a hurry to use these means with them. Because first of all, they need to have the necessary time to make them apt to receive these sacraments, since, having lived so long with so very depraved habits and traditions, and there being so much ignorance and lack of doctrine concerning the things of God [...]  
(Valignano, 1946: 169)

This fragment allows us to situate the *Advertimentos* more comprehensively. What appears to be a text that presents a rigorous code of behaviors and norms that westerners must follow to assimilate and adapt to the local context, was also a rigorous process of sociocultural discipline that justified the two-way adaptation between missionaries and Japanese. With these norms and courtesies, the Jesuits wished to create an image of «authority» and «courtesy» in Japan. The *katagi*, filtered through a western perspective, was considered by Valignano to be a set of norms and traditions of an external rituality that had to be excised little by little. The Japanese rite, externalized in a practice without meaning, considered as an artefact, had to be ritualized internally. Beyond norms of behavior, courtesies, or studies of usages and customs, Valignano elaborated a complex notion of Christianization which was to descend hierarchically from on high to all the different levels of the social sphere. They adapted to exterior rituality in order to internalize ritual Christianization.

The vicissitudes of the *accommodatio*, the controversy about the «Chinese rites» that ended the Jesuit experience in China and the «Orient» with the *Ex quo*

papal bull in 1742, the edicts prohibiting Christianity in Japan beginning in 1614, the persecutions, the thirty one priests martyred in Japan between 1617 and 1632, most of them crucified, marked the failure of religious adaptation in Eastern Asia (Vu Thanh, 2018). However, a text like the *Advertimentos*, constituent part of this geographically localized failure of the Catholic mission, a sort of mirror that projects itself toward Ricci in China, also sets up global questions.

### 3. WITHOUT VALIGNANO THERE IS NO RICCI

As demonstrated by Giuseppe Marino, without Valignano there would not have been a Ricci, since he was the first to encourage thorough learning of the Chinese language and culture, the study and transcription of classical Chinese works and the authorized change in vestments, among other things (Ross, 1999: 510-511; Po-Chia Hsia, 2008: 99-110; Marino, 2017a, 2017b: 395-428). When Ricci learned of Valignano's death, he wrote a letter from Peking to the General of the Society of Jesus, Claudio Acquaviva, dated August 15, 1606. The letter conveys strong sentiments of loneliness and yearning in the face of grief: «In this year, among the other troubles, which are never absent here, we have this great loss of the death of Reverend Valignano, father of this mission, whose loss makes us all orphans.» (Ricci, 2001: 423).

The feeling of having been orphaned expressed by Ricci represents the intense bond with Valignano. Two important letters written by Ricci to Valignano sent from the city of Shaozhou speak to this point. The first was written in Portuguese on September 9, 1589 (Ricci, 2001: 127-146) and the second in Spanish on October 30 of the same year (Ricci, 2001: 147-155). If these letters are read with little knowledge of the two missionaries, they seem to be providing explanations, the sort of descriptions made by a missionary to his superior, a version transmitted by a subordinate to an authority. But if we consider the Jesuits' situation in China, the letters take on the importance of valuable fragments regarding the entry of Christianity in Eastern Asia. The epistolary communication between the authors is dense, deep and full of historic evidence. But the letters also allow us to review the dimension of interchange in a situation of limited mobility.

There are many signs of the relationship between these two Jesuits. Ricci arrived from Macerata to Rome on August 15, 1571, to enter the San Andrés Jesuit novitiate on the Monte Quirinale. Valignano was there, as substitute master of novices, opening the doors for young Ricci. The meeting in that city was a true metaphor for their future relation and for the perspectives in that novitiate that was just beginning, but also for their joint approach to the «Orient». Furthermore, in 1572 Valignano was rector of the Jesuit College in Macerata, where Ricci was born and where he had studied before going to Rome. In 1573, when Valignano was named Visitor of the

East Indies and in 1583, when Rome asks him to be Provincial of the East Indies, the two Jesuits make their significant entry to Japan, China and the Indies. Moreover, the meaning of this trip took on new vitality with Ricci's arrival in 1582 to the city of Macao to take charge of the missions in China by Valignano's request. With an extraordinary capacity to adapt and decipher the new sociocultural and linguistic reality, in 1583 Ricci was already established in Zhaoqing. Possibly the last time they met was in 1593 in Macao, to discuss the new strategies of Christianization the Society should adopt.

Valignano, being Ricci's direct superior in China, always opened new roads for him. He continually guided him and accepted his proposals. In this sense, there are two traits in their relationship which stand out and which consolidate the entry of Christianity into that nation. In 1594, Valignano, as a good reader of the Asian context and using his faculties as Provincial of the Oriental Indies, authorized Ricci to innovate regarding the use of his Chinese clothes by changing his *bonzo* clothes for the silk attire of the literati. He furthermore was permitted to grow out his hair and beard, and the possibility of wearing a hat was considered, as Ricci himself confirms in a letter of October 7, 1595 sent to Rome to the Jesuit Girolomao Benci.

We were all dressed in the Chinese fashion using the square berretta in memory of the cross. This year I deprived myself of this too, since I used a very extravagant berretta. It was pointy as those worn by bishops, to become totally Chinese on a trip I made another month farther on, and I arrived at the old court, which is the metropolis of the kingdom. (Ricci, 2001: 269)

This was a decisive step for the Society, as it allowed deeper geographic, cultural, social and linguistic knowledge. It was a signal of an effective way to accommodate and adapt to as well as decipher local reality. Another aspect of importance was Ricci's *Tianzhu shiyi* (*The true meaning of the Lord of Heaven*), published in 1603 (1985). This text replaces the first Christian work in the Chinese language, *Tianzhu shilu* (*The true explanation of the Lord of Heaven*) written by Michele Ruggieri, the first European sinologist, possibly with Ricci's help in 1584. The publication and circulation of the *Tianzhu shiyi* was requested by Valignano in Japan, due to the ability of the Japanese, according to him, to read Chinese characters.

The figure of Valignano always emerges in Ricci's writing as «the father of this mission» or «our visitor», incarnated as a model of authority, following the proper hierarchy of the Society, but also as a model of wisdom. We can take their intense epistolary interchange for granted since Ricci always references the long trajectory of questions and answers between the two of them in other letters. Unfortunately, these letters were lost in shipwrecks, in overland caravans, by the forgetfulness of other missionaries, by mistaking cities or by arrival at the wrong port. In this interchange of ideas, in the uncertainty regarding the arrival of manuscripts to

their destinies, in questions that received no answers or answers that are written on the go, the letter written in Portuguese on September 9, 1589, is of extraordinary density and can be considered through the notion of *writing in movement*. Here we have a Ricci concentrating deeply, his heartbeats are there on the paper, his inroads and advances into China. The text begins with a reference to the decree of proscription of the Jesuits from Zhaoqing and of the journey with his companions to Shaozhou. He offers Valignano a detailed account of the trip and of the new geography he is discovering as also an antiquarian's description of the temples. But what is fundamental is that Ricci's fame emerges in his circuit through Chinese territory. As might be expected, his first preoccupation was the language. This is what he describes: «Here the Mandarin language is very well spoken, with good pronunciation; so much so that I understand a lot of it because it is nearly different to the language of Zhaoqing, to the point that not even the Mandarin could understand them (...)» (Ricci, 2001: 136). Without language problems, what was essential for him was his routine as a missionary. Little by little the letter is submerged in the Ricci we know, in the methodical missionary who knows the oriental rites and how to behave as necessity dictates:

On arrival in the city, I immediately prepared the books to go and visit the *bingbei dao*, as it is the custom to pay a visit to the others to give them our credentials and let them know what our intentions were. That is because he is new and knows nothing about us. Therefore, I briefly told him about our arrival in China and how we had been received by the *dutang*, and that we had been for quite a long time in Zhaoqing and that know this *datang* sent us here, to his land, and we had been in Nanhua, where it did not seem such a good idea to reside for any length of time, because in this place there were many fathers who professed a doctrine different to ours. (Ricci, 2001: 136-137)

Ricci's words are the form missionaries in Asia used to accommodate to others by means of the formalities they learned day by day. In Ricci's words, this sound simple, but it implied years of embracing Chinese culture, following Valignano's path, a process accompanied by the controversies it generated. *Writing in movement* sheds light on the tensions involved regarding who is the letter addressed to, if the letter will ever arrive, and where there is a continual shift regarding the self, we, and others; and of the role of the missionaries themselves. There is, for example, a valuable fragment in the letter to understand how in seven years, according to himself, this missionary had already won fame. He was seen on the streets of Shaozhou as an alchemist, an astrologer, a cosmographer. He was even considered a person who could perform miracles:

I went to visit all of them that were very full of people, so much so that, because of the fame of our miracles they had heard of in Zhaoqing, they would not let me through: all the mandarins treated me with much courtesy and gave me tea, except

for the *chayuan*, who is a bizarre *jiancha*, and having heard some things about us, wanted to show he knew much more. Creating various difficulties for us, he wanted to know at all cost what we intended; and the ability he had in asking whether we knew how to make silver! Finally, he came to the point by saying I was a great astrologist and cosmographer and that I knew how to draw the whole world and that already in Zhaoqing they had printed what I had drawn. (Ricci, 2001: 139-140)

This quotation makes clear that there is a clear construction as «others» of the figure of Ricci and the missionaries in China, recognizable and recognized in public spaces. This is an extraordinary text since it is a sort of anthology that goes from the astrologer to the miracle worker, from *bonzo* to *litterati*, from Macerata to the option of getting to know all Eastern Asia. Ricci acquired the language, and worked as a cartographer and proto ethnographer, with a fine understanding of the social complexity of China. The more he learned cartography and ethnography of the country the more the frontiers of his own territoriality became manifest. The letter, as one might expect, ends with a general expression of gratitude to Valignano: «We thank V.R. very much for your prayers and those masses which have helped us very much and without doubt one must attribute to them the success Our Lord continually gives to this enterprise» (Ricci, 2001; 146). After reading this letter and knowing about the experiences of Valignano and of Ricci, one cannot think of the West without bearing the East in mind, even if the terms «East» and «West» themselves were rarely used by the missionaries themselves. However, the link between both Jesuits offers the contemporary reader not only fragments of lives or Christianity in Japan and China, but also the possibility to decipher, just as they did, the ways in which, even today, the relationship between both «hemispheres» are articulated. In this sense, while spatial mobilities and conceptual immobilities are thus linked, it is also possible to think that spatial immobility may also lead to conceptual mobility; the time that Ricci spent in China allowed for his pre-set conceptions to shift.

#### 4. CONCLUSIONS

During the years 2020 and 2021, we saw people worldwide confined to reduced spaces, with proximity to one another interrupted, accompanied by systematic mistrust toward others. From this context, our thoughts turn to those modes of writing which symbolically and literally represent those immobilities of the sociocultural spaces we inhabit. It leads us to consider how writing allows us to relate to the other, to dialogue with, interact, and even be, the other. Our thoughts turn to actors and authors who, like many others, have crossed the limits of conceptualizations of alterity: the Jesuits Alessandro Valignano and Matteo Ricci, who innovatively invert the crossways between East and West. The practical knowledge of Valignano and Ricci, as also their epistolary exchanges and

their experience in Eastern Asia, occurred when the experience of mobility was more complex than at present. This leads us to reflect on the forms they took on and described in their experiences as missionaries, their relation with the other «barbarians», and the materiality of their writing as a mode of exchange.

Taking into account the changes and continuities of temporal distances, at a time when being confined is a shared experience due to the Covid-19 pandemic, we ask ourselves: In what ways does writing help to establish bonds with one's peers, at the same time it defines «others» and ways of relating vertically, or horizontally, to them? Can we write while in movement and in the company of unknown persons? Thus, an oblique question to this problem is whether what we here define as *writing in movement* of the missionaries, is opposed to the exercise of writing while alone, in exile, or in seclusion. Let us take, for example, Dante Alighieri and Niccolò Machiavelli in exile, Thomas More confined to the Tower of London, William Shakespeare closed in by the plague, Michel de Montaigne in self-seclusion from the world in his own tower, or the introspections of solitude of Blaise Pascal and Baruch Spinoza. In this sense, and, as part of the preceding problem, where can we situate missionary writing? We suggest that missionary writing specifically the writing that refers to sociocultural and conceptual deciphering of others in contexts of religious conversion, shares the problem of distance with writing in solitude, exile, and seclusion (Morales, 2005, 2014, 2011; Correia Afonso, 1955; Palomo, 2005; Chinchilla and Romano, 2008; Bernier, Donato and Lüsebrink, 2014; Díaz Blanco, 2014; Fabre, 2014; Fechner and Wilde, 2020). Distance gives perspective to the questions analyzed and the place from which they are written (Ginzburg, 2019), but is different in so far as the missionary moves between spatial mobility and conceptual immobility facing the fear and fascination of the new and diverse on the same ground.

These Jesuits demonstrate a way of mission making, a way of being Jesuit, that endeavoured to decipher what they could not understand. These are missionaries who coincided with the planetary expansion of the Society when Acquaviva was General (1581-1615) (*Epistolae Praepositorum* 1635; *Lettere de' Prepositi Generali a' Padri*, 1606; Guibert, 1941; Rosa, 1960; de Certeau, 1974; Guerra, 2001; Broggio, Cantù, Fabre and Romano, 2007) and after death, would be part of secular controversies about the politics of *accommodatio* and the «Chinese rites.» They were authors, avant-garde in their strategies, writers, and translators. They had broad protoethnographic aspirations, strong training in education, and capacity for fieldwork. They were forged in the footsteps of St. Francis Xavier, patron saint of missionaries who died in China (1552). Furthermore, they are part of a long list of Jesuits spread out over the globe and on all the oceans of the world who were mediators between, and interpreters of, two worlds. We could add a myriad adjectives and many pages about these Jesuit missionaries, because they opened the

door to a Continent and their thought moved in two directions, from «West» to «East» and from «East» to «West».

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