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Chinese Cultural Studies:

Matteo Ricci:

On Chinese Government, Selection from his Journals  
(1583-1610 CE)

from The Diary of Matthew Ricci, in Matthew Ricci, *China in the Sixteenth Century*, trans Louis Gallagher, (New York: Random House, 1942, 1970), as excerpted in Mark A. Kishlansky, *Sources of World History*, Vol. 1 (New York: HarperCollins, 1995), p. 269-273

[Kishlansky Introduction] Matteo Ricci (1552-1610 CE) was born into a noble Italian family. At the age of 16 he was sent to Rome to study law but became more interested in the new science that was sweeping Western Europe. He studied mathematics and astronomy and then petitioned to join the Jesuits. He was sent on a Jesuit mission to the Far East and studied for the priesthood in east India. He was assigned the difficult task of organizing a mission to China, a task at which earlier Jesuit missionaries had failed. Ricci learned the Chinese language with such proficiency that he persuaded officials to allow him into the country where he taught Chinese intellectuals about mathematics and science and published the first six books of Euclid's *Elements* in Chinese. After a long delay he was finally allowed to enter the closed City of Peking in 1601, where he stayed for the rest of his life teaching science, mathematics, and Christianity to Chinese intellectuals.

Ricci's most important published work was his *History of the Introduction of Christianity into China*. But the journals that he kept and edited for publication allow one of the few glimpses of an outsider's view of Chinese society and government during a period when China was closed to foreign visitors. In this selection Ricci describes Chinese government.

We shall touch upon this subject only insofar as it has to do with the purpose of our narrative. It would require a number of chapters, if not of whole books, to treat in full detail... Chinese imperial power passes on from father to son, or to other royal kin as does our own. Two or three of the more ancient kings are known to have bequeathed the throne to successors without out royal relationship rather than to their sons, whom they judged to be unfitted to rule. More than once, however., it has happened that the people, growing weary of an inept ruler, have stripped him of his authority and

replaced him with someone preeminent for character and courage whom they henceforth recognized as their legitimate King. It may be said in praise of the Chinese that, ordinarily they would prefer to die an honorable death rather than swear allegiance to a usurping monarch. In fact, there is a proverb extant among their philosophers, which reads: "No woman is moral who has two husbands, nor any vassal faithful to two lords."

There are no ancient laws in China under which the republic is governed in perpetuum, such as our laws of the twelve tables and the Code of Caesar.

Whoever succeeds in getting possession of the throne, regardless of his ancestry, makes new laws according to his own way of thinking. His successors on the throne are obliged to enforce the laws which he promulgated as founder of the dynasty, and these laws cannot be changed without good reason....

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The extent of their kingdom is so vast, its borders so distant, and their utter lack of knowledge of a transmaritime world is so complete that the Chinese imagine the whole world as included in their kingdom. Even now, as from time beyond recording, they call their Emperor, Thien-cu, the Son of Heaven, and because they worship Heaven as the Supreme Being, the Son of Heaven and the Son of God are one and the same. In ordinary speech, he is referred to as Hoamsi, meaning supreme ruler or monarch, while other and subordinate rulers are called by the much inferior title of Guam.

Only such as have earned a doctor's degree or that of licentiate are admitted to take part in the government of the kingdom, and due to the interest of the magistrates and of the King himself there is no lack of such candidates. Every public office is therefore fortified with and dependent on the attested science, prudence, and diplomacy of the person assigned to it whether he be taking office for the first time or is already experienced in the conduct of civil life. This integrity of life is prescribed by... law... and for the most part it is lived up to, save in the case of such as are prone to violate the dictates of justice from human weakness and from lack of religious training among the gentiles. All magistrates, whether they belong to the military or to the civil congress, are called Quon-fu, meaning commander or president, though their honorary or unofficial title is Lau-ye or Lau-sie, signifying lord or father.

The Portuguese call the Chinese magistrates, mandarins, probably from mandando, mando mandare, to order or command, and they are now generally known by this title in Europe.

Though we have already stated that the Chinese form of government, is monarchical, it must be evident from what has been said, and it will be made clearer by what is to come, that it is to some extent an aristocracy. Although all legal statutes inaugurated by magistrates must be confirmed by the King

in writing on the written petition presented to him, the King himself makes no final decision in important matters of state without consulting the magistrates or considering their advice....

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Tax returns, impost, and other tribute, which undoubtedly exceed a hundred and fifty million a year, as is commonly said, do not go into the Imperial

Exchequer, nor can the king dispose of this income as he pleases. The silver, which is the common currency, is placed in the public treasuries, and the

returns paid in rice are placed in the warehouses belonging to the government. The generous allowance made for the support of the royal family and

their relatives, for the palace eunuchs and the royal household, is drawn from the national treasury. In keeping with the regal splendor and dignity of the

crown, these annuities are large, but each individual account is determined and regulated by law. Civil and military accounts and expenses of all

government departments are paid out of this national treasury, and the size of the national budget is far in excess of what Europeans might imagine.

Public buildings, the palaces of the King and of his relations, the upkeep of city prisons and fortresses, and the renewal of all kinds of war supplies must

be met by the national treasury, and in a kingdom of such vast dimensions the program of building and of restoration is continuous. One would scarcely

believe that at times even these enormous revenues are not sufficient to meet the expenses. When this happens, new taxes are imposed to balance the national budget.

Relative to the magistrates in general, there are two distinct orders or grades. The first and superior order is made up of the magistrates who govern the

various courts of the royal palace, which is considered to be a model for the rule of the entire realm. The second order includes all provincial

magistrates or governors who rule a province or a city. For each of these orders of magistrates, there are five or six large books containing the

governmental roster of the entire country. These books are for sale throughout the kingdom. They are being continually revised, and the revision, which

is dated twice a month in the royal city of Peking, is not very difficult because of the singular typographical arrangement in which they are printed. The

entire contents of these books consist of nothing other than the current lists of the names, addresses, and grades of the court officers of the entire

government, and the frequent revision is necessary if the roster is to be kept up to date. In addition to the daily changes, occasioned by deaths,

demotions, and dismissals in such an incredibly long list of names, there are the frequent departures of some to visit their homes at stated periods. We

shall say more later on of this last instance, which is occasioned by the custom requiring every magistrate to lay aside his official duties and return to his

home for three full years, on the death of his father or his mother. One result of these numerous changes is that there are always a great many in the city

of Peking awaiting the good fortune of being appointed to the vacancies thus created.

Besides the classes or orders of the magistrates already described and many others which we shall pass over because they differ but little from our own, there are two special orders never heard of among our people. These are the Choli and the- Zauli, each consisting of sixty or more chosen philosophers. all prudent men arid tried. who have -already given exceptional proof of their fidelity to the King and to the realm. These two orders are reserved by the King for business of greater moment pertaining to the royal court or to the provinces, and by him they are entrusted with the great responsibility of carrying with it both respect and authority. They correspond in some manner to what we would call keepers of the public conscience, inasmuch as they inform the King as often as they see fit, of any infraction of the law in any part of the entire kingdom. No one is spared from their scrutiny, even the highest magistrates, as they do not hesitate to speak, even though it concerns the King himself or his household. If they had the power of doing something more than talking, or rather of writing, and if they were not wholly dependent upon the King whom they admonish, their particular office would correspond to that of the Lacedemonian Ephors. And yet they do their duty so thoroughly that they are a source of wonder to outsiders and a good example for imitation. Neither King nor magistrates can escape their courage and frankness, and even when they arouse the royal wrath to such an extent that the king becomes severely angry with them they will never desist from their admonitions and criticism until some remedy has been applied to the public evil against which they are inveighing. In fact. when the grievance is particularly acute they are sure to put a sting into their complaints and to show no partiality where crown or courts are concerned. This same privilege of offering written criticism is also granted by law to any magistrate and even to a private citizen, but for the most part it is exercised only by those to whose particular office it pertains. Numerous copies are made of such written documents submitted to the crown and of the answers made to them In this way, what goes on in the royal headquarters is quickly communicated to every corner of the country. These documents are also compiled in book form, and whatever of their content is deemed worthy of handing down to posterity is transcribed into the annals of the king's regime.

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Besides the regular magistrates there are in the royal palace various other organizations, instituted for particular purposes. The most exalted of these is what is known as the Han-lin-yuen, made up of selected doctors of philosophy and chosen by examination. Members of this cabinet have nothing to do with public administration but outrank all public officials in dignity of office. Ambition for a place in this select body means no end of labor and of sacrifice. These are the King's secretaries, who do both his writing and his composing. They edit and compile the royal annals and publish the laws and

statutes of the land. The tutors of kings and princes are chosen from their number. They are entirely devoted to study and there are grades within the cabinet which are determined by the publications of its members. Hence they are honored with the highest dignity within the regal court. but not beyond it...

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The Chinese can distinguish between their magistrates by the parasols they use as protection against the sun when they go out in public. Some of these are blue and others yellow. Sometimes for effect they will have two or three of these sunshades, but only one if their rank does not permit of more.

They may also be recognized by their mode of transportation in public. The lower ranks ride on horseback, the higher are carried about on the shoulders of their servants in gestatorial chairs. The number of carriers also has significance of rank; some are only allowed four, others may have eight.

There are other ways also of distinguishing the magistracy and the rank of dignity therein; by banners and pennants, chains and censer cups, and by the number of guards who give orders to make way for the passage of the dignitary. The escort itself is held in such high esteem by the public that no one would question their orders. Even in crowded city everyone gives way at the sound of their voices with a spontaneity that correspond to the rank of the approaching celebrity.

Before closing this chapter on Chinese public administration, it would seem to be quite worthwhile recording a few more things in which this people differ from Europeans. To begin with, it seems to be quite remarkable when we stop to consider it, that in a kingdom of almost limitless expanse and innumerable population and abounding in copious supplies of every description, though they have a well-equipped army and navy that could easily conquer the neighboring nations, neither the King nor his people ever think of waging a war of aggression. They are quite content with what they have and are not ambitious of conquest. In this respect they are much different from the people of Europe, who are frequently discontent with their own governments and covetous of what others enjoy. While the nations of the West seem to be entirely consumed with the idea of supreme domination, they cannot even preserve what their ancestors have bequeathed them, as the Chinese have done through a period of some thousand of years....

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Another remarkable fact and quite worthy of note as marking a difference from the West, is that the entire kingdom is administered by the Order of the Learned, commonly known as The Philosophers. The responsibility for the orderly management of the entire realm is wholly and completely committed

to their charge and care. The army, both officers and soldiers, hold them in high respect and show them the promptest obedience and deference, and not infrequently the military are disciplined by them as a schoolboy might be punished by his master. Policies of war are formulated and military questions are decided by the Philosophers only, and their advice and counsel has more weight with the King than that of the military leaders. In fact very few of these and only on rare occasions, are admitted to war consultations. Hence it follows that those who aspire to be cultured frown upon war and would prefer the lowest rank in the philosophical order to the highest in the military, realizing that the Philosophers far excel military leaders in the good will and the respect of the people and in opportunities of acquiring wealth.

[Kishlansky Questions]

1. What is the relationship between emperor and magistrate in Ricci's account of Chinese administration?
2. What characteristics of Chinese government does Ricci most admire?
3. What is the role of the Choli and the Zauli?
4. Why did Ricci write the Journal? Who was his intended audience?
5. Do you think that Ricci's description of Chinese government is accurate?