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## “Like the Hebrews in Spain”: The Jesuit Encounter with Muslims in China and the Problem of Cultural Change\*

“Como los hebreos en España”: El encuentro de  
los jesuitas con los musulmanes y el problema  
del cambio cultural

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This essay is concerned with the possibility of cultural change in the writings of Matteo Ricci. In order to elucidate this question, this essay discusses aspects of Matteo Ricci's perception of Islam and Muslims in China and identifies the moments when they changed. I show that over time Ricci developed a much more nuanced perception of Islam in China, but argue still that his views remained quite limited because of lack of dialogue with Muslims he saw in China. These limitations, I also argue, reflect the limitations of European views of Islam in the early modern Euro-Mediterranean world. Recognizing these limitations, I suggest, might help us to develop new approaches to questions of religion in early modern China.

*Key words:* Matteo Ricci, Alvaro Semedo, Mnemonics, Islam, China, Conversos (Jews), Huihui.

Este trabajo trata de las posibilidades del cambio cultural en los escritos de Matteo Ricci. Para poder conocer mejor esta cuestión, este estudio discute diversos aspectos de la percepción de Matteo Ricci sobre el Islam y los musulmanes en China, identificando los momentos en los que cambia. He podido mostrar cómo, a lo largo del tiempo, Ricci desarrolló una percepción cada vez más matizada del Islam en China, pero sostengo que sus opiniones se mantuvieron bastante fijas debido a su falta de diálogo con los musulmanes de esa zona. Esta percepción tiene mucho que ver con los limitados puntos de vista del Islam en la Europa mediterránea moderna. Conocer estas limitaciones, sugiero, nos podría ayudar a desarrollar nuevos enfoques sobre la investigación de la religión en China.

*Palabras clave:* Matteo Ricci, Álvaro Semedo, Mnemónicos, Islam, China, Conversos (Jews), Huihui.

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## 1. A Muslim Woman from the West

Matteo Ricci (1552–1610) liked playing with words, and Chinese characters provided him with many opportunities to do just that. One example is found in “Xiguo jifa” (“Ars Memorativa of the Western Kingdoms”), a celebrated essay on mnemonics that the Jesuit missionary to China wrote in 1596 at the behest of some Chinese officials he had befriended. At one point in the essay, Ricci uses Muslims as an aide-mémoire. He creatively shows how *huihui* 回回—a Chinese term used for Jews, Nestorian Christians, but mostly for Muslims at that time—can be morphed into the character *yao* 要, thus evoking the concept of “a woman from Xixia who is a Muslim” (以“要”字取西夏回回女子之象).<sup>1</sup> Jonathan Spence suggests that Ricci probably saw multiple linkages between words and concepts such as “woman,” “West,” “Jews,” “Nestorians,” and “Muslims.”<sup>2</sup> Strictly speaking, this hidden set of linkages could mean that the top part of *yao* (the ideograph *xi* 西, “west”) and the bottom part (*nu* 女, “woman”) carried with it the image of a woman from the western kingdom Xixia 西夏, an offshoot of the Tangut Empire that was located on the western side of the Huang He (Yellow River) in the eleventh through the thirteenth centuries. But as Spence explains, Xixia in this context denotes the northwest—a territory that by Ricci’s time was home to large Muslim communities.<sup>3</sup> This is why we conclude that the woman in Ricci’s essay on mnemonics must be Muslim.

All of this makes sense, but one big question remains: why does Ricci insist that the woman from Xixia is a Muslim, instead of simply referring to a “woman from Xixia” or a “woman from the West” (as the character itself suggests)? Spence proposes that the religious element in this little mnemonic trick should remind us that the character *yao* carries, among other meanings, the nuances of importance and duty.<sup>4</sup> This could make *yao* close to what we might consider religion

<sup>1</sup> Ricci (Li Madou), “Xiguo jifa,” in Ricci, *Li Madou Zhongwen zhuyi ji*, pp. 141–168 (quote found in p. 146). Ricci’s essay was made famous in the West by Spence in the *The Memory Palace of Matteo Ricci*.

<sup>2</sup> Spence, *The Memory Palace*, pp. 93–95.

<sup>3</sup> For information on Xixia see Kwanten and Hesse, *Tangut (Hsi Hsia) Studies: A Bibliography*.

<sup>4</sup> Spence, *The Memory Palace*, p. 94.

in this context. In the *Fundamental Christian Teachings*, written by Ricci’s colleague, the Italian Jesuit Michele Ruggieri (1543–1607), the early Jesuits in China used *yao* to mean “fundamental.”<sup>5</sup> It is therefore sensible to think of the woman from Xixia as not just a woman from Xixia, but also as a woman identified by a religious marker—in this context, Islam. Spence points out that the term *huihui* itself did not mean only Muslims. As Ricci knew well, *huihui* was also associated with Nestorians (“*huihui* of the cross”) and Jews (“*huihui* who reject the sinew”). Spence goes on to speculate that Ricci may have been implying that there were two “triple systems” of faith. In this putative schema, the Western (monotheist) religions of Islam, Judaism, and Christianity stand in opposition to the Eastern ones of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism.<sup>6</sup> I find this suggestion a bit unlikely. If such a classification was indeed on Ricci’s mind at the time, then he must have been the very first European to express it. What we call today *religionswissenschaft*—more specifically, the classification of religions and the assigning of religions to different world regions—developed only centuries later.<sup>7</sup> The same is true of the notion that Islam, Judaism and Christianity were the world’s three monotheist religions. It is hard to think that Ricci was imagining an all-encompassing worldview at a time when the notion of encounters between civilizations—an idea with which he became most associated over the years—was not yet in place. Europeans did not speak of Islam or even “Muhammedanism” before the nineteenth century and the rise of religious studies.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, as C. Meredith Jones has shown, even up to Ricci’s time, Europeans knew very little about Islam and had many misconceptions about it. Islam was mostly viewed as a heresy or as cult centered on Muhammad. For instance, “the common view of Islam held by the Christians was that a large number of gods were worshipped, of whom Mahomet

<sup>5</sup> I have meditated on the connection between the character *yao* and religious duty and principle as developed by the Jesuit Michele Ruggieri (1543–1607) in a paper delivered at the 2010 Gresham Lecture, Gresham College, London, Wednesday 10 November 2010. (<http://www.gresham.ac.uk/professors-and-speakers/zvi-ben-dor-benite>), or ([http://www.academia.edu/1056030/Fundamentalism\\_and\\_the\\_Way](http://www.academia.edu/1056030/Fundamentalism_and_the_Way)).

<sup>6</sup> Spence, *The Memory Palace*, p. 95.

<sup>7</sup> Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions, or, How European Universalism Was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism*.

<sup>8</sup> Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions*, pp. 46–47.

was only the chief and the most powerful, not merely the Prophet.”<sup>9</sup> Similarly, Gloria Allaire points to “an almost total lack of distinction between the terms ‘Saracen’ and ‘pagan’ in early Italian chivalric texts.”<sup>10</sup> Ricci must have known such texts, and they were probably among the most important sources of information about Islam available to him. Finally, one must always remember that the encounter between certain individuals—Ricci and an occasional Chinese interlocutor, for example—was really just that, an exchange between two human beings who did not represent entire civilizations.<sup>11</sup> In short, in Ricci’s time, it was not easy to imagine Islam as part of the monotheist trio of the great world religions, let alone position it vis-à-vis another trio of East Asian religions. The question of how Ricci saw Muslims and Islam in China, therefore, remains open.

One should be more puzzled about the choice Ricci makes for a mnemonic trick after realizing that the great dialoguer apparently never had a conversation, let alone an intimate dialogue, with a Muslim person in China.<sup>12</sup> The only record of a direct encounter between Ricci and a Muslim refers to a meeting Ricci had in 1602 in Beijing, when he ran into a group of visiting foreign Muslim merchants. One of the merchants told Ricci that in the northwest there were some white men who seemed to be Christian. Ricci was interested and attempted to organize an expedition to the northwest, but he failed. Later it was discovered that those people in the northwest were Nestorians. Ricci does not mention any conversation with the Muslim merchants other than the one about the possibility of Christians living somewhere in the northwest.<sup>13</sup> In contrast, an exciting episode occurred in 1605 when Ricci was in Nanjing and heard about a Chinese Jew who was visiting the city. He arranged to meet the “Jew Ai” and interviewed him for a long time about his beliefs, knowledge of Hebrew and scriptures, and

<sup>9</sup> Jones, “The Conventional Saracen of the Songs of Geste,” p. 206.

<sup>10</sup> Allaire, “Noble Saracen or Muslim Enemy? The Changing Image of the Saracen in Late Medieval Italian Literature,” p. 177.

<sup>11</sup> For a recent critique of the tendency to expand Jesuit-Chinese exchanges into an “encounter between civilizations see Hart, *Imagined Civilizations China, the West, and Their First Encounter*, pp. 257-263.

<sup>12</sup> This is my conclusion after carefully going over Ricci’s opus and letters, now available in a complete nice scholarly edition. See Ricci, *Della entrata della Compagnia di Giesù e Christianità nella Cina*, Ricci, *Lettere: 1580-1609*.

<sup>13</sup> Spence, *The Memory Palace*, p. 120.

religious rites. The scene was a bit comical: the Jew Ai came to see Ricci expecting to meet a fellow Jew, and when Ricci showed him a painting of Mary with Jesus and the John the Baptist, he quickly identified them as Rebecca and Jacob and other (Hebrew) biblical figures.<sup>14</sup>

And yet Ricci never spoke with a representative of the Chinese Muslims, a much larger group than the Chinese Jews. But Ricci’s odd choice for the above-mentioned mnemonic trick certainly shows that Muslims—and not a notion of Islam, as Spence seems to suggest—were very much on Ricci’s mind when he interacted with his Confucian interlocutors. In this regard, the image of the Muslim woman from the West serves as an invitation to think about how the early Jesuits, chief among them Ricci himself, viewed Muslims in China. Such an exercise has a great deal of worth, I would argue, because it offers us a unique European view of Islam and Muslims in the very early modern period and in an unfamiliar setting. In the setting discussed here, the encounter between Christian Europeans and Muslims does not take place in the site where it has been taking place for the centuries since the rise of Islam—the Euro-Mediterranean world. Rather, it takes place far from there, in China, where the power relations that characterized European-Muslim encounters and exchanges did not exist. Instead, both sides, Christian and Muslim, were powerless, and seemed to be displaced. Thus, the Jesuit encounter with Muslims in China is worth looking at precisely because it is far removed—geographically, politically, militarily, economically, and culturally—from the place where the parameters through which we examine the relationship between Islam and the West have been under construction or centuries. Simply put, it is an encounter between Europeans and Muslims both before and outside notions of Islam and the West as we know them today and as we project them back into the past came to be.<sup>15</sup> Bearing this crucial point in mind,

<sup>14</sup> Here is the full passage “Il giudeo, che veniva con quella imaginatione di aver ritrovato gente della sua legge, non dubito niente esser quella la Imagine di Rebeca con suoi figliuoli Iacob e Esaú.” Ricci, *Della entrata della Compagnia di Giesú*, p. 463. More on this encounter see Pelliot, “Le juif Ngai, informateur du P. Mathieu Ricci,” pp. 32-39.

<sup>15</sup> In other words, I am writing here against, in part, the backdrop of the subfield of “Islam and the West” that is been on the rise since the 1960s, and particularly after the publication of Edward Said’s *Orientalism* in 1978. To put it crassly, this growing body of literature is, no matter what is the “political” orientation of the author, overshadowed by the idea of “conflict,” “clash,” or “confrontation” between the two, often terribly reduced, “sides”—Islam and the West. See few items for example: Hitti, *Islam and the West, A His-*

one should ask how did the first Jesuits to come to China recognized the Muslims they saw there, and how they wrote about those Muslims.

This essay presents two ways in which Jesuits recognized Muslims: as the familiar rivals or enemies of Europeans, and as residents of China.<sup>16</sup> It also asks how Jesuits made sense of the Muslim presence in China. In what follows, I present some comments on Islam and Muslims by two early Jesuit missionaries to China. I focus mostly on Ricci, looking at several letters he wrote and some jottings he made in his major opus *Della entrata della Compagnia di Giesù e Christianità nella Cina*. The second source is the Portuguese father Álvaro Semedo (1586–1658 or 1659) who arrived in China at the time of Ricci's death in 1610. Like Ricci shortly before him, Semedo also wrote lengthy reports on China in which he discussed various aspects of the country and its society. Both Semedo and Ricci wrote during the first stages of Jesuit presence in China and were struggling to understand the country, its society, its culture, and its Muslims. Like Ricci, Semedo endeavored hard to settle in China and greatly was affected because of the fragile status of the Jesuit order there. Semedo was even imprisoned by the Chinese authorities at some point in 1613 and had to reenter the country after changing his Chinese name.<sup>17</sup> Semedo's still largely neglected account, *Imperio de la China: I cultura evangelica en èl, por los religiosos de la Compañia de Iesus*, is in part a rendering of Ricci's *Della Entrata* into Spanish, but it is also Semedo's own representation of China.<sup>18</sup> He not only translated Ricci's account, often making direct references to Ricci, but he also changed and adapted it. In many cases, Semedo added a great deal from his experiences. In this regard, I read Semedo's *Imperio de la China* as a commentary on Ricci, and I use it here with Ricci's account to highlight certain issues in Ricci's text.

*torical Cultural Survey*; Said, *Orientalism*; Lewis, *Islam and the West*; Kepel, *The War for Muslim Minds: Islam and the West*. For an intelligent critical analysis of the problems in both sides see, Varisco, *Islam Obscured: The Rhetoric of Anthropological Representation*.

<sup>16</sup> In this regard, I am in a way reading Ricci as an "ethnographer" of sorts trying to recognize Islam in strange and unfamiliar context. This reading is greatly inspired by Gilsenan's *Recognizing Islam: An Anthropologist's Introduction*.

<sup>17</sup> On Semedo, Mungello, *Curious Land: Jesuit Accommodation and the Origins of Sinology*, pp. 74-90.

<sup>18</sup> A bit more on Semedo and Ricci see Brockey, "The First China Hands: The Forgotten Iberian Origins of Sinology," pp. 79-80.

## 2. Strangers and Familiar Strangers in China

The case of the Muslim woman from the West brings to the fore other issues. Let us recall, again, that Ricci wrote the *Xiguo jifa* as a service for Chinese interlocutors interested in European *Ars Memorativa*. When he invokes the Muslim woman from the west, he knows that his Chinese counterparts are very familiar with Muslims. After all, Ricci uses the word “Muslim” in this context as part of a mnemonic trick, something that could help his counterparts remember things quickly and easily. This suggests that they were intimately familiar with Muslims. It is also very clear that Ricci was deeply aware of this intimate awareness. In other words, the settings of the first Jesuit encounters with Muslims in China are quite complicated. They take place outside Europe, in a location where Jesuits engage in a dialogue with another culture—the Chinese—for whose members the Muslims are familiar, while the Europeans are strangers. What is more, it is very clear to Ricci that Muslims are familiar to the Chinese in a way that differs from the way Europeans recognize Muslims. The cultural context in which Ricci and Semedo observe Islam is therefore complicated. The encounter with Muslims occurs within several sets of oppositions, if you will. On the one hand, there is the Christian-Muslim one. On the other hand, there is the Christian-Chinese one, with the Muslims in the middle, as it were. Finally, there is always the Chinese-Muslim context as well, and—as I will suggest below—a Jewish-Christian context is also at play here.

What of the Muslim side itself? The scope and thrust of this essay do not allow or necessitate a detailed discussion of the way in which Chinese Muslims saw Jesuits. I have shown elsewhere that some Muslims in China paid a great deal of attention to the presence of Jesuits there. But they did not view them as Europeans. Moreover, Muslim interest in Jesuit writings arose only long after some of the fathers began publishing books in Chinese attempting to reconcile what they saw as Chinese culture with the Christian divinity. I have stressed that Muslim interest in Jesuits was limited to a number of intellectuals who were engaged in a similar, albeit still very different, project that was launched during the early 1600s and peaked about a century later. I have also emphasized the fact that Muslim interest in Jesuit work was limited to doctrinal issues. In other words, Chinese Muslims were not interested



in the Jesuits as representatives of a specific ethnic or social category, as Europeans, or as “Christians.” They saw the Jesuits as proponents of very specific theological issues that mattered to them as well—namely, how to represent a monotheist universal divinity, such as the Western god Allah, in Chinese terms. In fact, the Europeaness or the Christianity of the Jesuits never mattered to Chinese Muslims.<sup>19</sup> Conversely, as we shall see below, the first Jesuits in China took a special interest in the presence of Muslims in China from the moment they arrived in the country. Moreover, Jesuit observations of Muslims in China were concerned with radically different questions. Their interests were first more concerned with the ethnicity of the Muslims and only later with their religion, however they defined it. Religion was first absent from the way in which Jesuits thought and wrote about Muslims. It mattered less as an arena for Jesuit inquiries about Muslim religiosity and more as the factor that determined their ethnic status. In simple terms, the Muslimness of the Muslims in China mattered only inasmuch as it determined their Chineseness or lack thereof. This, I would argue, gave rise to a certain ambiguity about Chinese Muslims—an attitude that does not perceive them as Chinese but as strangers to varying degrees because of their religion.

Some general comments about the historical backdrop are also necessary. The Muslims in China, although understood as a more or less distinct collectivity, were considered an integral part of the population and have been living in China for many centuries.<sup>20</sup> There were also foreign Muslims—coming as ambassadors from Central Asian locales known to the government of the Ming dynasty (1368–1644)—who were indeed foreign, but also familiar to the Chinese.<sup>21</sup> European Catholics were a different story. The last decades of the sixteenth century were the beginning of what is aptly called the Catholic Century in the East Asian region east of the Strait of Malacca.<sup>22</sup> Catholicism, in the form

<sup>19</sup> Ben-Dor Benite, “‘Western Gods Meet in the East’: Shapes and Contexts of the Muslim-Jesuit Dialogue in Early Modern China”.

<sup>20</sup> For an overview of Muslim history in China, see Lipman, *Familiar Strangers: A History of Muslims in Northwest China*.

<sup>21</sup> For Ming foreign policy towards Central Asian Islamic polities see Rossabi, “Ming China’s Relations with Hami and Central Asia, 1404–1513, A Reexamination of Traditional Chinese Foreign Policy,” Ph.D. dissertation, Columbia University, 1970. See also Watanabe, “An Index of Embassies and Tribute Missions from Islamic Countries to Ming China (1368–1466) as recorded in the *Ming Shih-lu* classified according to Geographic Area”.

<sup>22</sup> Spence, *The Chan’s Great Continent: China in Western Minds* pp. 19–40.



both of trade sponsored by Catholic empires and of missionizing orders, expanded into China during the period. Spain and Portugal began a long stretch of dominance over trade in the Indian Ocean, the Sea of Japan, and the China Sea. Along with the merchants came Jesuit fathers on their way to undertake missionary work in India, China, Korea, and Japan.<sup>23</sup> In the 1540s, shortly after the establishment of the order, the first Jesuits were already establishing footholds in India; they did the same a bit later in Japan. Conveniently for the Jesuits, both Japan and India were torn at the time by civil wars and political fragmentation.<sup>24</sup>

China, under the tight and unified control of the Ming government, seemed pretty much out of bounds for foreigners, and it took the Jesuits much longer to reach its hinterland.<sup>25</sup> This policy was not the Chinese attitude towards all foreigners, but—and this is crucial—it was toward people who belonged to nations that the Chinese did not recognize or know through past records. Many in the Ming government “seem to have believed that no embassy should be accepted from a ruler who had not been enrolled among the tributary states in the first reigns of the dynasty.”<sup>26</sup> Europeans, therefore, were doubly removed from China—as foreigners and especially as strangers unknown in the outer Chinese world. Jesuit fathers, like other foreigners coming from afar, were equally affected by this attitude, at least at first. Only in 1601, almost twenty years after the first fathers entered China disguised as Buddhist priests, was Ricci, their leader, granted permission to reside in the capital, Beijing.<sup>27</sup> Other Jesuits were permitted to settle in other major cities such as Kaifeng, Nanjing, and Hangzhou. The long early years of the Jesuits’ tenure in China were accompanied by rigorous study of the Chinese language and literary classics and culminated, in 1594, in the symbolic act of dressing as Confucian mandarins. It is important to note that the Jesuits’ status in China remained fragile for several decades after

<sup>23</sup> The Jesuits were by far the more dominant element in the spectrum of missionary orders in the China, but definitely not the only ones. Other Catholic orders, the Dominicans and the Franciscan took part in the making of the era “Catholic.” See for example Spence, *The Chan’s Great Continent*.

<sup>24</sup> Brockey, *Journey to the East The Jesuit Mission to China, 1579-1724* pp. 1-56; Mungello, *Curious Land*, pp. 1-42.

<sup>25</sup> This tightness was a major source of agony for the Portuguese, the early European significant power that attempted entering China during the 16th century. See Wills, “Maritime Europe and the Ming,” pp. 24-77.

<sup>26</sup> Wills, “Maritime Europe and the Ming,” 29.

<sup>27</sup> Hsia, *A Jesuit in the Forbidden City Matteo Ricci 1552-1610*, pp. 202-223.

their arrival. In fact, their presence became firmly established only much later, during the early days of the Kangxi emperor (r. 1662-1622) of the Qing dynasty. This was only after they had managed to prove the superiority of their science over that of the Chinese.<sup>28</sup> While still hoping to convert the Chinese to Catholicism, the Jesuits had come to admire China's culture and its learned elite.<sup>29</sup> To foster the success of their mission, Jesuits in China not only changed their physical appearance, but they also changed the appearance of their doctrines, intentionally melding them with concepts more familiar to the Chinese. Jesuits immersed themselves in the study of the Chinese classics to be better able to dialogue with their Chinese Confucian counterparts. To that end, the Jesuits generated a large volume of literature about Christianity in Chinese and struggled with the impossible task of translating Christianity into Chinese.<sup>30</sup> Furthermore, the Jesuits allowed Chinese converts to Christianity to continue some Chinese ritual practices, a policy that gave rise to the famous Chinese rites controversy in the Vatican and elsewhere in Europe. Thus, cultural change and adaptation came to be seen by Jesuits, from Ricci on, as key to their success in living in China.

In this regard, I would argue, the comfortable presence of Muslims in China was puzzling in Jesuit eyes. Chinese Muslims spoke Chinese, participated in elite cultural life, and seemed, in fact, to be "real" Chinese, which presented the early Jesuit missionaries to China with a dilemma that mattered to them a great deal. The Jesuits encountered Muslims not only in the cities but also, most significantly and sometimes troublingly, at court—their own prime target. The Jesuits were focused on consolidating their power at court, a venture they believed was key to their ultimate success in the mission to win China over to Christianity.<sup>31</sup> At court they found, among other Muslims, the descen-

<sup>28</sup> Pingyi, "Scientific Dispute in the Imperial Court: The 1664 Calendar Case,".

<sup>29</sup> This admiration with Confucianism eventually got the Jesuits into a lot of trouble the Pope and the many enemies they had in Rome. See for example Rule, *K'ung-Tzu or Confucius: The Jesuit Interpretation of Confucianism*. See also Gernet, *China and the Christian Impact: A Conflict of Cultures*, trans. Janet Lloyd; and Spence, *The Memory Palace*.

<sup>30</sup> For the Confucian-Christian dialogues in China, see Xiaochao, *Christianity and Imperial Culture: Chinese Christian Apologetics in the Seventeenth Century and their Latin Patristic Equivalent*.

<sup>31</sup> For a recent interpretation of the Jesuit efforts, see Zhang, "Cultural Accommodation or Intellectual Colonization? A Reinterpretation of the Jesuit Approach to Confucianism during the Late Sixteenth and Early Seventeenth Centuries," Ph.D. diss, Harvard University, 1996.

dants of the Islamic astronomers brought to China by the Mongols, a group who now formed what was called the Muslim school in the Chinese Bureau of Astronomy.<sup>32</sup> Ricci was so struck by this Muslim presence that in his major work on China and Chinese culture, he dedicated a whole section to Muslim court astronomers.<sup>33</sup> Indeed, in many Chinese urban centers the Jesuits encountered many members of the well-educated Chinese Muslim merchant and gentry elite.<sup>34</sup> As we shall see, these successfully Chinese Muslims were vexing to the Jesuits, but at the same time, they presented the possibility of success for the Jesuit project. The assumption was that Muslims—like the Jesuits, at least initially—also had the goal of a mass infiltration and conversion of the land (to Islam in their case, of course). What had become of that project? So it was that study of China’s Muslims, considered a largely irrelevant curiosity by later scholars, became central to various early Christian efforts to understand and come to terms with China.

We can now better understand the possible context for the Muslim woman from the West in Ricci’s “Ars Memorativa of the Western Kingdoms.” Ricci must have been very conscious of the presence of Muslims in China, and at same time he was fully aware of the fact that his Chinese interlocutors were very familiar with the Muslims and had their own terminology for them. It was clear to him that the Chinese Muslims were fully at home in China.<sup>35</sup> In sharp contrast, the Jesuits

<sup>32</sup> For scholarship in English on this episode in Chinese history, see Tasaka (Tazaka), Kodo, “An aspect of Islam culture introduced into China.”

<sup>33</sup> Ricci, “Astronomi Cinesi e Maomettani,” *Della Entrata* 29-31. Harriet Zurndorfer has written about the encounter between Jesuit and Chinese astronomers at the Chinese court during the period after Ricci and mentions also the confrontation with Muslim astronomers. “‘One Adam having driven us out of Paradise, another has driven us out of China’: Yang Kuang-hsien’s Challenge of Adam Schall von Bell’.

<sup>34</sup> On the Muslims in the urban centers of China during the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries see for example Shoujiang, “Nanjing Huizu diyuxing lishi wenhua tezheng,”; Chengmei, “Zhejiang Huizu” (The Hui of Zhenjiang) p. 51. See also Cunli, *Huizu shangye shi* (Commercial history of the Hui *minzu*), pp. 132-142; Toru, “The Community and Religious Life of Chinese Muslims,” paper presented at conference, “The Legacy of Islam in China: An International Symposium in Memory of Joseph F. Fletcher,” at Harvard University, 14-16 April 1989, 1; Dasheng, “The Role of the Mosque in the Reacceptance of Islam by Muslim Descendants in Quanzhou during the Ming Dynasty,” paper presented at conference, “The Legacy of Islam in China: An International Symposium in Memory of Joseph F. Fletcher,” at Harvard University, 14-16 April 1989, p. 22.

<sup>35</sup> On the identity of Chinese Muslims as Chinese, see Ben-Dor Benite, *The Dao of Muhammad: A Cultural History of Muslims in Late Imperial China*.

had to go through many ordeals to enter and settle in the country.<sup>36</sup> The questions of how and for what purpose Muslims had first come to China puzzled Ricci, who understood his own purpose clearly and in explicitly missionary terms. Furthermore, Ricci struggled with two, not just one, categories of Muslims. One was the familiar European designation of Moors or Saracens, which Ricci used in reference to the Chinese Muslims. The second, as we have seen already, was the Chinese designator for Muslims, *huihui*. This point is significant. Whereas “Moors” and “Saracens” were references for Muslims imported from the European reality and imagination, “*huihui*” was a term that emerged in China and out of a specific Chinese context. Ricci was probably the first European who had to contend with this duality.<sup>37</sup> On the one hand, Muslims were considered decidedly outside the Chinese world. On the other hand, reality showed the Jesuits that the Muslims were definitely part of this world. This contrast, I would argue, characterizes all early Jesuit reports on Muslims in China, particularly Ricci’s.

### 3. “Self-Planted” Muslims

On September 13th, 1584—less than a year after his arrival in China, and when he was still staying in the small southern Chinese town of Zhaoqing, near Canton—Ricci noted in a letter that he “had no idea” how to understand Muslim presence in China—or in his words: how they “self-planted” in China. The letter, written to Giambattista Román (Juan Bautista Román), the Spanish procurator in the Philippines who was then residing in Macao, was one of the early lengthy reports on China that Ricci produced. In the letter, Ricci recounted and explained all that he and his companion, Michele Ruggieri, had done in China since entering the country about two years earlier. Ricci therefore took the time to describe China for the distinguished Spaniard, and the letter included one of the earliest reports he made on religious life in China. The language of the passage in which the Mus-

<sup>36</sup> On the convoluted trajectories of Jesuits into China, see Spence, *The Memory Palace*. Hsia, *A Jesuit in the Forbidden City Matteo Ricci 1552-1610*; Camus, “Jesuits’ Journeys in Chinese Studies.”

<sup>37</sup> For Marco Polo, the Muslims he encountered were simply “Saracens,” *The Most Noble and Famous Travels of Marco Polo Together with the Travels of Nicolo de’ Conti*, Ed. John Frampton, with introduction, notes, and appendixes by N. M. Penzer pp. 275-278.

lims are mentioned is telling: “The Chinese are divided into three sects, not including [small] sects, and without that of the Muslims ... which I do not know how, planted themselves among them.”<sup>38</sup> Implicitly at least, Ricci includes the Muslims among the large religious sects he encounters in China. But he explicitly does not count them as Chinese. Islam is clearly a different category, and Ricci struggles with it. He tells us explicitly that he “do[es] not know how” (*no sé como*) the Muslims “had planted themselves” in China. Evidently, Ricci had to acknowledge that they were pretty much at home—they were “planted” in the country. The word “planted” is quite strong (the verb “*sembrar*” also means becoming cemented). It implies that the Muslims Ricci saw were quite at home in China. Ricci’s use of a reflexive verb also suggests that he is quite suspicious of what he saw and is wondering what kind of a cultural process produced the Muslims he saw. More importantly, Ricci’s remark about not knowing how the Muslims became “planted” in China strongly suggests that beyond suspicion and curiosity, they presented him with a challenge: after all, his mission was “planting” Christianity in the same place among the Chinese. How the Muslims did it, and to what extent, were therefore crucial questions.

Semedo’s more detailed account of the Muslims of China provides us with a glimpse of what Ricci saw, the sight that made him so suspicious and curious. Semedo describes the Muslims thus: “There are moreover in China, *Moors* in great abundance, not in all the Provinces, nor in every City, but yet in the more principal [ones]. They speak the language of the Country, and know nothing of their own tongue, a few words only excepted. ... In their *Physiognomy*, nose, eyes, beard and face they are altogether like the *Chinese*” (emphasis added).<sup>39</sup>

<sup>38</sup> Original is as follows: “I cinesi sono divisi a tre sette, non considerando setas, sin la the los Moros, que, no sé como, se sembró, entre ellos.” Ricci, *Lettere: 1580-1609*, pp. 84-85. The full lengthy letter is in pages 57-87.

<sup>39</sup> “Ay tambien Moros en gran cantidad, no en todas las Provincias ni dellas en todas las ciudades, están, todavia, en las mejores, hablan la lengua de la tierra, que de la suya, pocas palabras saben. La forma del rostro en todo como la Chinas.” Ivaro Semedo, *Imperio de la China i cultura euangelica en l por los religiosos de la Compaia de Iesus*, (Madrid: Impreso por Iuan Sanchez en Madrid, 1642), 195-196. Alvaro Semedo’s narrative was quickly translated into several European languages (Italian, and later English). I am using here the Spanish original and the 17th century English translation. *The History of That Great Renowned Monarchy of China: Wherein All the Particular Provinces Are Accurately Described*, p.152.

This passage helps clarify Ricci's first observations of Muslim made few decades before. This account was written only a few decades after Ricci's visit to Canton, where he first saw Chinese Muslims, and the reality it depicts could be easily taken as reflecting conditions in the late sixteenth century as well.<sup>40</sup> These Muslims are not the Arabic-speaking and Arab-looking Saracens of the Euro-Mediterranean world. The language is clear: the Muslims "speak the language of the country" and "in their physiognomy" they cannot be distinguished from the rest of the Chinese (*La forma del rostro, en todo como la Chinas*). No wonder, then, why Ricci used the word "planted." In sharp contrast with Semedo's rather dispassionate, well-informed depiction of Muslims, Ricci was quite hostile to them at first and would not allow that they were Chinese. The first mention of Muslims that Ricci made in his diaries, written about two years before the letter to Román quoted above, shows that he was convinced that the numerous Muslims in Canton—a major port city that controlled Portugal's base in Macao—were spreading rumors that the recently arriving Portuguese were the front guard of a violent Christian European conquering force. Ricci correctly observed the tensions between the Chinese and the Portuguese in Canton. But he incorrectly chose to blame them on the Cantonese Muslims: "Igniting this fire [are the] many Mohammedan Saracens, who live in the city of Canton, who promptly told the Chinese that these men from Frankia, as the Mohammedans call the Christians of Europe (and since the Chinese cannot pronounce the letter *r*, because it does not exist in their language, they came to call them till now *Falanchi* . . .), are valiant men, conquerors of other peoples' kingdoms, knowing already that they had subjected by military power Malaca and other Indian kingdoms"<sup>41</sup>

There is a marvelous historical irony attached to the great powers of foreknowledge that Ricci attributed to those Chinese Muslims of the late sixteenth century. Hindsight makes it seem that they were able fo-

<sup>40</sup> Semedo's account about Muslims entering the examination system in China certainly the profile of the typical Chinese-Muslim gentry of the time, as I was able to reconstruct it from Chinese sources, see Ben-Dor Benite, *The Dao of Muhammad*.

<sup>41</sup> Original is as follows: "Accendendo questo fuoco [fuoco] molti saraceni maomettani, che stanno nella città di Quantone, che subito dissero ai Cinesi esser questa gente de' Franchi, come I maumettani chiamano ai christiani di Europa (e non potendo i Cinesi pronunciare la lettera *r*, che non hanno nella sua lingua, venerro a chiamarli sino adesso Falanchi . . .), e che erano huomini valenti e conquistatori de' regni altrui, sapendo già che avevano per forza d'armi soggettata Malaca et altri regni della India." Ricci, *Della Entrata*, 112-113.



resee the exploits of European powers in East Asia in the years to come. In its contemporary context, too, the passage is striking in that it shows that the Chinese in Canton, who more than anyone else in China at the time were exposed to the presence of Europeans, deployed (an albeit sinified version of) a quintessentially Islamic idiom when referring to the Portuguese (*ai Cinesi esser questa gente de'Franchi*): they referred to them as “Franks.” This point is significant. In effect, Ricci’s argument was that the Chinese in Canton saw the Europeans through Muslim eyes, through a Muslim gaze that since the time of the Crusades had associated Europeans with the image of the aggressive Frankish conqueror. Thus the old rivalry between “Saracens” (the term Ricci reserves for the Chinese Muslims) and “Franks” is reenacted on Chinese soil, itself an Orient, which becomes a space where an Occidental entity (the Franks) engages in a mighty fight with an Oriental entity (the Saracens). According to Ricci’s depiction, though, this image is generated by the Muslims alone. They “ignited this fire,” says Ricci, and they are ones who warned that the Portuguese are conquerors in disguise, preparing for a forthcoming military invasion. I have showed elsewhere that this is a blatant lie and that the Muslims of Canton could not have done what Ricci says they did.<sup>42</sup> More important for our purposes here, I have explained that Ricci’s use of the word “Franks” and the way in which he specifically explains it in this passage suggest that he saw the Muslims as the same rivals from the old and familiar Euro-Mediterranean world, where Muslim Saracens and Christian Franks had clashed for centuries.<sup>43</sup> As we shall see below and as we can already infer from what I have presented above, Ricci later changed his mind about the potential Islamic threat to Jesuit and European plans for China. But it is important to note that when he first entered China, he clearly saw the Muslims as the quintessential enemies, at least rivals, of European Christians. Furthermore, Ricci refers to the Chinese Muslims in ethnic rather than religious terms. He calls them Saracens (*saraceni*) and describes their rivalry with the Europeans in political, rather than religious or theological, terms.

<sup>42</sup> Ben-Dor Benite, “Ricci et les « musulmans de Canton » : à propos du premier dialogue des jésuites avec l’Europe,” pp. 89-106.

<sup>43</sup> Ben-Dor Benite, “Ricci et les « musulmans de Canton », ” pp. 93-94.



#### 4. Chinese until Pork Is Served

Ricci's perception of Muslims presented and discussed above was created during the early 1580s, pretty much right after his arrival in China. It is a puzzling perception. How could Ricci see Muslims who—as Semedo describes them—“look Chinese” both in terms of their “physiognomy” and dress, speak Chinese, and behave like Chinese and still insist that they are Saracens? It is true that Semedo also uses European terminology for Muslims and refers to them as “Moors.” But he clearly recognizes that the Moors he sees are not the Moors from Spain or North Africa. Conversely, Ricci's Saracens are depicted like the Saracens back home. They are hostile to Europeans and are big liars. Ricci does not spend much time thinking about their cultural status or ethnicity—even though, as we have seen in his letter to Román, he is fully aware of the Chineseness of these Muslims. Evidently, the passages above represent Ricci's inability to register, understand, and express cultural change. I would argue that what is truly missing in Ricci's mind is the possibility of cultural change when it comes to Islam. This lacuna dictates the way in which he records his first observations of Muslims in China and describes them pretty much like the old familiar Saracen rivals from back home. Over twenty years after he wrote the abovementioned letter, sometime between 1605 and 1608, Ricci completely changed his views on Muslims and expressed his new opinion in another long passage. This passage was in fact his final assessment of Chinese Islam, and it was very different than the first two comments presented above. In a discussion of Chinese religions, when speaking of the “evil” of “Chinese idolatry,” Ricci suddenly digresses and relates the following tale:

This evil [Chinese idolatry] is joined by another. Since in the far western regions China borders on Persia, at various times many followers of Mohammedan law entered this country, and their children and descendants multiplied so much that they have spread over all China with thousands of families. They are residing in nearly all provinces, where they have sumptuous mosques, recite their prayers, are circumcised, and conduct their ceremonies. But as far as we know, they do not disseminate [their faith], nor do they try to obtain [converts], or to publicize their faith, and [they] live subject to Chinese laws and in great ignorance of their [the Chinese] sect, and are held in low opinion by the Chinese. For these reasons, they treated as native Chinese, and not being suspected of plotting rebellion, they are allowed to study [the Confucian classics] and enter the ranks [of the] bureaucracy.

Many of them, having received official rank, abandon their old beliefs, retaining only their prohibitions against eating pork, to which they have never become accustomed.<sup>44</sup>

The passage quoted here is the first broad account of Chinese Islam and Chinese Muslims that he wrote since his first comments, mentioned above. The differences between this report and the earlier ones are striking. Note first the change in tone. In the 1580s Ricci “did not know how” how the Muslims had “planted” themselves in and among the Chinese, and he was quite hostile to the Muslims. Twenty years later he explains how, when, and why they arrived in China. Muslims had “entered” China over the course of generations simply because of the geographical proximity of the Persianate world to China’s northwestern borders. The Muslims had since multiplied, not by proselytizing but through natural reproduction. The Muslim infiltration of all provinces is nothing but a simple result of their large numbers and their life in China. Also note that Ricci is fully aware of the Muslims’ apparent success in being accepted by the surrounding Chinese society. As he puts it, they are treated as “native” by the Chinese even though they preserve their Muslim identity. According to Ricci, the Chinese attitude toward the Muslims is the result of several factors: the Chinese take them to be inferior, and this makes the Muslims seem unthreatening and keeps them relatively isolated.

Furthermore, unlike the Muslims who “ignite” fires of hatred and agitate the Chinese against the Europeans in the earlier report, the Muslims now do not “cause trouble” and do not provoke or inflame their non-Muslim Chinese neighbors in any way. We also learn that they also obey Chinese laws and, above all, are not “suspected of plotting rebe-

<sup>44</sup> “Aquesto male se ne aggiunse un altro, e fu che, con la vicinanza della Persia, per la parte di ponente, intorno in questo regno in varij tempi molti della legge macomettana, e si moltiplicorno tanto per generatione ne’ suo figliuoli e nipoti, che già hanno impita tutta la Cina con molte migliaia di famiglie; et quasi in tutte le provincie con molto sumptuose meschite, dove recitano, si circoncidono, e fanno le loro cerimonie. Ma per quello che no saputo, loro, nè seminano, nè procurano, di divulgare la sua legge, anzi vivono assai soggetti alle leggi della Cina et in grande ignorantia della loro setta, e sono tentui in puoco conto da’ Cinesi. Con tutto ciò, per esser già tutti naturali, non sospettano di loro reibellione, e già li lasciano studiare et entrare ne’ gradi et magistrati del regno; e molti di loro, riceuto il grado, lasciano anco la loro antica setta, non gli restando altro di essa che il non mangiare carne di porco per non esser avvezzi a essa”. Ricci, *Della Etrata*, p. 91. Most of this passage is cited in Spence, *The Memory Palace*, p. 118. Translation is Spence’s with some of my editions and amendments.

llion.” In fact, Ricci takes care to tell us that they are not proselytizing in any way, passively or aggressively, directly or indirectly. This of course stands in sharp contrast to the ways and methods employed by the Jesuits and other missionaries active in China at the time, who do proselytize. The Muslims also seem to be uninterested in non-Muslim, or “general,” Chinese customs and beliefs. This, again, is quite the opposite of the tediously “anthropological” attitude of the Jesuits toward Chinese religions and philosophies, for which Ricci himself is chiefly responsible. In short, whereas the Jesuits are very interested in the nature of Chinese rites and beliefs, the Chinese Muslims are not.

But the biggest change in Ricci’s perception of the Muslims is revealed in the terminology he uses. In the first passages reviewed above, Ricci speaks of the Muslims in ethnic terms—calling them “Muhammadan Saracens” (*saraceni macometani*) and paying no attention to their religious beliefs and rites. In this passage the ethnic term “Saracen” disappears altogether, and instead of the generic “Muhammadan,” Ricci uses a much more religious term: “followers of Mohammedan law” (*della legge macomettana*). This differentiation between Muslim and Saracen is not entirely new in the Italian perception—as opposed to that of other contemporary European cultures—of Islam and Muslims. It might be the case that Ricci reflects this Italian perception as well. In contrast, Allaire has identified changes in the perceptions of the “noble Saracen” and the “Muslim enemy.”<sup>45</sup> But here, in an interesting way, the contrast seems to be between “noble Muslims” and “Saracen enemies.” Ricci now speaks about the Muslims in different terms. In his early passages he saw, and conveyed, the Muslimness of the people he had met in Canton in ethnic terms. The mere fact that these people were Muslims was enough to ethnicize—or, better, to Saracene—them, even though they had nothing to do with the Saracens Ricci had known back home. In the later passage, the term “Saracen” disappears, and Ricci speaks clearly about the Muslims in religious terms. He does not classify Islam as a religion per se. But he does refer to the Muslims, quite correctly, as “followers of Muhammadan law” and describes in detail their liturgical customs and rites. In this context, we can mention again the issue of proselytization highlighted above.

<sup>45</sup> Allaire, “Noble Saracen or Muslim Enemy?”, pp. 173-184.

The fact that Ricci addresses the issue in his later report clearly indicates that he now perceives the Muslims first of all as a religious community. When he talks about Muslims who climbed up the ranks of the Chinese bureaucracy, something that means adhering to Confucian norms and values, he describes this transformation as “deserting their own old sect [beliefs]” (*lasciano anco la loro antica setta*). It is interesting to note that in this context of cultural change, the desertion of Islamic law, pork remains the final frontier for Muslims. Those sophisticated Confucian Muslims pass as normal Chinese until the moment when pork is served and they refrain from touching it. Eating pork is a practice to which “they have never become accustomed.” I shall return to this point below. Finally, even the “evil” that Ricci assigns to the Muslims is different in nature. In the early passage, the Saracen Muslims represent a political evil, inciting hatred of the Portuguese. In the later passage, the Muslims are still “evil,” but this evil thing is attached to the idolatrous religious practices of the Chinese.

Semedo’s report is similar to that of Ricci but provides a much longer and more detailed account of the Muslims. The major difference is the tone. Semedo’s account is devoid of the negative tone that still lurks behind Ricci’s thoughts about Muslims. Semedo describes in detail, taking almost three long pages, Chinese Muslims’ observance of dietary and marriage laws and their intermarriage with the Chinese. Semedo also discusses the question of eating pork, but without too much drama: the Muslims he says, prefer to live in areas where people eat beef, as opposed to pork (*son lo por la mayor parte adonde están las carnicerías de la baca; que como no comen Puerco*).

## 5. Hebrew Muslims: The Possibility and Limitations of Cultural Change

The final item in Ricci’s narrative—the one about high-ranking, and highly assimilated, Chinese Muslim officials who do not eat pork—tells us precisely how much Ricci came to know about Chinese Islam in the course of twenty years. Again, it is remarkable to note that in spite of the numerous references to Muslims in Ricci’s writings, he does not mention even a single conversation he had with a Muslim. Yet he seems to know so much about them that he is even able to discuss their intimate behaviors. To wit, Ricci describes the high-ranking Mus-

lims as people who hide their Muslim origins or Islamic beliefs until it comes to “eating pork, to which they have never become accustomed.” One can imagine such a scene: a high-ranking Chinese Muslim official at court among his fellow Confucian academicians, “passing” completely as anyone else until pork is served, when he is “outed” as a Muslim. Ricci, who never attended the Chinese court or personally knew high-ranking officials, could not have witnessed this. He probably heard about such scenes from non-Muslim officials who had witnessed them at court. Probably these officials are also the ones who had told Ricci all he knew about Muslims, including this intimate detail about the few high-ranking Muslim officials.

The story about the Muslims who pass as typical members of the Chinese elite until pork is served brings back most pointedly the question of cultural change. It is an extreme situation depicting the condition of almost complete assimilation, leaving a single element that ties an elite man to his previous life as someone else or to his culturally different roots. The fact that Ricci included this story in his account of the Chinese Muslims shows that he was curious about the habits and lives of such Muslims and inquired about issues centered on cultural or religious adaptation and accommodation. It is also clear that he framed the story as a tale about cultural adaptation—pointing out that eating pork is something that that Muslims “have never become accustomed.” Conversely, Semedo merely reports that Muslims do not eat pork and prefer living in areas where beef is the main meat. Semedo’s rather neutral tone when he reports this and the fact that he does attach the issue of pork to questions of becoming accustomed only accentuate, I would suggest, Ricci’s sensitivities about cultural change. He was concerned with what such situations meant for him, for future Jesuit missionaries, and more importantly for the future Chinese Christians he expected to see in China in the wake of his activities. Accommodation and the relationship between Chinese culture and Christianity were very much on his mind. To put it crassly, accommodation was the outcome of asking if one can simultaneously be Confucian (read: Chinese) and Christian. The big question that concerned everyone involved in the project of Christianizing China was to what extent Chinese converts would be allowed to remain Chinese after becoming Christian. In other words, does conversion entail, or mandate, cultural change? The other side of the coin, the question of the possibility of becoming Chinese,

was clearly on the minds of Jesuits like Ricci, who studied Chinese and tried hard to engage with the Chinese on their own terms.<sup>46</sup>

Cultural change, and the possibility of cultural change, were therefore key issues for the Jesuits, and the Muslims of China could have been a great source of historical and social experience for Ricci to study. But he never engages them directly, which naturally raises the question of why he behaved in that way. Ricci inquires about Muslims but never speaks to them. One incident is striking. In 1607, Ricci hears that the second edition of his *Catechismo—Tianzhu shiyi* (*The True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven*)—“is bought by, among others, many from the sect of the Saracens, for it seems to be consistent with their doctrines.” Ricci simply notes this fact in his diary and does not ponder the possible meaning of it, nor does he consider the possibility of initiating a conversation with a Muslim. He simply reports that “someone has told me that the many of the Moorish faith, who live in this country, buy this book, for it seems to them that it speaks of God better than the books of China.”<sup>47</sup> One can detect here, again, the duality between the ethnic sounding “Saracens” and the religious sounding “many of the Moorish faith,” with which Ricci seems to have been struggling when he was thinking of Muslims in China. But more important, it is astonishing to realize that the Jesuit scholar who spent his whole life seeking common ground with Confucians in China through dialogue did not seek to do the same thing with Muslims, even when the possibility of a theological common ground with the Muslims of China presented itself.

This lack of interest in dialoguing with Muslims stands in sharp contrast to Ricci’s interest in Jews in China—particularly in the context of cultural change. It should be recalled that Ricci did make efforts to converse with and interrogate the Jew Ai. Ricci asked him how much he knew of his own religion, asked him questions about scripture, and even showed him portraits of Christian biblical figures. Evidently, he thought he had much in common with the Chinese Jew and much to

<sup>46</sup> The literature on this is quite vast, see for example, Rule, “Jesuit or Confucian: Chinese Religion in the Journals of Matteo Ricci, 1583-1610”; Zürcher, “Jesuit Accommodation and the Chinese Cultural Imperative,” pp. 31-64; Wiest, “Bringing Christ to the Nations: Shifting Models of Mission Among Jesuits in China”; Standaert, “Jesuit Corporate Culture as Shaped by the Chinese”; Standaert, “Inculturation and Catholic-Chinese Relations in Late Ming and Early Qing.”

<sup>47</sup> For a discussion of this passage, see Ben-Dor Benite, “‘Western Gods Meet in the East,’” pp. 517-520.

ask him. This makes a great deal of sense if we recall the long history of Jewish-Christian polemics and other exchanges in Europe. The history of these exchanges actually gains intensity during the early modern period in Italy itself. This was a time when both the spread of print culture and the Catholic reformation gave rise to a heightened Christian interest in Jewish thought and religion that in turn produced phenomena such as Christian Hebraism on the one hand, and tight control and censoring of Hebrew texts on the other hand.<sup>48</sup> In other words, Ricci probably imagined that he had some common ground with Jews when he approached the Jew Ai. Furthermore, as an educated early modern Italian humanist, Ricci had the tool kit with which to engage the Jew.<sup>49</sup> Concerning Islam and Muslims, things were still different at that point: Ricci lacked the tool kit with which he could engage Muslims in China—or anywhere else, for that matter—and struggled to make sense of their presence in China and what it might imply for Christianity. In this regard, the comparison with the case of the Jew Ai exposes one clear limitation Ricci had when it came to thinking about the role of religion in the process of cultural change.

Semedo's report accentuates the issue of the missing Islamic tool in Ricci's cultural tool kit. In contrast to Ricci's, Semedo's attitude toward Muslims seems to be more relaxed. He does report a conversation he had with a Muslim: "they [the Muslims] know many things from the sacred scripture. In Nanjing, I found one born and raised there who told me: 'David, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob.'" Excitedly, Semedo also reports that the Muslim pronounced the four names "the way I [Semedo] pronounce them."<sup>50</sup> This anecdote actually exposes the Jesuits' lack of knowledge about Islam, since the four aforementioned biblical figures occupy a special place in Islam and are mentioned many times in the Qur'an, not only in Christian scriptures. But Semedo could understand acquaintance with these names only as knowledge of the Bible. It is also evident from the conversation that when he conversed with the

<sup>48</sup> See Raz-Krakotzkin, *The Censor, the Editor, and the Text: The Catholic Church and the Shaping of the Jewish Canon in the Sixteenth Century*.

<sup>49</sup> I borrow the idea of "toolkit" from Anthony Grafton and Howard Goodman who use it in a different context concerning Ricci. Goodman and Grafton, "Ricci, the Chinese, and the Toolkits of Textualists."

<sup>50</sup> "Sabén Muchas cosas de la sagrada escritura. En Nankim hallé uno allí nacido i criado que me dixo: David, Abraham, Isac, Jacob; assi como yo lo puedo prononciar." Semedo, *Imperio de la China*, p. 196.



Muslim he asked questions about Judeo-Christian scripture, not about Islam. Semedo’s conclusion about the status of Muslims in China is striking in this regard: “they [the Muslims] are there [in China] like the Hebrews in Spain, merchants and doctors, but they carry more respect.”<sup>51</sup> The equation of Muslims in China with the “Hebrews in Spain” is striking. Although Semedo refers, superficially, to the occupations of Muslims in China in comparison to Jewish trades in Spain, one cannot escape the thought that he is making a much more profound comparison. As Semedo, an Iberian, must have known very well, seventeenth-century Spanish Hebrews were New Christians, people of Jewish origin whose ancestors had been forced to convert to Christianity over a century before and who were still struggling to become or to be accepted as true Christians. In this regard, the Muslims in China—who, as Semedo points out, looked completely (*en todo*) like the Chinese—were Hebrews. Forced to think about Muslims who were Chinese but still preserved their faith in Islam, Semedo could think only of Jewish converts to Christianity in Spain. The Spanish New Christian, therefore, represented for Semedo the possibility of cultural change, precisely because that person’s experience was a flawed or incomplete process of change. At the same time, use of the New Christian example in the Chinese context vis-à-vis Muslims exposed the limited tool kit with which the Jesuits could think of such processes.

The encounter with Muslims who were at home in China—sinified or assimilated Muslims, if you will—forced Ricci to struggle with a dilemma centered on the question of cultural change. On one hand, he recognized these Muslims as “Moors” or “Saracens” and separated them from the Chinese social and cultural landscape. On the other hand, he recognized that these Muslims were an integral part of China and its society. It is at this point that he was forced to think seriously about the religion of the Muslims and to think how it changed in the context of assimilating within another culture. That kind of a challenge, I would argue, was an unprecedented exercise for early Jesuits in China such as Ricci and Semedo. Equipped with limited tool kits with which they could explore and appraise processes of cultural change, they could best think about these Muslims as Jews.

<sup>51</sup> “Estàn alla como los Hebreos and España, siendo Mercaderes, I medicos: pero con mas honra,” Semedo, *Imperio de la China*, 196.

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