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Xizi Qiji 西字奇跡

The Miracle of Western Words:

Matteo Ricci's Innovations in Language and Faith

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Xizi Qiji 西字奇跡 The Miracle of Western Words:
Matteo Ricci's Innovations in Language and Faith

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ABSTRACT

Matteo Ricci's *Xizi Qiji* (The Miracle of Western Words), published in 1605, is a landmark text in the history of cross-cultural communication. Written in Classical Chinese and annotated with Roman letters, it enabled Western readers in late Ming China to pronounce Chinese texts for the first time. The work is divided into five sections: the first three adapt Biblical stories into Classical Chinese prose, aligning them with Confucian moral principles, while the last two record Ricci's interactions with Cheng, a Chinese ink master, and their discussions on faith and the importance of writing. This project focuses on translating selected sections of *Xizi Qiji* into English, making this significant text accessible to modern readers. By preserving the elegance of the original Classical Chinese stories and incorporating Ricci's Romanized annotations, this translation highlights the literary and linguistic innovations of Ricci's work. Through this translation, the project aims to allow contemporary audiences to appreciate the aesthetic and intellectual value of *Xizi Qiji*.

INTRODUCTION

Matteo Ricci (1552–1610) went to Macau in 1583, during the Ming dynasty's Wanli period (1563–1620). He was a pioneering Jesuit missionary in China. During his time there he formed close relationships with Chinese officials and contributed significantly to the dissemination of Western astronomical, mathematical, and geographical knowledge.

Upon arriving in Macau, he found learning Chinese challenging, due to its pronunciation, its homophones, and the differences between the spoken and written language. To solve this problem, he attempted to use Latin to transcribe Chinese characters, aiming to make Chinese more accessible to Westerners and to identify pronunciation rules.

The following passages are from his publication, in Beijing in 1605, of *Xizi Qiji* 《西字奇跡》 (The Miracle of Western Words). This work was the first to apply Roman letters to Chinese. It featured two parallel text lines: one line provides the pronunciation of Chinese characters using Roman letters, and the other the classical Chinese translation of the Gospels.

The book is divided into five themed sections, the first three adapted from Biblical stories translated into classical Chinese, with Latin annotation for Western readers in China. The Roman letters enabled readers to pronounce religious passages in Chinese easily. Each section includes illustrations depicting Western Catholic ideas. The fourth section describes Ricci's interactions with the ink master Cheng, including their discussions on faith. The final section records Ricci's presentation of the edited stories to Cheng, emphasizing the importance of writing and asserting that, without writing, people cannot express emotions or thoughts.

Before creating these works, Ricci, hoping to leverage Cheng's reputation, collaborated with him on works intended to spread biblical stories and beliefs through his renowned illustrations. Cheng requested that these stories be illustrated and explained in Chinese. At that time, the Bible had not been systematically translated into Chinese. Ricci edited these stories freely, while staying true to their original meaning, which aligned with Chinese moral views and fatalism.

Matteo Ricci was a pioneer in using Roman letters for Chinese, significantly contributing to Chinese linguistics. Before his innovative work, the Chinese language lacked a phonetic alphabet system. His introduction of Roman letters was revolutionary, providing a convenient and comprehensible tool

for representing Chinese sounds, an innovation especially beneficial for Europeans.

This method later had a profound impact on Chinese scholars. Twenty-one years later, in 1626, another Jesuit, Nicolas Trigault, published *Xiru Ermu Zi* (Aid to the Eyes and Ears of Western Literati) in Hangzhou. Trigault’s work built upon Ricci’s system, utilizing Roman letters to denote Chinese pronunciation, though with slightly different rules. In his book, Trigault systematically listed all the syllables of Nanjing Mandarin and included an index for locating Romanized Chinese characters by their radicals and stroke counts. Using twenty-five Latin letters—comprising five vowels, twenty consonants, and five tone markers—his system was capable of representing all Chinese syllables. Although these Romanization systems were primarily designed to facilitate Chinese language learning for Westerners and had limited direct influence on Chinese writing practices at the time, Ricci’s system can be regarded as a precursor to the modern official Romanization system, Hanyu Pinyin. It also inspired later developments of the pinyin system, such as the Wade-Giles system that emerged centuries later.

This work includes five classical Chinese short stories from Matteo Ricci’s work *Xizi Qiji* 西字奇跡 (The Miracle of Western Words) and their translation into English, alongside Hanyu Pinyin. This format allows English readers to appreciate the rhythmic cadence of classical Chinese prose, akin to the melodic quality of classical poetry when read aloud. It also provides insight into the interaction between Matteo Ricci and Cheng, highlighting their discussions on faith.

PASSAGE ONE

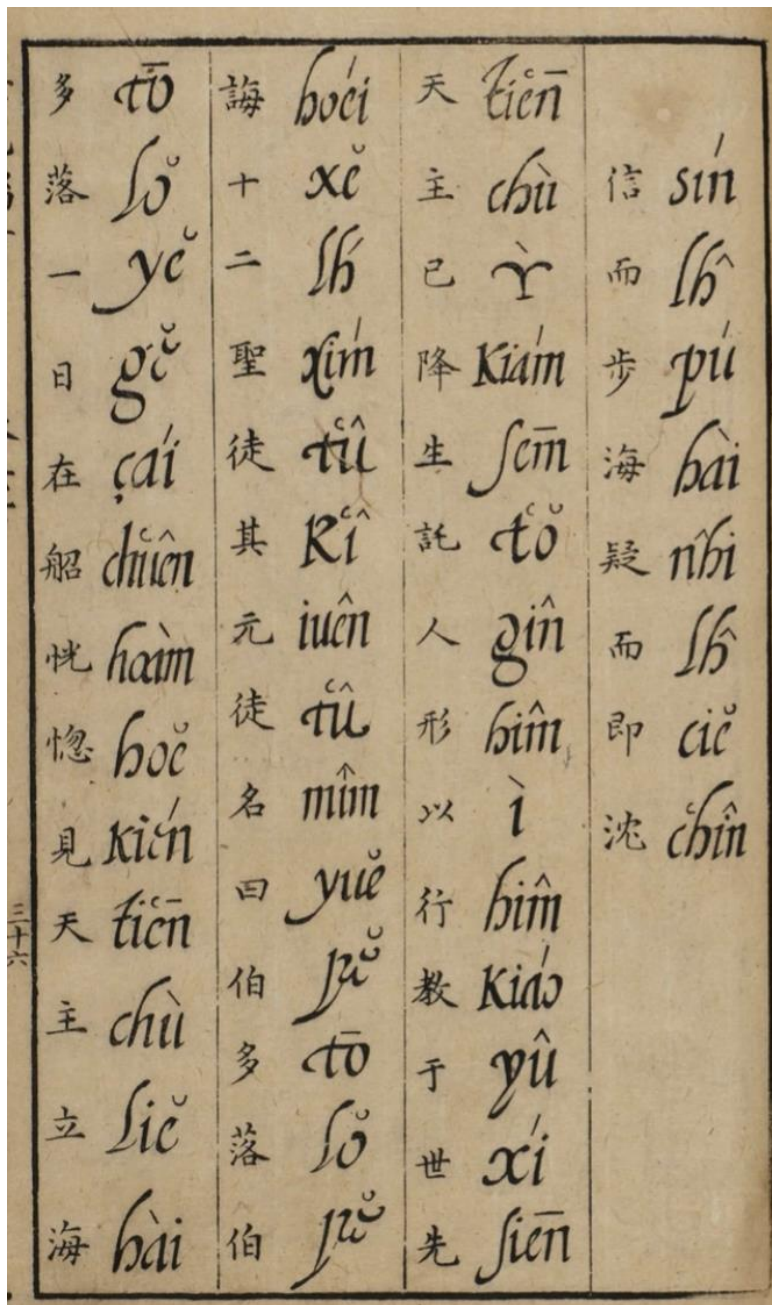


Figure 1. This is the transcription of *Xizi Qiji*, passage one, written in both Chinese characters and the Latin alphabet. Source: Guangdong Modern Woodcut Printmaking Institute, *Zuowei liwu de shengxiang hua* [作为礼物的圣像画] (Religious Paintings as Gifts) (January 10, 2022). Retrieved from <https://gdmwp.com/newsinfo/2456005.html>

The following passage is adapted from the Gospel of Matthew from the New Testament, chapter 14, verses 22–33. It describes the incident in which Peter and the other disciples of Jesus encounter a storm on the sea and call out to Jesus for help.

Xìn ér bù hǎi, yí ér jí chén.

《信而步海，疑而即沉》

Believe and walk on the sea, doubt and then sink.

Tiānzhǔ yǐ jiàng shēng, tuō rén xíng yǐ xíng jiào yú shì.

天主已降生，託人形以行教於世

The Heavenly Lord was already born and had taken on human form to teach in the world.

Xiān huì shí'èr shèng tú, qí yuán tú míng yuē Bóduōluò.

先誨十二聖徒，其元徒名曰伯多落。

He first taught the twelve disciples, and his first disciple was called Peter.

Bóduōluò yī rì zài chuán, huǎng hū jiàn Tiānzhǔ lì hǎi yá.

伯多落一日在船，恍惚見天主立海涯。

One day Peter was on a boat when he indistinctly saw the Heavenly Lord standing on the seashore.

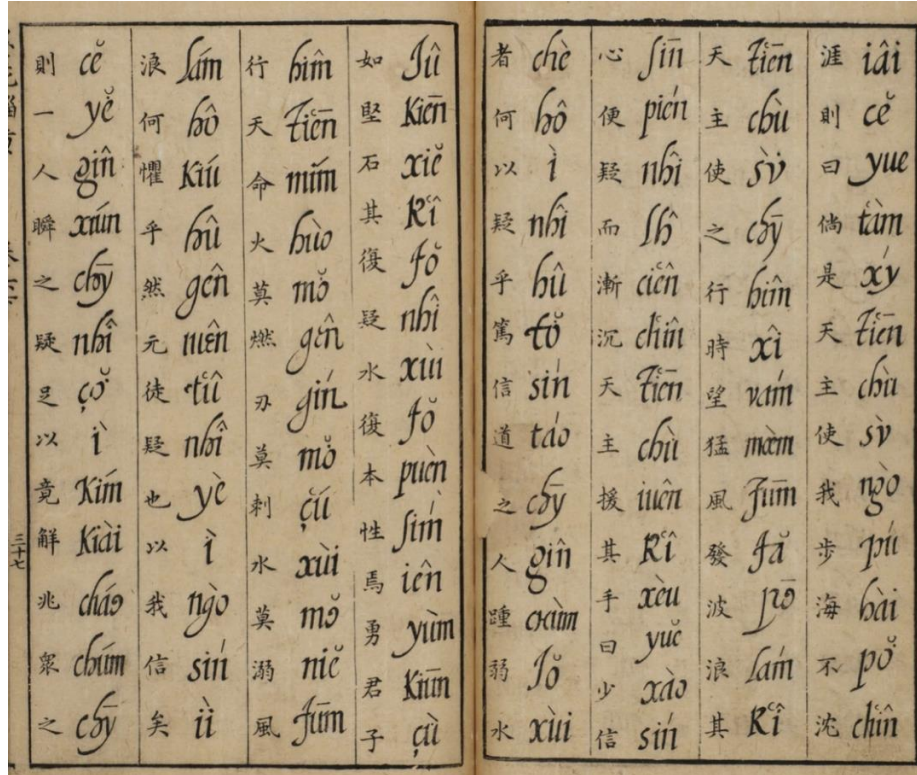


Figure 2. Transcription of *Xizi Qiji*, passage one, continued. Source: Guangdong Modern Woodcut Printmaking Institute, *Zuowei liwu de shengxiang hua* [作为礼物的圣像画] (Religious Paintings as Gifts), (January 10, 2022). Retrieved from <https://gdmwp.com/newsinfo/2456005.html>

Zé yuē: “Tǎng shì Tiānzhǔ, shǐ wǒ bù hǎi bù chén.”

則曰：「倘是天主，使我步海不沉。」¹

Thereupon he said: “If it is the Heavenly Lord, let me walk on the sea and not sink.”

Tiānzhǔ shǐ zhī xíng shí wàng měng fēng fā bō làng, qí xīn biàn yí ér jiàn chén.

天主使之。行時望猛風發波浪，其心便疑而漸沉。

The Heavenly Lord allowed it. As Peter went, he saw that the fierce wind was raising waves; then his heart doubted, and he gradually sank.

¹ Terminal punctuation marks and quotation marks have been added to the Pinyin and English translations for clarity. These were not present in the original text.

Tiānzǔ yuán qí shǒu yuē: "Shǎo xìn zhě hé yǐ yí hū?"

天主援其手曰：「少信者何以疑乎？」

The Heavenly Lord lent a helping hand: "O person of little faith, why did you doubt?"

Dǔ xìn dào zhī rén zhǒng ruò shuǐ rú jiān shí.

篤信道之人躡弱水如堅石，

A person who firmly believes in the way treads on thin water as if on solid rock.

Qí fù yí, shuǐ fù běn xìng yān.

其復疑，水復本性焉。

Were he to doubt again, the water would resume its natural state.

Yǒng jūn zǐ xíng tiān mìng, huǒ mò rán, rèn mò cì, shuǐ mò nì, fēng làng hé jù hū!

勇君子行天命，火莫燃，刃莫刺，水莫溺，風浪何懼乎！

For a brave gentleman who follows Heaven's order, fire cannot burn, blades cannot stab,
water cannot drown. Why fear wind and waves!

Rán yuán tú yí yě.

然元徒疑也。

Thus, the first disciple doubted.

Yǐ wǒ xìn yǐ, zé yī rén shùn zhī yí, zú yǐ jìng jiě zhào zhòng zhī hòu yí

以我信矣，則一人瞬之疑，足以竟解兆眾之後疑。

Considering my faith, then, one person's moment of doubt is enough to completely
resolve the subsequent doubts of many.



Figure 3. Transcription of *Xizi Qiji*, passage one, continued, with the picture “Xin Er Bu Hai Yi Er Ji Chen” [信而步海，疑而即沉]. Source: Guangdong Modern Woodcut Printmaking Institute, *Zuowei liwu de shengxiang hua* [作为礼物的圣像画] (Religious Paintings as Gifts) (January 10, 2022). Retrieved from <https://gdmwp.com/newsinfo/2456005.html>

Shǐ bǐ wú yí, wǒ xìn wú jù. Gù gǎn qí xìn yì gǎn qí yí yě.

使彼無疑，我信無據。故感其信亦感其疑也。

If I were to cause him to be without doubt, my faith would not have proof; therefore, I arouse his faith and also his doubt.”

Ōu luó bā lì mǎ dòu zhuàn

歐邏巴利瑪竇撰

Written by European Matteo Ricci

PASSAGE TWO



Figure 4. Transcription of *Xizi Qiji*, passage two, with the picture of “Er Tu Wen Shi, Ji She Xu Kong” [二徒闻实，即舍虚空]. Source: Guangdong Modern Woodcut Printmaking Institute, *Zuowei liwu de shengxiang hua* [作为礼物的圣像画] (Religious Paintings as Gifts) (January 10, 2022). Retrieved from <https://gdmwp.com/newsinfo/2456005.html>

The following passage is adapted from the Gospel of Luke, New Testament, chapter 24, verses 13–35. It describes the story of two disciples meeting the resurrected Jesus on the road to Emmaus.

Èr tú wén shí, jí shě kōng xū

《二徒聞實，即捨空虛》

Two Disciples Hear the Truth and Immediately Abandon Falsehood

Tiānzhǔ jiù shì zhī gù:

天主救世之故：

The reason the Heavenly Lord saves the world:

Shòu nán shí, yǒu èr tú bì ér tóng xíng, qiě tán qí shì ér yōu yān.

受難時，有二徒避而同行，且談其事而憂焉。

During a time of suffering, two disciples left and walked together, discussing the matter, and feeling sorrowful.

Tiānzhǔ biàn xíng ér hū rù qí zhōng, wèn yōu zhī gù.

天主變形而忽入其中，問憂之故。

The Heavenly Lord transformed and suddenly joined them, asking the reason for their sorrow.

Yīn jiě gǔ “shèng jīng” yán, zhèng Tiānzhǔ bì yǐ kǔ nán jiù shì, ér hòu fù rù yú jǐ tiān guó yě,

因解古《聖經》言，證天主必以苦難救世，而後復入於己天國也，

Because, as it is explained, the ancient Bible says that the Heavenly Lord must save the world through suffering, and then return to His own Kingdom of Heaven.

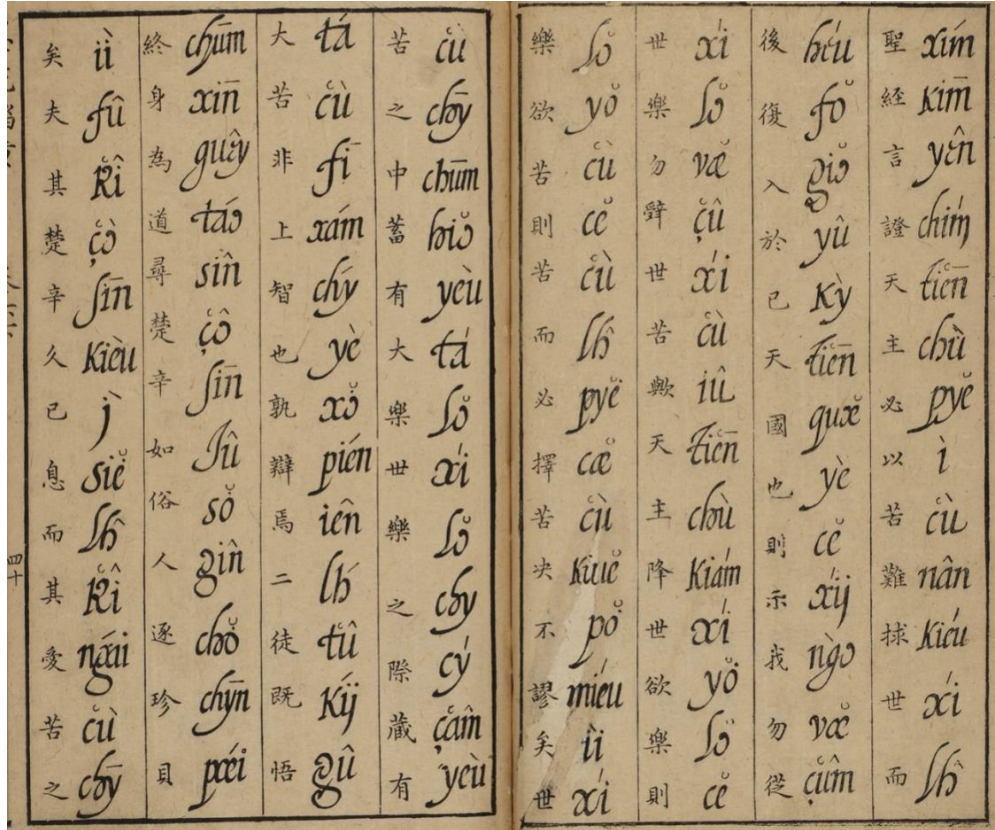


Figure 5. Transcription of *Xizi Qiji*, passage two, continued. Source: Guangdong Modern Woodcut Printmaking Institute, *Zuwei liwu de shengxiang hua* [作为礼物的圣像画] (Religious Paintings as Gifts) (January 10, 2022). Retrieved from <https://gdmwp.com/newsinfo/2456005.html>

Zé shì wǒ wù cóng shì lè, wù cí shì kǔ yú?

則示我勿從世樂，勿辭世苦欤？

Does this show us not to follow worldly pleasures and not to avoid worldly suffering?

Tiānzhǔ jiàng shì, yù lè zé lè, yù kǔ zé kǔ, ér bì zé kǔ, jué bù miù yǐ.

天主降世，欲樂則樂，欲苦則苦，而必擇苦，決不謬矣。

The Heavenly Lord descended into the world. If he had wanted pleasure, he could have had pleasure; if he wanted suffering, he could have suffering, but he was bound to choose suffering. This is absolutely not wrong.

Shì kǔ zhī zhōng, xù yǒu dà lè; shì lè zhī jì, cáng yǒu dà kǔ, fēi shàng zhì yě, shú biàn yān!
世苦之中，蓄有大樂；世樂之際，藏有大苦，非上智也，孰辯焉！

Amid worldly suffering, great joy is stored; amid worldly pleasure, great suffering is hidden. Who but the wise can discern this?

Èr tú jì wù, zhōng shēn wéi dào xún chǔ xīn, rú sù rén zhú zhēn bèi yǐ.

二徒既悟，終身為道尋楚辛，如俗人逐珍貝矣。

The two disciples, having been enlightened, pursued the Way with hardship all their lives, like secular people chasing after precious treasures.

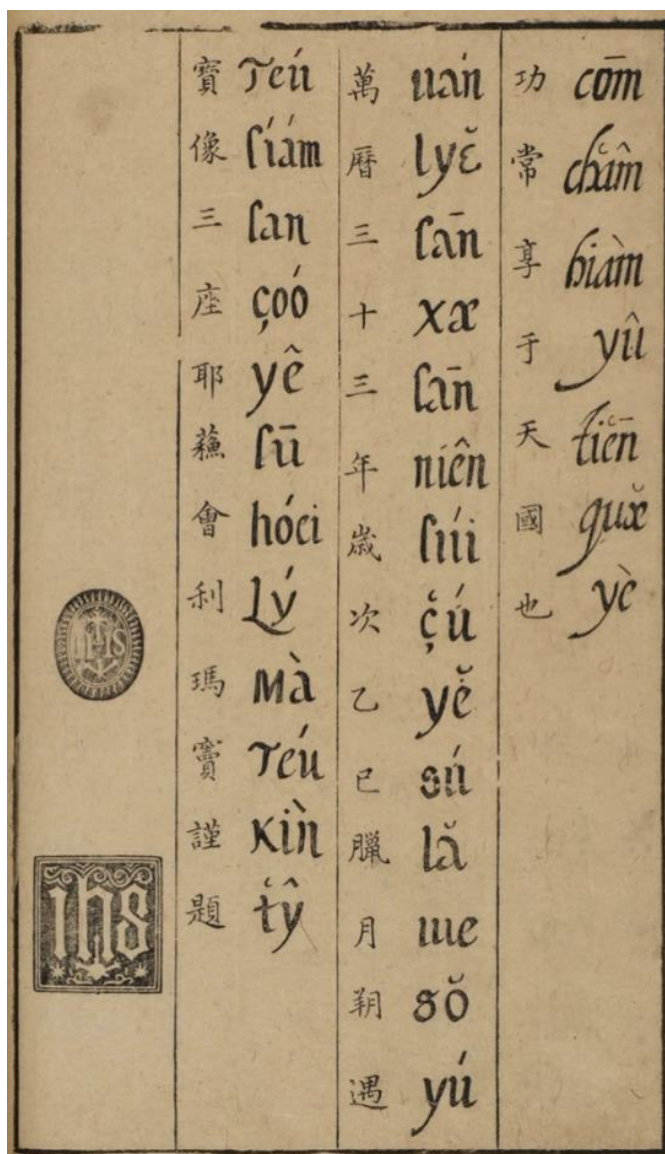


Figure 6. Transcription of *Xizi Qiji*, passage two, continued. Source: Guangdong Modern Woodcut Printmaking Institute, *Zuwei liwu de shengxiang hua* [作为礼物的圣像画] (Religious Paintings as Gifts) (January 10, 2022). Retrieved from <https://gdmwp.com/newsinfo/2456005.html>

Fū qí chǔ xīn jiǔyǐ xī, ér qí ài kǔ zhī gōng cháng xiǎng yú tiān guó yě.

夫其楚辛久已息，而其愛苦之功常享於天國也。

Their hardship had long ceased, but their merit in loving suffering continues to be enjoyed in the Kingdom of Heaven.

Wànli sānshísān nián suìcì Yìsì là yuè shuò, yù bǎo xiàng sān zuò, Yēsūhuì Lì Mǎdòu jǐn tí.

萬曆三十三年歲次乙巳臘月朔，遇寶像三座，耶穌會利瑪竇謹題。²

The thirty-third year of Wanli, in the year of Yisi (1605 AD), on the first day of the twelfth lunar month, upon encountering three precious statues, written respectfully by Matteo Ricci of the Jesuits.

² Tiangan Dizhi (天干地支), which means Heavenly Stems and Earthly Branches, is an ancient Chinese system used for recording years. It is composed of ten Heavenly Stems and twelve Earthly Branches. The Heavenly Stems include: Jia (甲), Yi (乙), Bing (丙), Ding (丁), Wu (戊), Ji (己), Geng (庚), Xin (辛), Ren (壬), and Gui (癸). The Earthly Branches include: Zi (子), Chou (丑), Yin (寅), Mao (卯), Chen (辰), Si (巳), Wu (午), Wei (未), Shen (申), You (酉), Xu (戌), and Hai (亥). The Heavenly Stems and Earthly Branches pair up in combinations, forming a total of sixty combinations, such as Jiazi (甲子), Yichou (乙丑), Bingyin (丙寅), and so on. The term “Yisi” (乙巳) mentioned in the article refers to a specific year within this cycle, which corresponds to the year 1605 in the Western calendar, during the reign of the Wanli Emperor of the Ming dynasty. A complete cycle spans sixty years.

PASSAGE THREE

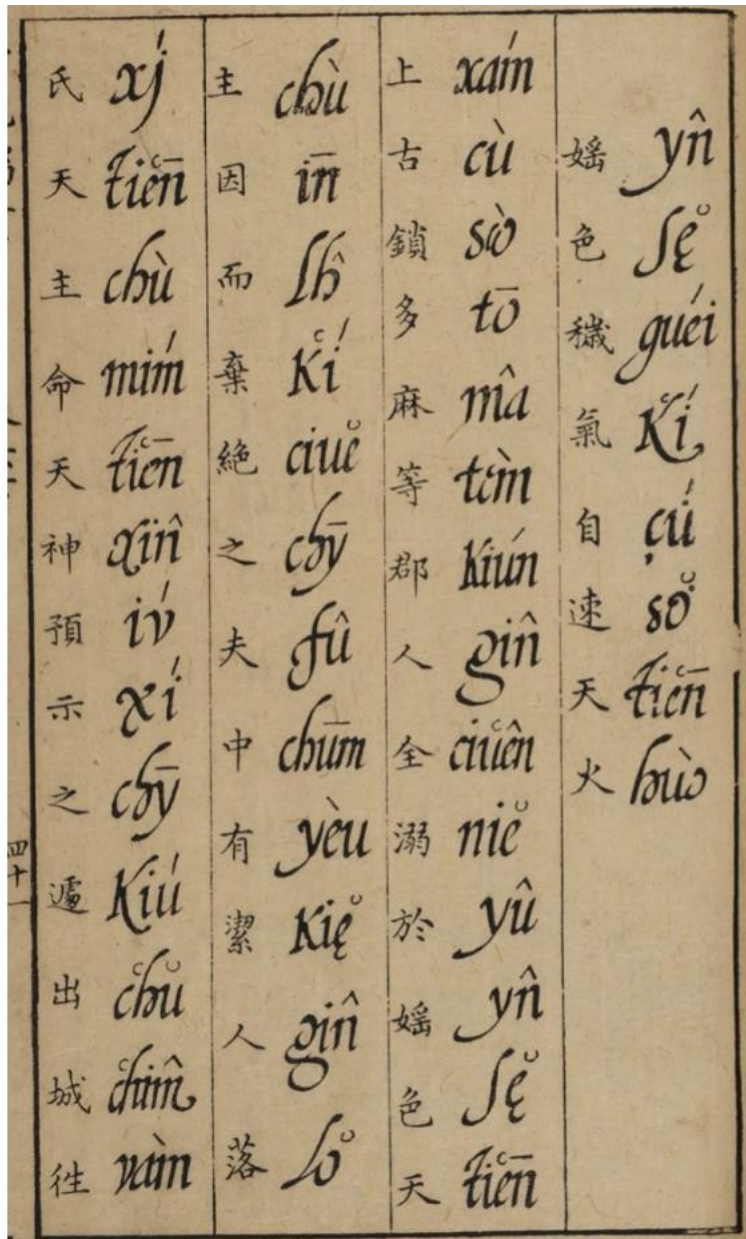


Figure 7. Transcription of *Xizi Qiji*, passage three. Source: Guangdong Modern Woodcut Printmaking Institute, *Zuowei liwu de shengxiang hua* [作为礼物的圣像画] (Religious Paintings as Gifts) (January 10, 2022). Retrieved from <https://gdmwp.com/newsinfo/2456005.html>

The following passage is adapted from the story in Genesis 18–19 that describes the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. Due to the people's immersion in lust and wickedness, the Heavenly Lord decides to destroy these cities. Angels warn Lot, instructing him and his family to flee to the mountains. Subsequently, the Heavenly Lord rains down fire and brimstone, destroying Sodom and Gomorrah, along with all its inhabitants and vegetation.

Yáo sè huì qì, zì sù tiān huǒ

《媯色穢氣，自速天火》

Seductive Lust and Indulgence Will Hasten Divine Retribution

Shàngǔ Suǒduōmá děng jùn, rén quán nì yú yín sè, Tiānzhǔ yīn ér qì jué zhī.

上古鎖多麻等郡，人全溺於淫色，天主因而棄絕之。

In ancient times, in Sodom and other regions, people were entirely submerged in lust and obscenity, thus the Heavenly Lord abandoned them.

Fū zhōng yǒu jié rén Luò shì, Tiānzhǔ mìng tiānshén yùshì zhī, qiān chū chéng wǎng shān.

夫中有潔人落氏，天主命天神預示之，遷出城往山。

There were pure persons among them, the family of Lot. The Heavenly Lord commanded the angels to warn them, and they were moved out of the city to the mountains.

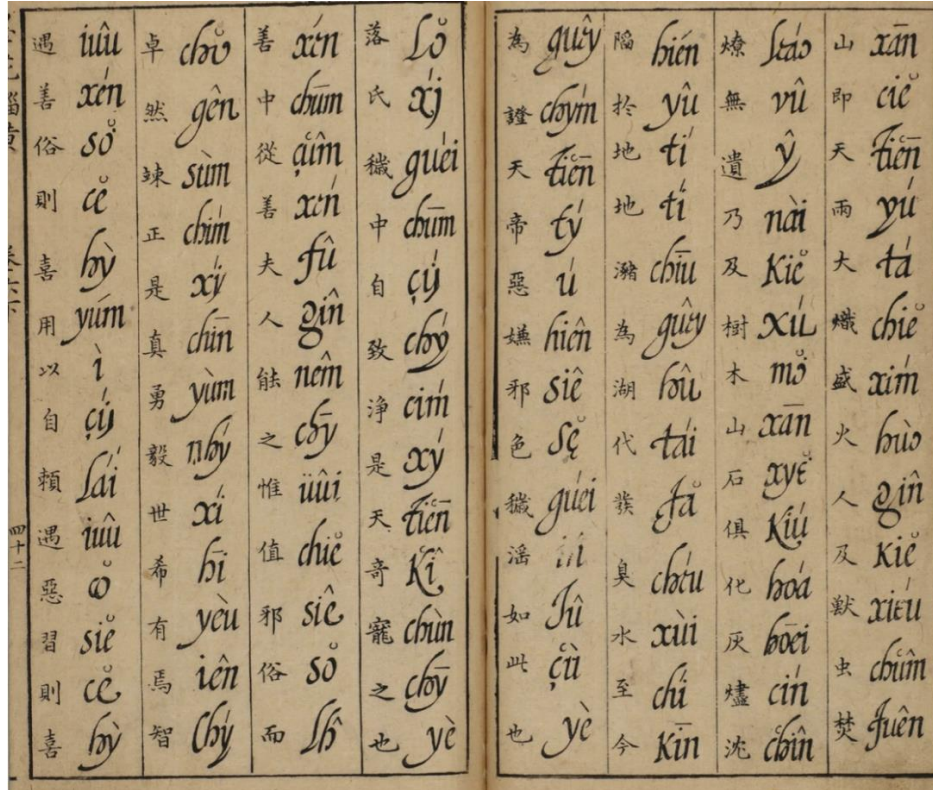


Figure 8. Transcription of *Xizi Qiji*, passage three, continued. Source: Guangdong Modern Woodcut Printmaking Institute, *Zuwei liwu de shengxiang hua* [作为礼物的圣像画] (Religious Paintings as Gifts) (January 10, 2022). Retrieved from <https://gdmwp.com/newsinfo/2456005.html>

Jí tiān yǔ dà chì shèng huǒ, rén jí shòu, chóng fén liáo wú yí.

即天雨大熾盛火，人及獸、蟲焚燎無遺。

Then, heaven rained down a great blazing fire, burning people, animals, and insects without leaving anything behind.

Nǎi jí shù mù, shān shí, jù huà huī jìn, chén xiàn yú dì, dì zhū wéi hú, dài fā chòu shuǐ, zhì jīn wéi zhèng.

乃及樹木、山石，俱化灰燼，沉陷於地，地瀦為湖，代發臭水，至今為證。

Even the trees and mountains turned into ashes, sinking into the ground. The ground became a lake, filled with foul-smelling water, and this serves as evidence to this day.

Tiāndì wùxián xié sè huì yín rú cǐ yě.

天帝惡嫌邪色穢淫如此也。

The Heavenly Emperor (God) detests such evil, obscene, and lustful behavior.

Luò shì huì zhōng zì zhì jìng, shì tiān qí lǒng zhī yě.

落氏穢中自致淨，是天奇籠之也。

The Lot family achieved purity amidst filth, which is the remarkable providence of Heaven.

Shàn zhōng cóng shàn, fū rén néng zhī; wéi zhí xié sú ér zhuó rán sǒng zhèng, shì zhēn yǒng yì, shì xī yǒu yān.

善中從善，夫人能之；惟值邪俗而卓然竦正，是真勇毅，世希有焉。

Following goodness within goodness, anyone can do it; but to remain upright and firm in the face of evil customs, this is true courage and determination, which are rare in the world.



Figure 9. Transcription of *Xizi Qiji*, passage three, continued, with the picture of “Yin Se Hui Qi, Zi Su Tian Huo” [淫色秽气，自速天火]. Source: Guangdong Modern Woodcut Printmaking Institute, *Zuowei liwu de shengxiang hua* [作为礼物的圣像画] (Religious Paintings as Gifts) (January 10, 2022). Retrieved from <https://gdmwp.com/newsinfo/2456005.html>

Zhì yù shàn sù zé xǐ, yòng yǐ zì lài; yù è xí zé xǐ, yòng yǐ zì lì. wú shì bù yóu jǐ yě.
 智遇善俗則喜，用以自賴；遇惡習則喜，用以自礪。無適不由己也。

The wise rejoice when encountering good customs, relying on them; when encountering bad habits, they also rejoice, using them to sharpen themselves. There is nothing that does not depend on oneself.

Wànli sānshísān nián suì cì Yǐsì là yuè shuò, yù bǎo xiàng sān zuò, Yēsūhuì Lì Mǎdòu jǐn tí.

万曆三十三年歲次乙巳臘月朔，遇寶像三座，耶穌會利瑪竇謹題。

The thirty-third year of Wanli, in the year of Yisi (1605 AD), on the first day of the twelfth lunar month, upon encountering three precious statues, written respectfully by Matteo Ricci of the Jesuits.



Figure 10. Tiandi Mu Tu [天帝母圖] “The Image of the Heavenly God’s Mother,” included in the original text of *Xizi Qiji*. Source: Guangdong Modern Woodcut Printmaking Institute, *Zuwei liwu de shengxiang hua* [作为礼物的圣像画] (Religious Paintings as Gifts) (January 10, 2022). Retrieved from <https://gdmwp.com/newsinfo/2456005.html>

At the end of the passage, Matteo Ricci mentions 遇寶象三座 “encountering three precious statues,” which refers to the four Western copperplate engravings of Catholic religious images included in the

text: "Believe and Walk on the Sea, Doubt and Then Sink," "Two Disciples Hear the Truth and Immediately Abandon Falsehood," "Obscene Lust and Indulgence Will Hasten Divine Retribution," and "Image of the Lord." According to Matteo Ricci's record in the *Shang Da Ming Huangdi Gongxian Tuwu Zou* 上大明皇帝贡献土物奏 (Memorial on Presenting Local Products to the Emperor of the Great Ming), the 寶像三座 mentioned here refers to one of the Heavenly Lord and two of the Virgin Mary:

謹以原攜本國土物，所有天帝圖像一幅，天帝母圖像二幅，天帝經一本，珍珠鑲嵌十字架一座，報時自鳴鐘二架，《萬國輿圖》一冊，西琴一張等物，陳獻御前。

I respectfully present the local products brought from my home country, including one image of the Heavenly Lord, two images of the Heavenly Lord's Mother, one Bible, one pearl-inlaid cross, two self-ringing clocks, one map of all nations, and one Western musical instrument, to be offered to Your Majesty.

PASSAGE FOUR

Cheng Dayue, also known as Youbo and Junfang, was a renowned ink master during the Ming dynasty's Wanli period. His work, *Chengshi Moyuan* 《程氏墨苑》 (Cheng's Ink Garden), published in the Wanli era, includes Western religious engravings. The book features prefaces by notable figures, including Cheng himself, Grand Secretary Shen Shixing, artist Dong Qichang, and missionary Matteo Ricci. Cheng included these engravings for commercial appeal rather than missionary purpose. Matteo Ricci, aware of this, collaborated with Cheng for mutual benefit. The following passage describes Matteo Ricci's appreciation for Cheng's assistance in writing religious stories and his understanding of faith.

wài qiě xiāng wèn dá tán lùn

《外且相問答談論》

Additional Questions and Discussions

yá zé yuē tǎng shì Tiānzǔ xìn dào zhī xíng tiān mìng huǒ wú yí

涯則曰：「倘是天主，信道之行天命，火無疑。」³

[Yá] then said: "If it is the Heavenly Lord, those who follow the mandate of Heaven will not doubt even in the presence of fire."

wǒ xìn wú xíng dào zhī rén zhǒng jiě zhào zhòng zhī rì zài.

我信無行道之人，踵解兆眾之日在

I believe that, for those who do not follow the way, the day of reckoning for the masses will come.

chuán huǎng hū hé rén ér yǐ cǐ wén jiǔ zhōu quàn qí tǔ yí wù chǎn

船恍惚，何人而以此文九州券其土宜物产？⁴

The boat is indistinct. Who can use this writing to document the land and the products of the nine provinces?

Céng bù duō zé shēng zhì wò zuò bù yán zhě zài sān xiū.

曾不多，則聲志卧坐不，言者再三修。

Even if the content is not much, it can still allow one to understand everything while sitting still, as the speaker has revised it repeatedly.

³ In the text, the term “涯” is unclear due to the lack of context. It can be interpreted as a figure representing faith.

⁴ The concept of “Jiuzhou” (Nine Provinces) is borrowed from the 《尚书·禹贡》, an article purportedly written by Yu the Great but actually composed by a person from the state of Wei during the Warring States period. This text states that Yu the Great divided the land into “Nine Provinces” during his efforts to control the floods. These provinces were Jizhou, Yanzhou, Qingzhou, Xuzhou, Yangzhou, Jingzhou, Yuzhou, Liangzhou, and Yongzhou. Matteo Ricci combined Christian thoughts and stories with traditional Chinese culture, so that Chinese readers could understand and accept new religious ideas within a familiar cultural context. This approach reflected the missionaries’ respect for Chinese culture. They did not completely discard or deny local culture; instead, they attempted to integrate the two cultures, showcasing the universality and inclusiveness of Christianity.

Dà hū lì xìng dé yǔ Yòubó Chéng kuò zhù zuò zhě wú yì wú nǎi shēn yě

大乎立，幸得與幼博程廓助作者，吾異吾乃諗也。

Great indeed is the achievement. I am fortunate to have the assistance of Youbo Cheng.

I admire and thus understand.

Ōuluóbā Lì Mǎdòu zhuàn.

歐邏巴利瑪竇撰。

Written by European Matteo Ricci.

PASSAGE FIVE

The following passage describes the interaction between Matteo Ricci and Master Cheng. The beginning emphasizes the significance of writing in the world, noting that, without it, people would be unable to express emotions or cope with ignorance. Writing bridges time and space, enabling communication across distances and generations. Ricci praises Cheng's knowledge and craftsmanship in ink-making. Cheng's dedication to ancient culture and techniques remains strong. Ricci also mentions having seen exquisite Chinese artifacts, attributing their quality to the craftsmen's singular focus on their craft. Ricci concludes that Chinese literature and culture are unparalleled globally, and, while smaller nations' knowledge and craftsmanship contribute to greater civilizations, they cannot compare to Chinese literature.

Shù wén zèng yòu bó chéng zǐ

《述文贈幼博程子》

A Narrative of Writing, Dedicated to Youbo, Master Cheng

Guǎng zāi, wén zì zhī gōng yú yǔ nèi yé!

廣哉，文字之功於宇內耶！

How vast is the contribution of words to the world!

Shì wú wén, hé rèn qí fèn fěi, hé kān qí àn wǎn hū?

世無文，何任其憤悱，何堪其暗汶乎？

If the world were without writing, how could people express their feelings, and how could they endure such obscurity?

Bǎi bù zhī yuǎn, shēng bù xiāng wén, ér yù shū yǐ tōng,

百步之遠，聲不相聞，而寓書以通，

At a distance of a hundred paces, voices cannot be heard, yet through writing, communication is possible.

Jí liǎng rén zhě kuī jū jǐ wàn lǐ zhī wài, qiě xiāng wèn dá tán lùn rú duì zuò yān;

即兩人者睽居幾萬里之外，且相問答談論如對坐焉；

Even if two people are separated by tens of thousands of tricents, they can ask questions and discuss as if sitting face to face.

Bǎi shì zhī hòu rén wèi shēng, wú wèi néng zhī qí hé rén, ér yǐ cǐ wén yě líng wàn shì zhī hòu kě dá jǐ yì, rú tóng shì ér zài bǎi shì zhī qián.

百世之後人未生，吾未能知其何人，而以此文也令萬世之後可達己意，如同世而在百世之前。

A hundred generations later, among people not yet born; I cannot know who they are, yet through this writing, my intentions can reach them, as if living in the same era a hundred generations before.

Shēng zhèng yǐ méi, hòu rén yīn qí yí shū, yóu wén qí fǎ yán, shì qí fēng róng, zhī qí shí zhī zhì luàn, yú shēng bǐ shí zhě wú yì yě.

生正已沒，後人因其遺書，猶聞其法言，視其豐容，知其時之治亂，於生彼時者無異也。

Though I am gone, later generations can still hear my teachings and see my likeness through my writings, understanding the governance and chaos of my time as if they lived in that era.

Wàn guó jiǔ zhōu, fén bù dà dì, yī rén zhī shēn, bǎi xún zhī shòu, jié jué yǐ xíng, bù néng dān jí;

萬國九州，棼布大地，一人之身，百旬之壽，竭蹶以行，不能殫極；

In the vast lands of all nations and the nine continents, with just one person's body and a lifespan of a hundred years, striving hard to walk, and not to reach the extremes;

Ér wú cáo yīn shū zhì, wò zuò bù chū shì mén, jí zhī qí sú, dá qí zhèng, dù qí guǎng, shí qí tǔ yí wù chǎn, céng bù zhōng rì yǔ dì rú zhǐ zhǎng yān.

而吾曹因書志，臥坐不出室門，即知其俗，達其政，度其廣，識其土宜物產，曾不終日與地如指掌焉。

Yet through writing, we can know their customs, understand their governance, measure their expanse, and recognize their land's products, all without leaving our rooms, all within the space of a day as easy as though I were pointing to things in my palm.

Shèng jiào zhī yè, bǎi jiā zhī gōng, liù yì zhī qiǎo, wú shū, hé lìng jīn zhì shèng ruò shì yǔ?

聖教之業，百家之工，六藝之巧，無書，何令今至盛若是與？

Gù guó yú shàng wén yú yì zhì.

故國逾尚文逾易治。

Thus, the more a country values literature, the easier it is to govern.

Hé zhě? yán zhī chuán, mò jì zhī yǐ shū, bù guǎng yě, bù wěn yě.

何者？言之傳，莫紀之以書，不廣也，不穩也。

Why? Spoken words are not recorded in writing; they are neither widely spread nor firmly established.

Yī rén yán zhī, huò wàn rén tīng zhī, duō zé shēng bù jì yǐ;

一人言之，或萬人聽之，多則聲不暨已；

One person speaks, and perhaps ten thousand people hear; if there are more than that, the voice will not reach far enough;

Shū zhě néng lìng wú liàng shù rén tóng wén zhī, qí yuǎn yě, qiě yì fāng wú ài yě.

書者能令無量數人同聞之，其遠也，且異方無礙也。

But books can enable countless people to hear the same words, spreading far and wide, without barriers.

Yán zhě sù liú, bù róng wén zhě xiáng sī ér dì shí zhī, bù róng yán zhě zài sān xiū zhěng ér bǐ què dìng yān.

言者速流，不容聞者詳思而諦識之，不容言者再三修整而俾確定焉。

Spoken words flow quickly, not allowing listeners to ponder and fully understand them, nor allowing speakers to revise and confirm them repeatedly.

Ruò shū yě, zuò zhě yù zé zhī, bǐ ér chóng yì, gǎi yì fāng yuán, nǎi zhe zhī zhòng yě.

若書也，作者預擇之，筆而重筆，改易方圓，乃著之眾也。

But with writing, authors carefully choose their words, repeatedly revising and confirming them before presenting them to the public.

Gù néng zhù shū, gōng dà hū lì yán zhě yě.

故能著書，功大乎立言者也。

Thus, those who can write books have greater achievements than those who establish words.

Jīn suì dòu yīn shí lín zhù wēng shī jiǎn, xìng dé yǔ yòu bó chéng zǐ wò shǒu, zhī cǐ jūn zhǐ yuǎn yǐ.

今歲竇因石林祝翁詩柬，幸得與幼博程子握手，知此君旨遠矣。

This year, due to an invitation by elder Mr. Zhu of Shilin, I had the pleasure of meeting Youbo, Master Cheng, and understanding his far-reaching vision.

Chéng zǐ shòu yú ài ér zhì qì bù shǎo shuāi, xíng yóu sì fāng, yī yì yǐ hào gǔ bó yǎ wéi shì.

程子壽逾艾而志氣不少衰，行游四方，一意以好古博雅為事。

Jí qí suǒ zhì mò, jué jīng qiǎo, zé bù dàn zì zuò, ér qiě yǐ kuò zhù zuò zhě, wú shì yǐ qīn yǎng dà guó zhī wén zhì shèng yě.

即其所制墨，絕精巧，則不但自作，而且以廓助作者，吾是以欽仰大國之文至盛也。

The ink that he produces is exceptionally exquisite, not only made by himself but also aiding other writers. This is why I admire the literary achievements of this great country.

Xiàng cháng jiàn zhōng guó yí dǐng fǎ wù, rú "bó gǔ tú" suǒ zǎi, wǎng wǎng jí gōng zhì. qí shí rén wú yì xué, gōng bù èr shì, suǒ yǐ nǎi ěr.

向嘗見中國彝鼎法物，如《博古圖》所載，往往極工致。其時人無異學，工不二事，所以乃爾。

In the past, I have seen ritual vessels and objects from China, as recorded in “Catalogue of Antiquities,” often of exquisite craftsmanship. People of that time did not engage in diverse studies, workers did not occupy themselves with more than one task, which is why they could achieve such skill.

Jīn guān chéng zǐ suǒ zhì mò, rú “mò yuàn” suǒ zǎi, sì yǔ chǒu xī gōng qiǎo wú yì.

今觀程子所製墨，如《墨苑》所載，似與疇昔工巧無異。

Now observing the ink made by Cheng, as described in the “Ink Garden,” it seems no different from the exquisite craftsmanship of the past.

Wú nǎi shěn dà guó zhī wén zhì, xíng jiāng shàng qǐ táng yú sān dài, qiě qīn qīn shàng zhī yǐ.

吾乃諗大國之文治，行將上企唐虞三代，且駸駸上之矣。⁵

I then realized the literary governance of this great country is advancing towards the heights of the Tang, Yu, and the Three Dynasties, steadily progressing.

Chéng zǐ wén bì bāng sù xí wén, ér yì xiáng zhī shì qiě wén zhě shū zhuàng, yù dé ér dì guān zhī.

程子聞敝邦素習文，而異庠之士且文者殊狀，欲得而諦觀之。

Cheng has heard that our country always studied literature and the peculiarities of scholars and writers from different schools, desiring to observe them closely.

Yǔ yuē: zǐ dé zhōng guó yī shì zhī míng wén, hé yǐ huāng wài wén wéi yē?

予曰：子得中國一世之名文，何以荒外文為耶？

⁵ The term “Tang, Yu, and the Three Dynasties” refers to the legendary wise rulers Yao and Shun from ancient Chinese history, whose reigns are collectively known as the “Era of Yao and Shun.” The “Three Dynasties” refers to the Xia, Shang, and Zhou dynasties. This term is often used to represent an ideal period of governance in Chinese legend, serving as a model for later rulers and emphasizing wise and virtuous governance. Matteo Ricci mentioned “Tang, Yu, and the Three Dynasties” to praise the high level of literary governance achieved by ancient Chinese civilization.

I said: You have obtained the famous writings of a lifetime in China, why waste your time on writings from elsewhere?

Biǎn xiǎo zhī guó, pì lòu zhī xué, rú lìng yǎn yì suǒ wén, huò zhě wàn fēn zhī yī bù wú shǎo pí dà guó wén míng zhī shèng ěr, ruò qí wén yě, bù néng jí yě.

褊小之國、僻陋之學，如今演繹所聞，或者萬分之一不無少裨大國文明之盛耳，若其文也，不能及也。

A small and remote country with its crude learning, even if it could interpret what it has heard, might contribute only one ten thousandth to the grand civilization of the great country (China). As for its literature, it cannot reach that of the latter.

Wàn lì sān shí sān nián suì cì yǐ sì là yuè shuò, ōu luó bā lì Mǎdòu zhuàn bìng yǔ bǐ.

萬曆三十三年歲次乙巳臘月朔，歐邏巴利瑪竇撰並羽筆。

The thirty-third year of Wanli, in the year of Yisi (1605 AD), on the first day of the twelfth lunar month, written and inscribed by European Matteo Ricci.

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