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A Friend Who Does Me No Good:
Aphorism in Matteo Ricci's *On Friendship*

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Abstract

This paper argues that Italian Jesuit Matteo Ricci (1552-1610) designed his aphoristic compilation, *Jiaoyou Lun* 交友論—*On Friendship* (1595)—to serve the Jesuit mission of converting the Chinese to Catholicism and express the conflict he may have felt exploiting friends to forward the Jesuit mission. Utilizing friendships to allow for greater social influence was central to the Jesuit proselytization strategy in China. However, Ricci's moral education from youth taught him to judge utilitarian friendships as immoral. The extant scholarship regarding Ricci's *On Friendship* fails to acknowledge the significance of the aphoristic form to this work. To illuminate the value of aphorism to the Jesuit mission and this book, I analyze a selection of the book's one-hundred maxims. My interpretation emphasizes the tone of authority and universality established through the genre's concision. This brevity can raise questions about the meaning of the text and spark conversations, strengthening friendships among readers, and arguably furthering the goals of the mission. Additionally, the text's inconsistent moral portrayal of utilitarian friendship may reveal Ricci's ambivalence about his own friendships with Chinese literati. Through close reading of *On Friendship*, I posit that the aphorism's brevity and ambiguity may have allowed Ricci to express his emotional unrest while still crafting a book that could be considered a tool of proselytization.

Introduction

Matteo Ricci carried the Catholic church's mission to the East. Tasked with entering China and spreading the word of Christ, he integrated himself into Chinese society, learning how to dress, speak, and act like the Chinese, all "for the greater glory of God." However, Ricci's efforts in proselytizing did not mean that he lived in China bluntly trying to force Chinese people to accept Catholicism. Instead, through building friendly relationships and creating fascinating works of literature, Ricci wove together the intellectual traditions of East and West with the goal of influencing the Chinese. One such literary work was a gift, presented to a blue-blooded friend. In 1595, Matteo Ricci composed a treatise on friendship, titled *Jiaoyou Lun* 交友論—*On Friendship*—to offer the Prince Kang Yi of Jian an. A compilation of one hundred aphorisms sourced from a variety of works from his Jesuit education, *On Friendship* takes the form of a collection of pithy sayings from the Western tradition.

The book presented by his European friend greatly pleased Prince Kang Yi.¹ The elite social circles in which the prince moved learned of Ricci's book and developed a hunger to read its contents. Eventually, a friend of the Jesuits decided to have the book published, so *On Friendship* became available to the Ming literati. The prince read *On Friendship* alone as the first reader of the text, but as the book entered elite circles, it became part of a more social intellectual culture.

¹ Matteo Ricci, *On Friendship: One Hundred Maxims for a Chinese Prince*, trans. Timothy Billings (Columbia University Press, 2009), 9.

Instead of the solitary role Prince Kang Yi had as the text's first reader, within literati circles, the book could be discussed by friends.

This book was received enthusiastically by the Chinese literati, being printed, revised and reprinted many times by both Jesuits in China and Chinese friends;² the work bolstered Ricci's social standing with the Chinese elite. According to Ricci's journals, the book that he presented to the prince as *On Friendship* was not originally aphoristic. According to the journals that Ricci wrote in the year before his death, Ricci planned to write the book known as *On Friendship* as a dialogue between himself and Prince Kang Yi.³ However, because no known editions of *On Friendship* exist in the form of dialogue, it is likely that Ricci decided to write in aphorism for *On Friendship* early in the drafting process. From this change in form a question rises: why a compilation of aphorisms? Later in life, Ricci would publish other works in dialogue form, and by no means was his writing known for being aphoristic. Further, the majority of the authors from whom Ricci sourced *On Friendship*'s content from were not known for being aphoristic. Therefore, Matteo Ricci's decision to write *On Friendship* as a collection of aphorisms is a distinct and significant point of interest for the work.

This paper examines the significance of Ricci's use of aphorism through a close reading of a few of the aphorisms in *On Friendship*. More specifically, this paper argues that the use of aphorism created an easy-to-read, highly concise sampling of the Western intellectual tradition's theory of friendship. The genre's

² Ricci, *On Friendship*, 2.

³ Ricci, *On Friendship*, 10.

concision established a tone of authority and universality, and also potentially created conversations between readers through ambiguity, developing the Jesuits' standing in Ming China, and therefore serving the Jesuit mission. Also, by writing *On Friendship* as a compilation of aphorisms, Ricci portrayed the moral value of utilitarian friendship inconsistently, perhaps exposing inner conflict regarding his own friendship with members of the Chinese elite.

This paper begins with a brief historical overview of *On Friendship* and its treatment in recent scholarship. Then it describes the relationship between the aphoristic form and friendship. Next, it analyzes a few of Ricci's aphorisms with the goal of substantiating the claim that Matteo Ricci chose a compilation of aphorisms for *On Friendship* so as to convey some of the deeply conflicted emotions that he felt as a major player in the Jesuit China mission. Finally, it analyzes an additional few of Ricci's aphorisms to reveal how the choice of genre aided the Jesuit mission.

Background to On Friendship

After receiving a Jesuit education in Rome and staying in Goa for four years, Ricci was summoned to join the Jesuit mission in China. First arriving in Macao, and eventually traveling into the mainland, he followed the Jesuit mission to Nanchang 南昌. By this point in Ricci's career in China, he and his confrères had already learned Chinese, become near-experts in Chinese culture, and adopted the dress of Confucian literati. In Nanchang, Ricci built a friendship with Prince Kang Yi that resulted in Ricci's writing *On Friendship* and giving it to the prince.

Ricci's choice of friendship as the subject for the book was not random. In Ming China, friendship was a hot topic of conversation for the literati and the elite. The popularity of the topic among the people he was trying to convert motivated Ricci's choice to write about friendship. By writing on a popular theme, Ricci created a work that was bound to generate discussion and interest in himself and the Jesuits. Friendship was a comparably hot topic in Renaissance Europe, where Michel de Montaigne (1533-1592) published his essay "Of Friendship" in 1580.⁴

In the Ming dynasty, where success for educated men depended on their performance in the highly selective civil service examinations, friends proved useful not only as sources of study help, but also sources for finding alternatives should a man fail to pass the exam.⁵ Additionally, to the many educated men in the Ming dynasty who were deeply invested in self-cultivation, friends could serve as a means of inspiring reflection. With friends, an educated man was able to have conversations about morality, ethics, and proper virtue. Through these conversations, the high virtue of a literatus' friends would rub off on the literatus, he would be given an opportunity to reflect on his own values, and he would eventually develop a deeper understanding of the self—a highly desirable outcome in the Ming. This ties into the deep intellectual culture present in the Ming dynasty, which resulted in meetings among elites to discuss all things learning and

⁴ Seigneur de Michel Eyquem Montaigne, *The Complete Essays of Montaigne*, trans. Donald Frame (Stanford University Press, 1958), 38.

⁵ Martin W. Huang, "Male-Male Sexual Bonding and Male Friendship in Late Imperial China," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 22, no. 2 (2013): 3.

self-betterment.⁶ As individuals went to these meetings more often, they naturally came to meet others who they wanted to deepen their relationship. In this way, the Ming dynasty's intellectual culture helped to fuel the passion the literati had for friendship.

Further, the increasingly commercial Ming economy allowed for increased opportunities for social mobility, resulting in a China that was less hierarchical than the China of the past. This resulted in a society that was supportive of friendship between individuals of differing social classes.⁷ Within the *wulun* 五倫—the five cardinal human relationships in Confucianism—friendship was widely considered to be the least important. This placed the relationship between friends beneath those between father and son, ruler and minister, husband and wife, and older and younger brother. Unlike the four other relationships in the *wulun*, friendship is the only bond that is actively chosen by the participant in the relationship. Friendship is also notably the least hierarchical.⁸ Because of friendship's comparatively egalitarian nature, those who lived in the less hierarchical Ming China naturally gravitated toward it.

Ultimately, the quality of Ming China that made it a time in Chinese history when friendship flourished was not that the people who lived during the time period were particularly friendly. Instead, because of the fiery intellectual discussions regarding friendship and the willingness of Ming literati to take

⁶ Miaofen Lü, "Practice as Knowledge: Yang-Ming Learning and Chiang-Hui in Sixteenth-Century China" (PhD diss., University of California, Los Angeles, 1997), 119.

⁷ Ana Carolina Hosne, "Friendship among Literati. Matteo Ricci SJ (1552–1610) in Late Ming China," *The Journal of Transcultural Studies* 5, no. 1 (July 1, 2014): 191.

⁸ Norman Kutcher, "The Fifth Relationship: Dangerous Friendships in the Confucian Context," *The American Historical Review* 105, no. 5 (2000): 1615.

friendship as a topic to write on, friendship in Ming China gained a level of moral significance that it had not held before in China's history. Because of the high level of moral significance friendship held in the Ming dynasty, Matteo Ricci likely chose to write about friendship to captivate the many elites who were already obsessed with it.

On Friendship developed organically: the book started as a translation exercise for Ricci, pulling from Andreas Eborensis' 1569 *Sententiae et exempla* (*Wise Sayings and Illustrative Anecdotes*) for content. With the help of hired native Chinese speakers, Ricci translated a number of the sayings from the book.⁹ The compilation of translated phrases evolved into a text taking the form of dialogue, and then into the collection of Western aphorisms in classical Chinese on friendship that is known today. The book's content is nearly entirely secular; only two of the maxims in *On Friendship* mention the Catholic god at all. Certainly, the omission of Christian content is an extension of the essential Jesuit strategy of accommodation which Ricci helped to develop in the Jesuit China mission. Jesuits adapted Christianity to the culture of those they aimed to convert. This makes *On Friendship* oblique in its function as a tool of proselytization.

Ultimately, the book became popular among the Chinese elite because of the exotic nature of a compilation of Western maxims on friendship as well as the remarkable similarity between Chinese and Western values concerning friendship presented in the book. As it was originally presented to the prince and originally printed, *On Friendship* only had seventy-six maxims. The third revision of *On*

⁹ Ricci, *On Friendship*, 8, 12.

Friendship is the earliest edition known to contain all one hundred maxims. This edition was published in 1601 in Beijing.¹⁰ The book's popularity among scholars was not limited to the Ming dynasty; today's scholars also have analyzed the significance of *On Friendship* in a variety of ways.

While lacking any discussion on the significance of aphorism in *On Friendship*, today's scholarship on the book varies greatly in analysis. For example, Ana Carolina Hosne asserts that *On Friendship* is a site of common ground between Western and Chinese intellectual traditions, allowing Ricci to make first contact with his literati audience.¹¹ Liu Yu argues that while generally lacking any form of "philosophical distinction" or "thematic structure," *On Friendship* succeeds in evangelizing by presenting Western ideas as compatible with Confucianism as a cover for Catholicism.¹² Xu Dongfeng instead posits that *On Friendship* fails as a tool for conversion because it forwards the compatibility of pagan friendship and Confucian friendship rather than Catholic and Confucian friendship.¹³ While generally recognizing the significance of *On Friendship* to Ricci's ability to expand his social network, the extant body of scholarship overlooks the significance of aphorism to *On Friendship*. This paper illuminates the significance of literary form, starting with how the genre of aphorism is especially apt for writing about friendship.

¹⁰ Ricci, *On Friendship*, 140.

¹¹ Hosne, "Friendship among Literati. Matteo Ricci SJ (1552–1610) in Late Ming China," 194.

¹² Yu Liu, "The Preparation for Proselytizing: Matteo Ricci's Treatise 'Jiao-You-Lun (On Friendship),' " *Mosaic: An Interdisciplinary Critical Journal* 43, no. 3 (2010): 175.

¹³ Dongfeng Xu, *Friendship and Hospitality: The Jesuit-Confucian Encounter in Late Ming China* (State University of New York Press, 2021), 88.

The Social Aphorism

The aphorism at first glance seems solitary. It is as concise as a literary form can be. Each aphorism in *On Friendship* holds the rhetorical weight necessary to stand by itself. Despite the aphorism's pithy nature and apparent autonomy, aphorisms seldom come without a herd of other aphorisms. As Andrew Hui puts in his book *A Theory of the Aphorism*, each aphorism appears to be complete in itself, but “also forms a node in a network, often a transnational one with great longevity, capable of continuous expansion.”¹⁴ As Hui explains, aphorisms exist in compilations and collections like *On Friendship*. In compilations, individual maxims reside in conversation with each other, forming systems of related axioms with complementary or contradictory meanings. In this way, the aphoristic genre is highly social, like social networks of friends.¹⁵

In addition to the connection between the book's aphoristic form and focus on friendship, the sociability of the aphorism connects to the Jesuits' primary proselytization strategy. The Jesuits' careers were built on forming connections and networking. In China, the Jesuits dealt in friendship. By dressing and acting as Confucian scholars—members of high society—they gained full access to the elite that acquired huge, sprawling social networks. Without access to such elite individuals as friends, the Jesuits would not have as many opportunities to convert others. Further, they would also have lacked the connections necessary for finding

¹⁴ Andrew Hui, *A Theory of the Aphorism: From Confucius to Twitter* (Princeton University Press, 2019), 3.

¹⁵ Hui, *A Theory of the Aphorism*, 7.

additional people to speak with and convert. Therefore, in China, developing large networks of male friends became a prominent aspect of Jesuit life.

But making friends did not serve the Jesuits' personal interests, nor did they do it for personal gain: making friends and socializing all played into the Jesuit motto, *ad maiorem dei gloriam*—"for the greater glory of God." In Ming China, Ricci and the Jesuits' method of proselytization became a cycle of participating in lengthy discussions on philosophy and other topics, attending lavish banquet dinners, and drinking large amounts of tea and wine, all for the goal of developing relationships.¹⁶ If those at the very top of the social hierarchy were able to influence the uneducated masses, the Jesuits' logic led them to try converting those at the top so their influence would trickle down and reach those of lower status. Even for the devout European Jesuits, the opportunities provided by developing friendships were so vast that during the Christian holiday of Lent where the Catholics were expected to fast, they would still attend the luxurious and extravagant dinner parties that allowed them to expand their precious social network. They'd be sure to skip lunch the following day to make up for the previous evening's indulgences.¹⁷ It was because of adaptations like these that Ricci and the Jesuits were able to make many connections, and these habits also show the degree of importance that forming friendships took within the China mission's proselytization strategy.

¹⁶ Mary Laven, *Mission to China: Matteo Ricci and the Jesuit Encounter with the East* (London: Faber and Faber, 2011), 84.

¹⁷ Laven, *Mission to China*, 86.

Like the individual people that form a social network, the individual maxims in an aphoristic work have complex, internal relationships. The networks of aphorisms generated from maxims that converse with one another parallel the book's content and the larger Jesuit approach to proselytizing. Therefore, the sociability of the aphoristic form makes it specifically apt for writing about friendship and it also mirrors the social component of the Jesuits' strategy for winning converts. Conversation between aphorisms is clearly an important component of *On Friendship*, especially aphorisms with contradictory meanings. The following section explores a selection of contradictory aphorisms on the topic of utilitarian friendship.

On Friendship: Exposing the Emotional Interior

It would be natural when first examining a Jesuit work such as *On Friendship* to consider how the work contributes to the mission's proselytization efforts. Equally important are aspects of the text that are more intimately related to the author. In the case of *On Friendship*, because of the diversity of sources the book's aphorisms come from, there are many internal inconsistencies. These are not a weakness, but instead a benefit. The inconsistency possible in *On Friendship* because of the genre may have given Ricci an avenue to express conflicted emotions on the topic of utilitarian friendship that he may otherwise not have had.

In Aristotle's (384-322 BC) *Nicomachean Ethics* which Ricci read during his days at the Jesuit Roman College, he learned of Aristotle's three types of

friends: friendships of utility, pleasure and virtue. Aristotle considered friendships of utility as less valuable and less morally sound than friendships of virtue, since utility-based friendships are more susceptible to influence from outside factors, rather than a shared commitment to the other.¹⁸ The utilitarian friend is one who forms close bonds for reasons other than the company of those whom he befriends. According to this definition, the friendships that Ricci developed with Ming literati were highly utilitarian and therefore morally suspect. Ricci's goal in befriending individuals like Prince Kang Yi ultimately was the Jesuits' gain. After befriending high society members, they would take advantage of their broad social network to further increase their social clout. To Ricci, friendship was polyvalent. Friendship was both a tool to further the mission, and also something that in his education ought not to be corrupted with utilitarian purposes.

Therefore, Ricci's primary strategy of proselytization became something that he had learned was immoral. It is likely that Ricci actually enjoyed the company of the literati whom he was tasked with converting, but his interactions would always be tainted by the ulterior motive that all of the Jesuits had—winning converts. The moral education Ricci received in youth could have made building utilitarian friendships as he did in China upsetting and confusing. This conflicted emotional state may manifest itself in the inconsistent moral portrayal of utilitarian relationships in *On Friendship*. In one aphorism from *On Friendship*, Ricci draws upon from his moral education and criticizes utilitarian friendship:

¹⁸ Aristotle, *Aristotle: Nicomachean Ethics*, ed. Roger Crisp (Cambridge University Press, 2014), 8.3.

交友使獨知利己，不復顧益其友，是商賈之人耳，不可謂友也。

28: “Whoever makes friends thinking only of personal profit without also considering the benefit of a friend is nothing more than a merchant, and cannot be called a friend.”¹⁹

In this aphorism, Ricci criticizes those who make friends for personal benefit. Ricci even chooses to use a very politically charged character *li* 利: a character that Ricci’s audience—the Prince and the Ming elite—would certainly have known. Meaning profit, *li* is a word that appears early in the *Mencius* as something to be criticized. In *Mencius*’ first chapter, Mencius meets with a king who asks if Mencius will profit the kingdom. Mencius does not take this choice of words well, stating that righteousness 義 and benevolence 仁 are his goals, and profit is what leads individuals away from proper virtue.²⁰ Mencius 孟子 (372–289 BC) was an inheritor of Confucian thought and is known for further developing the moral teachings of Confucius. By the Ming dynasty, Mencius’ contributions to the Confucian canon were fully integrated into the civil service examinations to be memorized by all students, so the Ming elite were deeply familiar with Mencian thought. The Ming elite’s familiarity with Mencius meant that Ricci’s use of the word *li* resulted in an aphorism strongly criticizing utilitarian friendship.

¹⁹ Ricci, *On Friendship*, 103.

²⁰ Mencius, *The Chinese Classics: Vol. 2: The Works of Mencius*, ed. James Legge (Palala Press, 1861), 1A:1-3.

Through a relevant cultural reference to Mencius, Ricci solidly asserts that one who makes friends only for personal benefit cannot be considered a friend, as he had learned in his youth. However, his stance on utilitarian friends is not consistent. The aphorism immediately following reads:

友之物皆與共。

29: “The material goods of friends are all held in common.”²¹

If one reads the character *wu* as “material goods”, then it is not unreasonable to assert that the aphorism regarding material goods supports those who make friends for material benefit, as—according to this aphorism—friends are supposed to share all things. The following two aphorisms also present utilitarian friendship in a positive light:

相須相佑，為結友之由。

3: “Mutual need and mutual support are the reasons to make friends.”²²

友人無所善我，與仇人無所害我等焉。

23: “A friend who does me no good is like an enemy who does me no harm.”²³

²¹ Ricci, *On Friendship*, 103. I will present an alternative reading of this aphorism later. See footnote 34.

²² Ricci, *On Friendship*, 91.

²³ Ricci, *On Friendship*, 99.

These three aphorisms put the benefit to the self at the center of friendship. The aphorism regarding mutual need (3) even goes as far as to say that the entire reason for making friends is to benefit the self. The character *shan* 善, translated by Billings as “do good,” has a distinct moral implication in classical Chinese. In the aphorism regarding friends who do no good (23), Ricci likely does not mean that one’s friend is supposed to provide material benefit. “Moral betterment” is a more accurate reading. While not necessarily utilitarian in a material sense, this still supports a utilitarian view of friendship in terms of self-cultivation. The utility of a friend in this aphorism (23) is of moral benefit, helping one attain greater virtue. Together, these three aphorisms clash with the aphorism on profit (28), in addition to Ricci’s moral education. Together, the three paint a picture of Ricci the evangelist who understands how the friends he makes in China can benefit the mission.

Clearly, *On Friendship* is not consistent in its view on utilitarian friends. However, this should not be seen as a philosophical weakness of *On Friendship*. Because *On Friendship* is a compilation of aphorisms from many different sources, Ricci did not need to commit to a single interpretation of friendship. There are inconsistencies because the sources from which he pulled content were also inconsistent. However, because he does not cite his sources, readers have the impression that all of the aphorisms represent his own views.

The Ricci in *On Friendship* comes across as very conflicted. He’s torn between his mission as a Jesuit and his moral education. This internal, emotional conflict manifests itself as the inconsistencies present in the book. From his

letters, we know that Ricci claimed the friendships he made were not morally wrong, because he and the Jesuits were not searching for “honors” in exchange for friendship.²⁴ However, the Ricci who gave prisms, maps, and other gifts to Prince Kang Yi with the purpose of gaining influence is the same Ricci who would write:

友之饋友而望報，非饋也，與市易者等耳。

9: “A friend who gives a gift to another friend and expects something in return has made no gift at all, but is no different from a trader in the marketplace.”²⁵

It is clear from this inconsistency in stance on utilitarian friends that Ricci did not appreciate transactionality in friendships, and yet, his career as a Jesuit was entirely dependent on the benefits of building relationships. Surely, Ricci must have experienced a degree of cognitive dissonance when making friends in China. The genre of *On Friendship* provided an environment for Ricci to write a book as conflicted as he potentially felt acting against the dictates of his moral education. His cognitive dissonance may have created inconsistencies among aphorisms in *On Friendship*, also making it a highly debatable book. If Ming literati had read a hypothetical version of *On Friendship* that was entirely consistent, they might not have had as much to discuss as they did with the highly inconsistent version of *On Friendship*. Through the use of aphorism in *On Friendship* Ricci was able to

²⁴ R. Po-chia Hsia, *A Jesuit in the Forbidden City: Matteo Ricci 1552-1610* (Oxford University Press, 2010), 168.

²⁵ Ricci, *On Friendship*, 93.

express a collection of diverse feelings, just as the book is made up of a diverse collection of aphorisms.

On Friendship: A Tool for Proselytization

In late-Ming China, collecting items was a very popular pastime.²⁶ In spending time amassing and curating collections that would include items like paintings or calligraphy, Ming literati were able to express their inner refinement and taste through their displayed material goods. The elite would spend large amounts of money and time establishing collections of items that they personally found aesthetically pleasing, exotic, foreign, or unusual. However, the value of the compiled items was not limited to the individual items' aesthetic value. To enjoy a collection in Ming China was a way for elites to enjoy their leisure time in a refined manner. Collections in Ming China were not limited to items typically thought of as art. Practically every object found in Ming elite culture was something to collect. One Lu Shu-sheng 陸樹聲 (1509-1605) had a collection of inkstones and found them so wonderful that he took on the name "Master of Ten Inkstones," as a means of expressing appreciation for his collection.²⁷ In addition to collecting objects, Ming elites would also collect books. Acquiring knowledge and deepening one's understanding of morality and philosophy was rooted in Ming China's deep intellectual culture centered on moral cultivation. Therefore, the collection of books naturally fell at the center of connoisseur culture.

²⁶ Wai-Yee Li, "The Collector, the Connoisseur, and Late-Ming Sensibility," *T'oung Pao* 81, no. 4 (January 1, 1995): 269–302.

²⁷ Li, "The Collector, the Connoisseur, and Late-Ming Sensibility," 287.

Those deeply invested in the culture of connoisseurship in Ming China often also wrote and consumed texts on collecting. These texts included books that described the minute details of the proper way to examine and curate collections according to particular rules of style and taste. These texts also included individual accounts regarding the experience of collecting.²⁸ This fascination bordering on obsession with collecting helps to contextualize *On Friendship*. Ricci's *On Friendship* takes the form of a collection. It is a compilation of thoughts on friendship from Ricci's education. In Ricci's introduction to *On Friendship*, he notes that he 輯成友道一帙, or "compiled this Way of Friendship in one volume."²⁹ He collected the thoughts of the Western thinkers who influenced his own thinking on friendship, and presented it to an audience who already deeply valued connoisseurship and collecting. In this way, the patchwork form of *On Friendship* serves the purposes of the text. To a Ming literatus, as *On Friendship* enters elite circles, there is already an established culture of connoisseurship. Because of this, it is logical to assume that a Ming literatus would be predisposed to take interest in Ricci's *On Friendship* due to its nature as a collection.

Interestingly, although some literati considered collecting a trivial pastime, as evidenced by the title of Ming dynasty scholar Wen Zhenheng's 文震亨 book: 長物志 *Treatise on Superfluous Things*, the aphoristic form of *On Friendship* contrasts the text's possibly superfluous nature as a collection. *Treatise*

²⁸ Li, "The Collector, the Connoisseur, and Late-Ming Sensibility," 276.

²⁹ Ricci, *On Friendship*, 89.

on Superfluous Things was a collection manual that described the proper way to construct a garden or organize a room. The very title seems to imply that the material culture of connoisseurship in early modern China is “superfluous.”

However, the words found in Ricci’s collection of western thought on friendship are aphoristic, so they are anything but superfluous. As Andrew Hui writes in *A Theory of the Aphorism: From Confucius to Twitter*, “in the aphorism nothing is superfluous, every word bears weight.”³⁰ Ricci’s *On Friendship* is able to benefit from the strengths of both being a collection and of being aphoristic. By being legible as a collection, *On Friendship* is familiar and interesting to the prince and Ricci’s Ming elite audience. And, by being aphoristic, *On Friendship* is able to convey meaning in the smallest textual units possible. The form’s compact size echoes the collection of miniatures, or *xiaopin* 小品 popular in the Ming.³¹ Readers are able to enjoyably peruse *On Friendship* as they would a collection of stones, but on a subsequent read, they may study individual aphorisms more closely or even the individual characters within those aphorisms.

By writing *On Friendship* as a collection of aphorisms, Ricci nudges his audience towards perusing *On Friendship* as one would any collection. The aphorism’s pithy nature is what allows *On Friendship* to be legible as a collection, with each maxim considerably deeper in meaning than the number of words or characters may imply while still being a browsable text. The aphoristic form’s brevity is at the center of the book’s power as a tool for proselytization. Not only

³⁰ Hui, *A Theory of the Aphorism*, 1.

³¹ Li, “The Collector, the Connoisseur, and Late-Ming Sensibility,” 276.

by attracting fans of collecting, the genre's concision also helps develop a tone of authority.

Without the allowance for wordiness that other genres grant, in aphorism, Ricci has no room for a nuanced argument. The aphorism is a statement of a drawn conclusion, but the reader is not privy to the author's thought process for reaching that conclusion. In the structure of each aphorism, Ricci makes claim to knowledge of how the world truly is, rather than writing a series of sentences about how the world could possibly be. To write a series of hypothetical conjectures would not be aphoristic. In this way, the book's genre forces Ricci to write declaratively, which ultimately serves his goal as a Jesuit attempting to assert knowledge over those he is trying to convert. For example:

忍友之惡，便以他惡為己惡焉。

33: "If we tolerate the vices of a friend, then those vices become our own vices."³²

Without the room to qualify or explain his reasoning in multiple sentences, in aphorism Ricci has to write with authority. In this example, Ricci states exactly what happens when one tolerates the vices of a friend. By definition, what Ricci writes in his aphoristic book has to be succinct. Ricci writes exactly that when one tolerates a friend's vices, there is a single outcome: the friend's vices become our own. In this way, the aphorism's concision is the root of the book's tone of authority. Authority helps the book act as a tool of proselytization because

³² Ricci, *On Friendship*, 105.

exerting intellectual dominance over the Chinese allowed Jesuits to more easily win converts.

The formatting of the aphorisms as they were originally printed further supports this tone. As Ricci writes in his introduction, the aphorisms presented in *On Friendship* are compiled from his own learning in the West. Notably, in the actual text of *On Friendship*, there are no sources provided for any of the written aphorisms. Li Zhizao 李之藻 was one of the most important Chinese Christian converts in the Ming dynasty, converted by Ricci himself. He collaborated with the Jesuits, publishing books like his 1629 *Tian Xue Chu Han* 天学初函. The version of *On Friendship* presented in *Tian Xue Chu Han* reflects the way that the book was originally available to the Ming elite. In this version of *On Friendship*, not only are the individual aphorisms not numbered as they are in Billings' translation, but no sources are given. While Ricci concedes in the introduction that he compiled the aphorisms from many different sources, his refusal to acknowledge his sources creates a situation in which the reader could easily ascribe the text's words to Ricci himself. This ascription potentially incorrectly places Ricci's role as the synthesizer of content rather than the editor of the book's content, and also ups the authority that Ricci wields over the reader. If each maxim lacks a source, the reader can easily misconstrue Ricci as a great sage of the West, able to write genius original pithy sayings. Allowing for this kind of misunderstanding increases Ricci's authority, potentially making the Chinese elite more willing to accept what he says about Catholicism.

The book's concision and lack of sources establish a tone of authority. In constructing aphorisms that claim to know how the world truly is, Ricci makes a claim to knowledge. This is a major strength of choosing aphorism as the form for the book. Ricci is able to write highly concise maxims without explanation or other justification for each aphorism because of the form. Using aphorism means that the book expresses how the world truly is—according to Ricci—establishing authority over the reader as the Jesuits attempted to establish intellectual authority in China.

Similar to the tone of authority created from the book's brevity, the genre's concision also creates a tone of universality. Ricci's aphorisms tend not to mention who the aphorism applies to. By forming an aphorism by using verbs and without specifying the subject, Ricci crafts an aphorism that is universal. The characters of the aphorism aren't applicable to a specific person; rather they apply generally to all people. In the context of Ricci's mission as a Jesuit, this is a valuable rhetorical technique. Rather than presenting Western thinking as only applicable to Europeans, Ricci writes aphorisms that are meant to be applicable to everyone. The Chinese of course, are included in this universal scope. The aphorism on tolerating the vices of a friend (33) clarifies the universality inherent to Ricci's aphorisms:

忍友之惡，便以他惡為己惡焉。

33: “If we tolerate the vices of a friend, then those vices become our own vices.”³³

The aphorism begins with the character *ren* 忍, which means to tolerate. In the first half of the aphorism, there is no mention of whose friends are the subject. The second half of the aphorism follows suit, with the closest character to a pronoun being *ta* 他, meaning him, or in this case his. Therefore, this word just refers to the friend from the first half of the maxim.

By presenting his aphorisms as universal, Ricci bridges the gap between Western and Chinese traditions. Rather than citing the teachings of the West as only applicable to them, Ricci’s language asserts that it is applicable to the world. Specificity is not something that the aphorism’s concise nature allows for. Specifying who each maxim is applicable to would act counter to the aphorism’s pithy nature. Therefore, the aphorism’s characteristic concision and broad applicability help to further Ricci’s goals as a Jesuit.

In this way, a tone of authority and universality are products of the genre’s concise nature. The genre’s concision did not only aid the Jesuit mission through establishing tone, it also made the text indeterminate. The multiplicity of meanings for each individual character make classical Chinese a versatile language. However, this means that for a reader, a character with many meanings may have to be contextualized by its surrounding characters. In a pithy form like

³³ Ricci, *On Friendship*, 105. This is the same aphorism presented in footnote 32, but I have struck through the words Billings added in his translation to make the sentence grammatical in English.

aphorism, the valuable context provided by other characters is highly limited. For a single maxim that is able to stand alone, the only context available for a given character is from the other characters within its own maxim. This makes certain aphorisms that use polyvalent characters perfect for inspiring discussion. One such aphorism is:

友之物皆與共。

29: “The material goods of friends are all held in common.”³⁴

Between friends all is common (my own translation).

Wu is one such polyvalent character that could have inspired discussion. In the original, *wu* could have many other such as things, colors, people, or *wanwu* 萬物—the myriad things.³⁵ Ricci utilized this ambiguity to forward his efforts in proselytization. By using words that have many meanings, Ricci may have been able to create conversations about his book and the individual words within. By making the book often ambiguous in meaning, conversations surrounding the book’s content likely often materialized.

On Friendship is very easy to read and pick up, but also hard to grasp. This structure ensures that *On Friendship* is debatable. In this way the short, digestible, yet thought-provoking nature of *On Friendship* makes it perfectly constructed for the culture obsessed with curiosities and collection. In the same

³⁴ Ricci, *On Friendship*, 103.

³⁵ *Hanyu Da Cidian*, s.v. “物.”

manner that Ricci presented Western gifts like prisms, maps, and clavichords with the purpose of sparking conversation, Ricci presents various intellectual curiosities from the Western tradition that are just long enough to convey their individual meaning, and short enough to read quickly. Aphorisms like the aphorism on material goods (29), with polyvalent words like *wu*, embody this concise yet stimulating strength of aphorism. This nature may have sparked conversations. Spoken word discussions held by Chinese literati—called *jianghui* 講會—were popular forums meant for lengthy debates on writing, art, friendship, and especially ethics. At these meetings, members discussed popular texts like *On Friendship*.

The many students attracted by Wang Yangming's 王陽明 (1472–1528) teachings on the heart and mind participated in *jianghui* and learned through discussion.³⁶ At these meetings, groups of elite men came together to debate and benefited from the friends they made.³⁷ Not only were *jianghui* integral in the rise of friendship during the Ming Dynasty, *jianghui* also may have been a location for *On Friendship* to grow in popularity among elite men. At the time *On Friendship* was circulated among elite circles, *jianghui* likely helped to further increase the book's recognition, therefore also increasing Ricci and the Jesuits' influence. Polyvalent characters like *wu* likely helped to inspire these conversations. The characters are made ambiguous by the aphoristic form, strengthening the connection between the book's genre and Jesuit goals.

³⁶ Xu, *Friendship and Hospitality*, 84.

³⁷ Lü, "Practice as Knowledge: Yang-Ming Learning and Chiang-Hui in Sixteenth-Century China," 119.

Ricci's choosing to use the character *wu* did not only serve the purpose of fueling conversations. This maxim, borrowed from Erasmus (1466-1536) can have a variety of meanings, many supporting Ricci's proselytization efforts. The original maxim from Erasmus in Latin reads, *amicorum communia omnia*, translated to English as "friends hold all things in common."³⁸ This means that in the context of Ricci's aphorism, *wu* can be taken to mean almost anything. *Wu* could mean values, implying that the morals of friends should accord. *Wu* could mean people, meaning that one friend ought to share the people or connections specific to them. A notion of shared networks of people and friends is similar to how Ricci aimed to expand his social network through mutual friends to influence the greatest number of people. *Wu* could even be taken to mean inner self, implying that friends should freely share their feelings or that friends' selves are to be held in common. This idea references the Aristotelian friend, who is so intimate that he can be considered a second self. Taking *wu* as inner self supports this reading, as two friends holding a self in common implies regarding the friend as oneself. The Ming elite participating in *jianghui* could have deeply examined the character *wu* in this aphorism because of its many meanings. In a wordier text, the surrounding information may contextualize a polyvalent character such as *wu*, but because Ricci wrote in aphorism, the ambiguity of *wu* is maximized, creating a highly interpretable and debatable text. This debate could have raised public

³⁸ Kathy Eden, *Friends Hold All Things in Common: Tradition, Intellectual Property, and the Adages of Erasmus* (Yale University Press, 2008), 405.

awareness of Ricci and the Jesuits, therefore furthering the mission's objective of winning converts.

The book's tone of authority and universality are created by its concision. This concise nature also is the root of the book's debatability and power to create conversations. Clearly, the brevity of the book's genre makes it more powerful as a tool of proselytization. Therefore, it is important to note the few aphorisms in *On Friendship* are not perfectly concise, and the ideas that they convey. The below example is one such uncharacteristically verbose aphorism that centers on the intimacy of the Aristotelian friend:

上帝給人雙目、雙耳、雙手、雙足，欲兩友相助，方為事有成矣。

56: "The Lord on High gave people two eyes, two ears, two hands, and two feet so that two friends could help each other. Only in this way can deeds be brought successfully to completion."³⁹

In this aphorism Ricci conveys a similar understanding of the economy of language to the aphorism on friends' vices. However, Ricci is uncharacteristically verbose in the final section of the aphorism. Translated as "Only in this way can deeds be brought successfully to completion" in Billings, the six characters at the end of the aphorism convey an idea that could have been expressed just three: 方成事. As established in the previous section, the concise nature of aphorism as a

³⁹ Ricci, *On Friendship*, 113.

genre allows the text to be consumed more quickly. Therefore, the few exceptions to this convention of concision are particularly notable.

The aphorism on people's body parts (56) is notable for its length. Ricci not only writes the final part of the aphorism using an unnecessarily long two pairs of verb and object: 為事有成, he also begins the aphorism with many examples of the kinds of human body parts that come in pairs. Ricci certainly could have made the comparison between body parts and friends by just comparing a single body part to two friends. Granted, like all aphorisms in the book, this maxim comes from Ricci's education rather than his own mind. However, because Ricci's roles in *On Friendship* were that of editor and translator, he tweaked and changed the language of the texts he used. In this example, Ricci combined the sayings of Cassiodorus and Plutarch into a single pithy saying.⁴⁰

Ricci used texts that were not aphoristic and fit the philosophy present in those texts into aphoristic molds. Because of this, it was well within Ricci's power to condense the language of the originals in order to better achieve a more concise product. However, Ricci did not do this, which perhaps implies a degree of importance attached to this aphorism. By breaking the expected pattern of concision implied by the text's genre, Ricci can emphasize a specific maxim. This aphorism and the sixteenth are the only two aphorisms in *On Friendship* that mention the Lord on High. The Catholic God was a foreign concept to China, and

⁴⁰ Xu, *Friendship and Hospitality*, 70. I was unable to locate any reference to Cassiodorus or Plutarch in *Sententiae et Exempla* itself.

one that required thorough explanation to be seen as legitimate by the Ming elite. In this way, Ricci's dedication of precious page space to a more verbose aphorism is fitting considering that the aphorism's content concerns the Lord on High—Ricci's name in Chinese for the Catholic God at the time.

This aphorism combines recorded sayings of Cassiodorus and Plutarch, but adds a religious reference, attributing the relationships between human beings to a divine source. In the aphorism, Ricci notes that human beings are meant to exist in pairs of friends, just as human beings have pairs of eyes, ears, hands, and feet. All of the pairs of body parts in this maxim are described with the character *shuang* 雙—an unidentical matched pair. The pair of friends mentioned near the end of the aphorism however cannot be described using this character: instead it is described using the character used for describing a couple—*liang* 兩. The distinction between these two characters is minute, yet necessary in classical Chinese. A *shuang* of eyes, ears, hands or feet are not only a pair, but a matched pair. This means that they are explicitly different. A left shoe is unable to fit on the right foot, because each shoe is made differently. In classical Chinese, humans are not described in this way. Therefore, the character used for describing two humans is *liang* rather than *shuang*. In the context of this aphorism, this is an important distinction because the aphorism's content asserts that the existence of paired body parts on human bodies implies that human beings are also supposed to exist in pairs. The linguistic limitation of only being able to describe two people using the character *liang* means that Ricci could not have maintained the aphorisms' parallel structure established in the first half of the aphorism.

However, this distinction between characters does not weaken Ricci's writing. The aphorism on paired body parts (56) notes four weighted, matched pairs of body parts. The fifth pair in the aphorism is a pair of friends, an unweighted relationship. This compilation of four pairs of weighted body parts followed by an unweighted, non hierarchical pair of friends echoes the role of friendship as the fifth and only unweighted relationship in the *wulun*. The identity in weight and hierarchical position is implied by the character *liang* 兩. This character also helps to suggest another sense of identity in friendship through a major theme present throughout *On Friendship*.

The Aristotelian friend—a friend so intimate that they could be considered a second self—is also implied by *liang*. This idea is so prominent in *On Friendship* that the very first aphorism in the book addresses it:

吾友非他，即我之半，乃第二我也。故當視友如己焉。

1: “My friend is not an other, but half of myself, and thus a second me—I must therefore regard my friend as myself.”⁴¹

From the perspective of the Jesuits, this is a highly applicable concept for proselytizing. As explained previously, accommodation was key to the mission in China. By adapting Catholicism into a form compatible with Confucianism, Ricci and the Jesuits claimed that the two doctrines were not entirely separate. In fact, much of this method of accommodation relied on presenting Catholicism as a part

⁴¹ Ricci, *On Friendship*, 113.

of the Confucian canon that had simply been lost to time; the Jesuits claimed only to want to help the Chinese rediscover this missing aspect of their own heritage.⁴² Reconciling the differences between Confucianism and Catholicism was central to Ricci's proselytization strategy. This method of cultural adaptation is central to Ricci's proselytization effort, becoming most relevant in his pivotal work: *The True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven* 天主實義. The book argues for the similarities between Confucianism and Christianity in the form of a dialogue between a Western scholar and Chinese scholar.

Therefore, the concept of fusion and sameness is important to examine in *On Friendship*. On a smaller scale, the idea of the friend as a second self was highly appealing because a relationship as intimate as the one described in the first aphorism in *On Friendship* would imply sameness on multiple levels between friends. If a Chinese literatus and a Jesuit missionary form a bond as described in this aphorism, the pair become one. In other words, they become "one soul in two bodies."⁴³ If this becomes the case for a Jesuit and Chinese literatus, then the pair's beliefs and values also must become one. How could the pair's beliefs not fully come into agreement? In this way, for a Chinese literatus to be interested in being friends with a Catholic, selves and therefore beliefs fuse, just as the Jesuits attempted to fuse Catholicism into Confucianism.

⁴² Yu Liu, "The Intricacies of Accommodation: The Proselytizing Strategy of Matteo Ricci," *Journal of World History* 19, no. 4 (2008): 470.

⁴³ David Konstan, "One Soul in Two Bodies: Distributed Cognition and Ancient Greek Friendship," in *Distributed Cognition in Classical Antiquity*, ed. Douglas Cairns and Miranda Anderson (Edinburgh University Press, 2017), 209.

In the aphorism on pairs of body parts, Ricci's use of the character *liang* subtly implies the fusion of souls. Rather than a matched pair of equal opposites like a pair of hands or feet, Ricci's aphorism uses *liang*, lacking the matched nature of *shuang*. This phrasing accentuates the similarities between the two friends. The language in this aphorism implies that friends are similar enough to be considered the same, returning to the significance of the friend as a second self.

The significance of the word *liang* to the fusion of selves is evident in the etymology of the character. The oldest extant authority on Chinese characters: the *Shuowen jiezi* 說文解字 is the world's earliest surviving dictionary.⁴⁴ Today, it still serves as a model for Chinese dictionaries, proving its value to linguistics. Each character in *Shuowen jiezi* falls into one of six categories, called the *liu shu* 六書—or six writings. *Liang* belongs is a *hui yi* 會意—“grasp-meaning”—character.⁴⁵ As a *hui yi* character, *liang*'s two component parts both convey meaning. This signifies that all parts of *liang* are relevant to examine.

According to *Shuowen jiezi*, the upper half of the *liang* is *yi* 一, meaning “one”. The lower half of the character is also pronounced *liang* 兩, defined as *ping fen* 平分, meaning “equally divided.”⁴⁶ With the individual parts of its structure defined, the significance of *liang* is clear. The notion of a single thing, or soul, divided equally between friends inheres in the very structure of the character *liang* 兩. The character itself implies the fusion of souls and beliefs that Ricci would hope for two friends.

⁴⁴ Kenneth Thern, *Postface of the Shuowen Chieh-tzu*. (Department of East Asian Languages and Literature, University of Wisconsin, 1966), 1.

⁴⁵ Thern, *Shuowen Chieh-tzu*, 10.

⁴⁶ *Shuowen Jiezi*, s.v. “兩.”

In this way, the character *liang* is indicative of the Jesuit strategy of accommodation on multiple levels; it implies the fusion of friends' souls and their beliefs, which extends to asserting the compatibility between Catholicism and Confucianism that was central to the China mission. If friends between cultures can be identical in nature, then their belief systems must be compatible. This significance of word choice helps to illuminate the importance of aphorism to *On Friendship*. By writing in aphoristic form Ricci was able to succinctly and subtly insert some of the ideas central to the China mission. Unlike in *The True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven*, he would not have to explain his ideas, nor would he have the page space to do so. In aphorism, Ricci can try expressing the fusion of souls and beliefs covertly in Chinese to the very people he wanted to convert.

Conclusion

The choice to write *On Friendship* as a compilation of aphorisms had many benefits to Matteo Ricci. The use of aphorism allowed for an easy to read book that could inspire lengthy discussion, developing the Jesuits' standing in Ming China and furthering the goal of the mission to win converts. By writing *On Friendship* as a compilation of aphorisms, Ricci was also not confined to writing an entirely consistent work. *On Friendship*'s genre served as a way for Ricci to express a potentially complex emotional state as a person doing exactly what his moral education had taught him not to do.

This paper is not without limitation. Currently, it does not discuss the role of friendship within the history of Catholicism or within the Jesuit order. Because

this paper's argument deeply connects to Ricci's own moral education and personal philosophy, having a deeper understanding of the texts and history that informed his psychology would be greatly beneficial to this paper's argument. Ricci certainly would not have thought his actions were utilitarian as evidenced by the letters he sent to other Jesuits.⁴⁷ In his mind, every action in China helped him to altruistically save the many Chinese souls that would otherwise be damned. With a deeper understanding of the role of friendship in relation to Catholicism or the Jesuit order, this paper could more clearly argue that Ricci's moral education and actions came into conflict, expressed in *On Friendship*.

With that information, this paper could more definitively prove that in *On Friendship*, Ricci was able to produce something for the greater glory of God, and also to articulate his own difficulty confronting the Matteo Ricci who only made friends who did him good.

⁴⁷ R. Po-chia Hsia, *A Jesuit in the Forbidden City: Matteo Ricci 1552-1610* (Oxford University Press, 2010), 168.

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