

Lodovico Nocentini: A Rereader of Modern Italian Travellers to China

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Abstract: In 1882, Nocentini published *Il primo sinologo: P. Matteo Ricci*. The first secular biography of the famous Italian Jesuit to China, it posed important questions about the origins of sinology and the role of Matteo Ricci as an early modern Italian traveller in Sino-western relations. Nocentini's rereading of Matteo Ricci and travel literature in Italy in the late nineteenth century is examined through theories proposed by Derrida, Barthes and Nabokov. These theories provide an interpretative approach to understand the rereading carried out in Nocentini's work, as they are intended as a process of interpretation and reinterpretation, as well as appropriation of the original meaning.

Keywords: Lodovico Nocentini, Matteo Ricci, sinology

Curiously enough, one cannot read a book; one can only reread it. A good reader, a major reader, and active and creative reader is a rereader.

Vladimir Nabokov, *Lectures on Literature* (1980)

1. Introduction¹

In 1882, Lodovico Nocentini published *Il primo sinologo: P. Matteo Ricci* (The First Sinologist: F. Matteo Ricci) in which he researched the historical figure of Jesuit father Matteo Ricci (1552–1610), who, alongside Marco Polo, received credit for the European discovery of China. Intended for an Italian readership, Nocentini's biographical work strove to reveal Ricci not only as a missionary figure, but above all as the first scholar to provide a bridge between Chinese and western knowledge. Nocentini's work on Ricci has long been forgotten, being regarded as of little scientific value. Yet, the text deserves our attention as it was the first to focus on the status of sinology in Europe, particularly Italy, in the second half of the nineteenth century, and more generally it explains the contribution of modern Italian travellers to Sino-western relations.

¹ I would like to thank Mauro Brunello, Maria Luisa Paternicò and Davor Antonucci for their help in identifying and checking the Jesuit sources. Any mistakes, however, are entirely mine.

Nocentini's remarks on Matteo Ricci and his contribution to the establishment of sinology as a field of study are reread in this paper through theories proposed by Jacques Derrida, Roland Barthes and Vladimir Nabokov. Nabokov emphasizes that a good reader is someone who rereads. But rereading has two, non-exclusive meanings: to read again and to reinterpret. To reread and so to reinterpret an author, topic and publication such as Nocentini's *Il primo sinologo: P. Matteo Ricci* is a complex interpretative exercise that will be assisted by Derrida's and Barthes' theoretical approaches to rereading. In *Of Grammatology* (1967), Derrida affirms that rereading is a process corresponding to four actions: reinterpretation, new interpretation, appropriation and adding a new meaning. In his *S/Z* (1970), on the other hand, Barthes assumes a semiotic approach to rereading. For Barthes, rereading is a process of decoding in which the reader appreciates the plurality of meanings offered by the author right from the text's very drafting. Derrida and Barthes' quest for meaning will lead us to be rereaders of Nocentini, who in turn reread Matteo Ricci. By examining these rereadings over the long span of time between the sixteenth and the nineteenth centuries, we find ourselves opening a long series of Chinese boxes. These boxes take us from philology to semiotics, to discover the meaning of rereading Italian modern travellers to China.

Ultimately, therefore, to analyse Nocentini is to understand his research as relating the legacy of Ricci to the formation of sinology as a field of study and to successive generations of sinologists. Furthermore, to discuss Nocentini's life and literary production is to acknowledge the journey in space and time and history that we are taken on when rereading *Il primo sinologo: P. Matteo Ricci*, and to acknowledge what the re/reader of Nocentini's *Il primo sinologo: P. Matteo Ricci* is offered by travel literature more in general.

2. Rereader and author: Nocentini rereads Matteo Ricci and travel literature

Lodovico Nocentini was born in Florence in 1849, where he graduated in oriental languages in 1879. After a short period in the Italian diplomatic delegation to China, Nocentini began a long and successful career in academia and first became professor and chancellor of the University of Naples before moving to La Sapienza University in Rome.²

Nocentini was a prolific author and in a career lasting from 1878 to 1910 he produced more than 70 publications. He covered topics ranging from politics to languages and from social to cultural studies, regarding a vast area covering central, eastern and south-eastern Asia. In the early stage of his academic career, Nocentini dedicated most of his attention to China and Japan, with publications about social and cultural aspects of the two countries, including publications on the Chinese language and translated Chinese and Japanese historical texts, such as *La Ribellione di Masacado e Sumitomo* (1878) and *Il santo editto di K'an-hi e l'amplificazione di Yun-cen* (1880).

² For a detailed biography of Nocentini, see De Angeli (2014).

A few years later, Nocentini published his first research monograph, which was not a translation of historical texts, but rather a work of research on Italian Jesuit Matteo Ricci at the Ming court: *Il primo sinologo: P. Matteo Ricci*. Nocentini conducted the research for this volume in the late 1870s and presented some partial results at the Fourth International Congress of Orientalists held in Florence in September 1878, before the full research results were finally published by Le Monnier in 1882. The text is a short monograph of only 59 pages, the first eight pages of which had been published in the records of the 1878 congress. The monograph is divided into three parts: the dedication, preface and text. In particular, the volume highlights that the research subject is Matteo Ricci, humanist, man of letters and science and sinologist; Ricci the missionary, on the other hand, only remains visible in the background, as his experience was nevertheless essential in enabling him to travel to China and relate to the Chinese literati and court. Nocentini was the first Italian secular author to write a biography of Ricci and his goal in compiling the work was to highlight the scientific and cultural dialogue between China and the West.³ Today, Matteo Ricci is a well-known and widely researched figure, and the countless biographies and works assess his contribution to building a bridge between Chinese and western knowledge.⁴ Yet, before Nocentini's publication in 1882, very little was written on Ricci and his legacy, a topic which was largely seen as falling within the competence of religious scholars. Therefore, Nocentini's work was novel in that he was a secular author and sinologist rereading Matteo Ricci and his legacy across the centuries: he was a young Italian academic trying to establish the role of post-unification Italy in the development of sinology, and proving the contribution of Italian genius to the world.

It is significant that the seventeenth-century boom in publications presenting Ricci's life and achievement in China was followed by a hiatus, until Nocentini's monograph. Literary productions focusing on Matteo Ricci started in 1610, the year of his death in Beijing. The first book about his work, entitled *Annua della Cina del 1606 e 1607 del padre Matteo Ricci della Compagnia di Gesu al molto R.P. Claudio Acquaviva generale della medesima* (Annuals for 1606 and 1607 by Matteo Ricci of the Society of Jesus to the Father Claudio Acquaviva General of the Same Society), was published by printer Bartolomeo Zannetti in Rome, followed in 1622 by F. Nicolas Trigault J.S.'s *Entrata nella China de' padri della Compagnia del Gesù. Tolta dai commentarii del p. Matteo Ricci di detta compagnia: dove si contengono il costume, le leggi, et ordini di quel Regno, ei principii difficilissimi della nascente Chiesa, descritti con ogni accuratezza, e con molta fede* (Entry to China by the Father of the Society of Jesus. Extracts from the Commentaries by F. Ricci of That Society Dealing with the Customs, Laws and Orders, and Very

³ As far as I was able to establish at the time of this research, no other publication concerning Matteo Ricci was compiled by a secular author prior to Nocentini's (1882) work.

⁴ Among the most important, albeit different contributions on the subject, see Spence (1984), Fontana (2005; 2010), Mungello (1989, 44–73) and Romano (2020, 105–166).

Difficult Start of the Newly Established Church, Described with Fine Details, and True Faith) by Neapolitan printer Lazzaro Scoriggio. Subsequently some extracts were published in *Regni Chinensis descriptio. Ex varijs authoribus* by Elzevir in Leiden in 1639. This was a reprint of the first book of the compilation put together by Nicolas Trigault in 1622. Finally, the Latin version of Trigault's book, *De Christiana expeditione apud Sinas ab Societate Jesu*, first issued in the 1610s, was republished in Cologne as late as 1684 by Wiedenfelt and de Berges.

Not one work on Matteo Ricci was published or reprinted during the eighteenth century.⁵ Whilst the eighteenth century is known as the silver age of travel literature, it was also the century of the Enlightenment, the century of the Chinese Rites controversy and the century in which the old Society of Jesus was suppressed. It was a complex period, and the literary silence was a consequence of this complexity. In 1742, Pope Benedict XIV put an end to the Rites controversy with the *Ex quo singulari* bull. The bull affirmed that the "Chinese Rites", traditional Chinese practices of ancestor veneration which Ricci and his Jesuit followers accepted as cultural rather than religious, were in fact of a religious nature. Consequently, ancestor veneration was banned as un-Christian, dealing a major blow to the policy of accommodation implemented by Jesuit missionaries in China since Ricci. The Jesuits were also obliged to take an oath not to discuss the topic further.⁶ The papal bull took the first step towards the suppression of the Society of Jesus by Pope Clement XIII in 1767, which initially targeted Jesuits in France, Spain, Portugal, the Kingdom of Two Sicilies and the Duchy of Parma and Piacenza, and from 1773, through the *Dominus ac Redemptor* bull promulgated by Pope Clement XIV, everywhere apart from Russia. The suppression of the religious order in France was a facet of the entangled history of the Jesuits and the Enlightenment, as explained by Jeffrey Burson (2013) in his analysis of the polemic between Nicolas-Sylvestre Bergier and Voltaire. France was the birthplace of the Enlightenment, and, as expressed in his *Essai sur les mœurs et l'esprit des nations* (Essay on the Manners and Spirit of Nations), it is well known that Voltaire was fascinated by China, so much so that he could be defined as a Sinophile. Voltaire was fascinated by Chinese antiquity and what he perceived to be China's supposedly superior moral and philosophical Weltanschauung. He admired China's enlightened absolutism and like Leibniz "maintained (at least nominally with the Jesuits) the Chinese were theists" (Burson 2013, 15).⁷ While at the antipodes of Enlightenment thought, both Bergier and Voltaire were convinced that China was a theist country, as their respective Welt-

⁵ There are no publications on Ricci during the eighteenth century except a republication in Chinese 经天该 (*Jing tian gai*) by 聽彝堂藏板 (*Ting yi tang cang ban*) published in Jiaqing between 1796 and 1819.

⁶ For a comprehensive account of the Chinese Rites controversy, see Criveller (2012).

⁷ Burson (2013, 17) explains that "Voltaire's *Essai sur les mœurs* affirmed that the major discrepancy intimated in the Hebrew version of the Old Testament suggested that sacred history was no model for universal history, and that the Chinese tradition actually reflected an older and far superior tradition of ancient history."

anschauungen were “shaped by critical engagement with the very same travel literature about non-Western ‘others’” (Burson 2013, 22), including Jesuit literature and the work of Matteo Ricci.

Religious accounts such those of Matteo Ricci belong to travel literature, a genre that evolved over the centuries and “attained much greater respectability, certainly a popularity and a usefulness” in the eighteenth century, even though in actual fact “many of the most readable, influential, and justifiably popular travel writers came before [...] Defoe” (Adams 1978, 488). These included Marco Polo and Matteo Ricci. According to Percy Adams:

the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries [were] the Silver Age of Travel and Travel Literature; for from 1600, merchants, explorers, ambassadors, soldiers, scientists, Grand tourers, and missionaries roamed the earth and wrote their letters, journals, or other accounts in order to satisfy the demands of their superiors—as with East India merchants or Jesuit scholar-evangelists—to satisfy their own pleasure or vanity [...] or, as with most, simply to profit financially from publishers eager to satisfy the great public demand for travel books of any kind (Adams 1978, 489).

Therefore, the absence of literature about Matteo Ricci is even more conspicuous in a century in which attention turned towards travel literature informed by non-western “others”, particularly when one of its most prominent writers, Voltaire, was a Sinophile. According to Adams (1985, 147), it was “the influence of religion on the traveller’s perception ... [with its] pervasiveness and complexity” that discredited the Jesuits and led to the Chinese Rites controversy. For instance, “Jesuits in China—from Matteo Ricci in the late sixteenth century to Louis Le Comte at the end of the seventeenth century—made Confucius almost a Christ and often lauded the Chinese way of life over that at home” (Adams 1985, 147). Despite the Jesuits’ influence over Enlightenment philosophers “with Voltaire and the *Encyclopédistes* still quoting Le Comte after mid-century” (Adams 1985, 147), these accounts tended to discredit the Jesuits in the eyes of the church. So, paradoxically, the Jesuits who were the source of inspiration for Enlightenment philosophers disappeared for the very reason that the church was uncomfortable with the implications of their ideas. Furthermore, the fact that historically, Voltaire’s *Essai* is much better known than Bergier’s *Traité historique et dogmatique de la vraie religion* (1780) highlights the linearity of narrative construction, which conceals an alternative point of view espoused by theists such as Bergier or the Jesuits who supported the French Royal family rather than Enlightenment-inspired reformists or revolutionaries. Burson explains that linearity belies a “more complex reality too often forgotten in the thick of historiographical controversy” (2013, 7), and so the eighteenth-century literary oblivion surrounding Matteo Ricci becomes the very embodiment of the association of the Enlightenment spirit with the Age of Reason, to the detriment of religion understood as a system of beliefs with a transcendental eschatology.

In contrast, the following century saw the reappearance of publications on Matteo Ricci, who has remained a subject of interest ever since. Nevertheless,

before Nocentini's publication in 1882, only three other works had appeared. The first of these was printed in Macerata and the title is self-explanatory: *Elogio di Matteo Ricci maceratese della Compagnia di Gesù recitato nell'adunanza dei Catenati la sera dei 3 settembre 1819* (Eulogy of Matteo Ricci Native of Macerata of the Society of Jesus Recited to the Assembly of the Academy of the Catenati on the Evening of 3 September 1819), by Giovanni Accoretti. Then two other publications, one by Michele Ferrucci, provided treatments of Ricci's own texts: *Dell'amicizia breve trattato del P. Matteo Ricci della Compagnia di Gesù* (On Friendship. A Short Treaty by F. Matteo Ricci of the Society of Jesus), published in 1825 to celebrate the marriage of Marquis Domenico Ricci Petrocchini and Ms Elisa Graziani from Macerata; and in 1853 the reprint of Ricci's *Trattato della Politica di Aristotele: Volgarizzato dal greco per Matteo Ricci con note e discorso preliminare* (Politics by Aristotle: Vulgarized from the Greek by Matteo Ricci with Notes and Preliminary Speech). The publications by Accoretti and Ferrucci came some years after the restoration of the Jesuit order in 1814,⁸ and both were connected to local events: the former to the assembly of one of most prestigious and long-lived Italian cultural associations established in Macerata in 1574,⁹ the latter to the marriage of a Ricci family descendant. Thus, Nocentini's publication was the first scholarly treatment of the figure and legacy of Matteo Ricci in over a century and can be seen as initiating the revival of interest in the figure.

3. The rereading theories of Derrida, Barthes and Nabokov

In his *Lectures on Literature*, Vladimir Nabokov asserted that “[c]uriously enough, one cannot read a book; one can only reread it. A good reader, a major reader, and active and creative reader is a rereader” (1980, 3). Nabokov stressed the characteristics of a rereader: someone who takes time to think, ponder, contextualize, that is, a reader who interrogates his or her own cognition of the text. But rereading also has another meaning: to reinterpret. In this specific case, we reread Nocentini, who rereads Matteo Ricci and all those who had written about Ricci before. And, in last instance, to reread means to reinterpret what was written in a different time, place or context. So, rereading means that we reconsider the text, the topic, the context and the author in a process of historical analysis. To facilitate engagement in this journey of rereading/reinterpreting Nocentini's work on Matteo Ricci, this study also uses Jacques Derrida's and Roland Barthes' theoretical approaches, as expressed respectively in *Of Grammatology* (1967) and *S/Z* (1970).

In *Of Grammatology*, Derrida asserts that rereading is a process which comprises four actions: first, the reinterpretation of the text, that is, the same interpre-

⁸ For a view on the restoration of the Society of Jesus and the role of Congress of Vienna, see Reinerman 1966.

⁹ The Catenati academy for the study of letters and arts was established in Macerata on 2 July 1574, by a group of literati led by Gerolamo Zoppio. See “Academia dei Catenati” <http://www.accademiadeicatenati.it/le-origini.html> (Accessed October 6, 2021).

tation repeated one or more times (1998, 75), to be distinguished from; second, a new interpretation as rereading “past writing according to a different organization of space” (1998, 86). Thirdly, rereading includes “an act of appropriation” by the reader (1998, 180); and finally, it adds a new viewpoint, because “each time that I reread [the text] will give me new perspective” (1998, 312). Therefore, according to Derrida, rereading is a cognitive procedure that allows the reader to acquire and advance personal knowledge through the rereading process.

In contrast, Barthes assumes a semiotic approach to rereading. For Barthes, rereading is a decoding process which helps to explain how different codes of meaning work (1970, 3–4). Barthes affirms that “to interpret a text is not to give it a (more or less justified, more or less free) meaning, but on the contrary to appreciate what plural constitutes it” (1970, 5). Barthes thus asserts the existence of plurality within the text itself: a plurality of meaning which is contained within the text from the moment of the author’s first draft. Yet, Barthes also warns the reader that each text follows “a particular system of meaning [...] based on connotation”, which should not be “confused with association of ideas”. In fact, for Barthes, “connotation is a correlation immanent in the text”, while association of ideas “refers to the system of a subject” identified with the reader (1970, 7–9). Barthes underlines that the reader should appropriate the text in the awareness that his or her personal associations of ideas should not be mistaken for the author’s connotations. Whilst the author’s connotations within the text are evident for any reader, associations of ideas are exclusive to each individual reader as a consequence of his or her own personal experience and background. Developing his conception of the plurality of meaning within the text, Barthes explains that the “intellectualization of the text” through rereading helps to discover “not the real text, but a plural text: the same and new” (1970, 16). Whilst reading for the first time allows the reader to obtain knowledge of the story and protagonists, the reader only discovers associations on a second or further reading.

When rereading, already aware of the plot, the events and the protagonists of the text, the reader is at liberty to focus his or her attention on the emerging connotations. Freed from the need to acquire knowledge of basic facts regarding the story, the rereader is able to concentrate on the plurality of the text. Therefore, the more the reader rereads, the deeper the discovery of connotations and the larger the range of meanings that emerge, and so the reader acquires a plurality of possible text meanings.

Last, Barthes asserts that while rereading a text “multiplies the signifiers”, this is “not to reach some ultimate signified” (1970, 165). This final point brings our attention to Barthes’ special *summa*: semiotics.¹⁰ Barthes reminds us that in rereading a text, the reader increases the number of connotations and expands the intertextuality. Barthes makes the reader consider how a text can convey more

¹⁰ In linguistics, to “multiply the signifiers” means to multiply the physical forms of the sign, such as the printed words and images associated with the words, but not to reach some ultimate meaning or idea.

than one image and how reality may comprise a complex web of connections, facets and meanings, coexisting in complementarity rather than in contraposition. By reasserting the plurality of meanings within the text, Barthes denies any possibility of the reader reaching any ultimate meaning. For Barthes, there is no fundamental or absolute idea existing in a Platonic hyperuranion.

In the following sections, the theories of Derrida, Barthes and Nabokov are deployed to scrutinize *Il primo sinologo: P. Matteo Ricci* by Nocentini, which is approached through the following stages: interpretation and reinterpretation; explanation and contextualization; the restoration of connotations; the quest for meaning and the discovery of a plurality of meanings.

4. Interpretation and reinterpretation

This interpretative analysis is inspired by Barthes' understanding of rereading set out in *S/Z*, published in 1970. However, whilst Barthes applied his analysis to a novel, Honoré de Balzac's *Sarrasine*, published in 1831, I apply the techniques of rereading to a historical text, Nocentini's *Il primo sinologo: P. Matteo Ricci*. Barthes teaches that the text needs to be decodified. In the case of Nocentini's text, three parts can be identified: the dedication, preface and text. Considering the text in its historical context, Nocentini compiled the work between the 1870s and the 1880s, as a secular author writing the biography of Jesuit father Matteo Ricci, using historical sources compiled by Father Bartoli, Father Acquaviva, Father De Petris, Father Cattanei, Father Costa, Father Bourgeois and Father de Magaillans.¹¹ It is evident that the sources available to Nocentini at the time were exclusively works compiled by religious scholars, who, in their turn, wrote biographies of Ricci focusing on his religious achievements, particularly the success of his proselytism. Although these works sometimes recognized his contribution to Sino-western relations, these aspects of his life were nevertheless placed in the background to the main theme. Nocentini reverses the focus of attention, putting Ricci's secular impact in the foreground and the religious aspects of his life in the background, while posing an important question: who launched the field of sinology, namely the study of Chinese language, history, customs and politics, in Italy?

5. Restoration and connotation

Nocentini's answer to his own question is apparent in his dedication: he dedicates his work as a disciple to his master, Professor Antelmo Severini, the first

¹¹ Most of these writers were contemporaries of F. Matteo Ricci, or part of the subsequent generation, the exception being Bourgeois, who lived in the eighteenth century: F. Claudio Acquaviva S.J. (1543–1615), F. Francesco de Petris S.J. who lived in China from 1563 to 1593, F. Lazzaro Cattaneo or Cattanei (1560–1640), F. Daniello Bartoli S.J. (1608–1685), F. Gabriel de Magalhães S.J. (anglicized as Magaillans) (1609–1677), F. François Bourgeois (1723–1792). I was not able to identify F. Costa.

professor of Chinese and Japanese languages in an Italian university. After graduating in Paris under the supervision of Professor Stanislaw Julien, Severini was called to the Istituto di Studi Superiori in Florence where he started to teach in December 1864 (De Gubernatis 1876, 15, 381).¹² In the preface, Nocentini explains his dedication and the association of Matteo Ricci with Severini, the first chair of Chinese language in the Kingdom of Italy, as underlining the link between the origin of sinology with its development in post-unification Italy.

In his writing, Nocentini makes no mention of the Collegio dei Cinesi (Chinese College) in Naples, established by F. Matteo Ripa (1682–1746) in 1732 and officially recognized by Pope Clement XII. At the Collegio dei Cinesi, Chinese language was taught exclusively for the education of religious, who then were sent to missions in China. There are two possible reasons for Nocentini's exclusion of the Collegio dei Cinesi, forerunner of L'Orientale University in Naples, the first place in Europe where the Chinese language was taught, from his text. First, Nocentini expressly sought to compile a biography of Ricci which concentrated on his role as humanist and scholar (1882, 6), builder of Sino-western relations and promoter of knowledge of the West in China as well as knowledge of China in Europe. Secondly, Nocentini's exclusion of the Collegio dei Cinesi allowed him to abstain from involvement in the virulent ongoing discussion between the Italian state authorities and religious authorities responsible for the Collegio (De Gubernatis 1876, 403–4) in a historical context in which many educated Italians "desired to reduce the influence of the Catholic church and to laicize Italian life as rapidly as possible" (Halperin 1947, 18). It was a tendency that spanned party lines and as Halperin explained, it was argued that "the Weltanschauung of Roman Catholicism could never be brought into harmony with the values and needs of modern democratic society". The anti-clericalist educated classes in Italy "eulogized the progress of science and the forward march of secular scholarship as the harbingers of a better world", and denounced ecclesiastical obscurantism and opposition to liberal trends, because they "contended that the political weakness of the social backwardness of Italy could in considerable measure be ascribed to the influence which the church still exerted upon the masses" (Halperin 1947, 18).

According to Nocentini, Professor Severini delivered a lecture at the Circolo Filologico di Firenze (Florence Philological Society),¹³ where he introduced Matteo Ricci as the scholar who opened Europe to knowledge of the languages spoken in East Asia and who made it possible to enjoy the vast literary production of that part of the world. Nocentini also remarks that Chinese only began to be taught in Italy in 1864, and "Chinese literature was ignored, as translated

¹² In 1876 the institute provided courses on Arab, Hebrew, Sanskrit, Chinese and Japanese (De Gubernatis 1876, 426).

¹³ The Circolo Filologico was established in Florence in 1872 by Ubaldino Peruzzi (1822–1891), member of one of the most influential families in the city, twice mayor of Florence and president of the executive board of the Istituto di Studi Superiori.

texts were lost, or more precisely what remained available were simple extracts of Ricci's paraphrases of some Chinese classics" (Nocentini 1882, 6). According to Nocentini's preface,

Il P. Ricci fu il primo ad estendere i vantaggi delle missioni alla scienza, divulgandola nel Reame di Mezzo: e sebbene egli vi si adoperasse solo collo scopo religioso, non gli vien meno per questo il gran merito di aver messo in una intellettuale comunicazione, come ci accingiamo a dimostrare, popoli che stanno ai lati opposti del nostro emisfero (1882, 6).¹⁴

The dedication and preface associating Matteo Ricci with Antelmo Severini, and their interpretation by Nocentini, underline the primacy of the Istituto di Studi Superiori in Florence in the teaching and study of Chinese language and literature in Italy. At the time, the institute was recognized as the best in the whole of Italy for the study of oriental languages (De Gubernatis 1876, 426). From 1866 to 1872, Nocentini himself studied at the Institute in Florence,¹⁵ at a time when the city was the capital of the Kingdom of Italy.¹⁶ Although the capital subsequently moved permanently to Rome, Florence remained the cultural capital and the main publishing centre in the Kingdom of Italy,¹⁷ and it was in this environment that Nocentini spent his formative years.

In the preface, Nocentini goes on to explain how the missions contributed to bridging distant, unknown people and cultures. Nocentini quotes Abel-Rémusat, affirming that the missionaries "[cominciarono] a studiare i costumi, le credenze e gl'idiomi dei popoli che abitavano le regioni più ad oriente dell'Asia, e si trattò di stabilire una cattedra di lingua tartara nell'università di Parigi" (1882, 4).¹⁸ Jean-Pierre Abel-Rémusat (1788–1832), to whom Nocentini refers, became the first professor of Chinese and Tartar-Manchu languages at the Collège Royal, forerunner of the Collège de France, when the chair was established in 1814 (Will 2015).

¹⁴ "Father Ricci was the first to extend the advantages gained by the missions to the sciences as he divulged knowledge of the Middle Kingdom: although he only identified with the religious goal, as we will show he did not lack the great merit of establishing intellectual communication between peoples who are at the opposite ends of this hemisphere."

¹⁵ The institute was established in 1859 to group formerly dispersed disciplines taught in several famous academies such as the Accademia della Crusca (Crusca Academy) and the Accademia del Cimento (Academy of Experiment) and in various locations within the Grand Duchy of Tuscany. These disciplines were restructured within the Istituto di Studi Superiori Pratici e di Perfezionamento (Institute for Advanced Practical and Specialization Studies), formally recognized as the University of Florence when it was renamed in 1924.

¹⁶ Florence was capital of the Kingdom of Italy for six years from 1865 to 1871.

¹⁷ For more information about the role of Florence as the capital of culture and the publishing industry in the Kingdom of Italy, see Poettinger (2018).

¹⁸ "[started] to study the customs, the religious beliefs and the languages of people living in East Asia, and so a chair of Tartar language was established in Paris".

6. The quest for meaning

The dedication and introduction set the tone for the content of the text. The following sections analyse the connotations of the text, using a selection of paragraphs to explore the meaning of Nocentini's research.

In the preface, Nocentini explains that studying languages is equivalent to rereading travels, making particular references to Marco Polo and the missionaries, Leibniz and Catherine II of Russia. Below, I explore why these examples provide support for Nocentini's connotation that the study of languages and rereading travel are related activities.

Nocentini examines Marco Polo's goals in studying the language spoken in China at the time of the *Pax Mongolica*,¹⁹ and deduces that the language was a tool of communication in order to do business and deal with everyday tasks, assuming a utilitarian approach. Nocentini seems to tread the same path as De Gubernatis with regard to the primacy of proto-Italian merchant-travellers in East Asia, whom he credits with opening the road to Asia, soon to be followed by the missionaries. It follows that merchants were the first to acquire knowledge of the language (De Gubernatis 1876, 19). On the other hand, Nocentini compares the famous Venetian traveller with Ricci and the missionaries who followed in his footsteps, who saw the Chinese language as a tool of communication that should be fully mastered in order to proselytize and translate the Scriptures. Nocentini juxtaposes the medieval travellers and merchants with the Renaissance missionaries and humanist men of letters and science to underline how, for the latter, the language itself became a goal. Consequently, Nocentini argues, the Jesuit fathers mastered the language to a greater degree than anybody else. The credit Nocentini allocates to the Jesuits ignores the fact that they were not the first Christian missionaries in China. Both Dominican and Franciscan friars had travelled to China at the time of the *Pax Mongolica* and, like Marco Polo, were received at the Yuan court.²⁰

Nocentini presents Marco Polo as a true example of a merchant and traveller, for whom language knowledge was a tool for conducting business and dealing with daily life. Nocentini suggests that the lack of high culture among merchants such as Marco Polo made them unable and unsuitable to transcribe other language sounds, such as those of Mongolian or Chinese, or to translate a foreign language. Nocentini argues that this lack of education was the primary reason why the notes and explanations in Marco Polo's *Il Milione* were so long and plodding (1882, 2).²¹

¹⁹ The term *Pax Mongolica* indicates a period of time (c. 1280–1360) during which Mongol domination seemingly guaranteed security on the Eurasian commercial routes. See Di Cosmo (2010).

²⁰ For more information on Franciscan missions to China, see Dawson (1966); and on the Dominican Friars, see Marsh-Edwards (1937).

²¹ Though it is impossible to establish with certitude which edition Nocentini consulted for his research, the following were available in Italian at the time and could potentially be identified with his judgement: Baldelli Boni (1827) or Marco Polo (1829). For other nine-

Therefore, we may conclude that, for Nocentini, the study of Chinese was not suitable for merchants and travellers, both because they lacked the necessary education and because their approach was utilitarian. Nevertheless, in placing the merchants first in the timeline, he may be seen as following De Gubernatis who explained that the study of Arabic and Turkish languages started in Italy as a result of commercial exchange between Italy and the Middle East (De Gubernatis 1876, 19).

However, Nocentini ignores the fact that Marco Polo visited and resided in China during the Yuan dynasty (1271–1368) which was of Mongol origins,²² and that consequently the language used at court during this period was Mongol and not Chinese.²³ Nocentini compares the travellers and merchants of medieval times with missionaries, without specifying whether he is referring to the Franciscan and Dominican missionaries who travelled to China during the *Pax Mongolica*, and were thus contemporaries of Marco Polo, or those who came later, following in the steps of Matteo Ricci. Regardless of this lack of specificity, in Nocentini's parallel, he sees a commonality between Marco Polo and the missionaries, in that both came from the Italian peninsula and travelled to China.

The other two examples provided are personalities with a very high cultural impact, but who never travelled to China.

The first of these is Leibniz. Nocentini writes that for Leibniz, “le lingue sono il monumento incancellabile della Storia, per le quali possono scoprirsi le migrazioni dei popoli e riannodarsi i fatti che essa narra staccati e confusi” (1882, 3).²⁴ Nocentini rereads Leibniz's conception of the history of languages in which he redefined the concept of *Ursprache*, which he had borrowed from Jakob Böhme (1575–1624). Böhme had defined the *Ursprache* as a single “radical and primitive” language associated with the shared origins of all nations. Leibniz accepted this concept, renaming it the *Lingua Adamica*. As Walker explains, Leibniz accepted “an ancient, but still living tradition, according to which the original primitive language of mankind, before the tower of Babel, was that in which Adam named the animals, giving them their true, natural names because, in his state of paradisiac universal knowledge, he knew their true natures” (1972, 299–300). Leaving aside Leibniz's *Lingua Adamica* theory, Nocentini rereads Leibniz, who in turn had reread the phonetic symbolism of Socrates and Plato (Walker 1972, 299–300), but in this case, he does not reinterpret or engage with the argument. Rather, he quotes it in order to establish his knowledge and authority on the subject. The topic of the *Ursprache* can be considered as having been fashionable at the time, as De Gubernatis (1876, 18), in the introduction of *Matériaux*, also writes about the search for a universal language.

teenth-century editions of *Il Milione* published in nineteenth-century Italy, see the essay by Laura De Giorgi in this volume.

²² For a contextualizing reading, see Larner (1999).

²³ Larner (1999, 168) specifies that Marco Polo indicated the names of places in China using Mongol or Persian.

²⁴ “languages are an indelible monument of History and proof of the migration of peoples because languages help to trace those peoples' migration along their uneven and unlinked paths”.

The last sample presented by Nocentini on this theme is the dictionary compiled at the behest of Catherine II of Russia.²⁵ According to Sabine Dedenbach-Salazar Sáenz, “Catherine the Great, a highly cultured and educated woman, planned the production of a universal and comparative dictionary of all languages of the world, hoping to find a primitive, original language” (2006, 196). This project was the first of its kind that attempted to relate European and Asian languages. The first edition, compiled under the supervision of Peter Simon Pallas,²⁶ consisted of two volumes appearing in 1786, while the second edition, compiled by Fëdor Ivanovich Yankovich in the years 1790–1791, also included African dialects (Nocentini 1882, 28–9; Pallas and Yankovich 1790).²⁷ Nocentini’s discussion of this literature suggests that research into a universal language was still a topic of debate among linguists and philologists in the late nineteenth century.²⁸

7. The plurality of meanings

Nocentini’s text does not shed much light on the scientific value of Matteo Ricci’s work, but it does shed light on events, contexts and situations surrounding the establishment of sinology as a field, and its development in Europe and in Italy in particular. By rereading Matteo Ricci as a modern Italian traveller, Nocentini sought to establish Italian primacy in the field, asserting that Professor Antelmo Severini was the first modern academic sinologist in the Kingdom of Italy.

The main text can be divided into a first part (1882, 7–40), in which Nocentini narrates the life and experience of Matteo Ricci and his closest Jesuit followers in China, and a second part (1882, 41–51), in which he focuses on the contribution made by Ricci to European knowledge of the Chinese language and the diffusion of western scientific knowledge in China. These two sections are of limited interest to this analysis because they offer little of value compared to present-day knowledge on the subject.

In contrast, the concluding part of the text (1882, 53–9) provides three listings that form the main focus of this analysis. This conclusion is explored below in order to reveal the connotations and their context and reveal the plurality of meanings. The records include 1) an inventory of lists of Matteo Ricci’s publi-

²⁵ According to Anthony Cross (2014, 105) in the *Memoir of a Map of the Countries Comprahended between the Black Sea and the Caspian; with an Account of the Caucasian Nation, and Vocabularies of their Languages* (1788) attributed to George Ellis (1753–1815): “The specimens of the various languages were drawn from Pallas’s universal comparative dictionary, compiled with the encouragement of the empress.”

²⁶ Pallas was a German scholar and professor of natural history at the Academy of Science in Saint Petersburg. He was well known for his travel and discoveries in Siberia. See Pallas (1948), Urness (1967), Parker (1973), Brown (2006, 9: 146).

²⁷ Nocentini refers to him using the Italian transliteration Jankievitch, but he is also known as Theodor Yankievich de Mirievo, famous for developing and implementing educational reforms in the Austrian and Russian empires. For more information, see Okenfuss (1979).

²⁸ For a detailed analysis of research in Italy into a universal language, see Pala (2020).

cations by other authors; 2) an index of biographies and other published works on Matteo Ricci and his views on China; and 3) a list of influential sinologists since the time of Matteo Ricci as identified by Nocentini.

7.1 Matteo Ricci as an inspiring author for the history of China

Nocentini provides an index of authors offering Matteo Ricci as the source for their works on the history of China or dictionaries of the Chinese language. He remarks on the diversity of these bibliographical works compiled by different authors, and suggests that this was because each author made his own translation of Ricci's Chinese titles (1882, 54). These bibliographical works were compiled by Daniello Bartoli, S.J. (1608–1685) in *Cina*,²⁹ Athanasius Kircher, S.J. (1602–1680) in *Cina Illustrata*,³⁰ Philippe Couplet, S.J. (1622–1693), Pedro de Ribadeneira, S.J. (1526–1611), Martino Martini, S.J. (1614–1661), Francesco Predari (1809–1870) in *Origine e progresso dello studio delle lingue orientali in Italia* (1842), Augustin De Backer, S.J. (1809–1873) in *La bibliothèque des écrivains de la Compagnie de Jésus* (1853–1861) and Giuseppe Angelo De Gubernatis (1840–1913) in *Matériaux pour servir à l'histoire des études orientales en Italie* (1876).

Unfortunately, Nocentini does not provide any details as to where he found the bibliographical references for Couplet, Ribadeneira and Martini, leaving us to assume that he availed himself of somebody else's work. If this is the case, Nocentini rereads an unmentioned author, who in turn rereads the originals by Couplet, Ribadeneira and Martini respectively. Nonetheless, the authorship of the bibliographical works included in the list does provide us with some ideas on what sources were available to a scholar of Ricci in the second half of the nineteenth century in Italy. This includes the indices of Ricci's works compiled by other Jesuits, mostly published in the second half of the seventeenth century, and after the Enlightenment hiatus during the eighteenth century, three authors publishing from 1842 to 1876 whose studies Nocentini therefore considered the most recent and comprehensive. Consequently, we may agree with Nocentini's conclusion that regardless of the authors' religious or secular background, education, nationality, and the period they lived and published, all had reread Matteo Ricci's work in order to inform their own research on the history of China.

7.2 Biographies of Matteo Ricci and his views on China

A second line of research relates to works reading Matteo Ricci's life and his views on China. Nocentini writes that Giulio Aleni, S.J. (1582–1647) compiled a biography of Matteo Ricci that was published in Chinese, 大西西泰利先生行蹟

²⁹ Nocentini refers to the third volume (1663) of Bartoli's five-volume *Dell'Historia della Compagnia di Giesu* (1653–73).

³⁰ Nocentini refers to *China Monumentis qua Sacris quâ Profanis, Nec non variis naturae & artis spectaculis, Aliarumque rerum memorabilium Argumentis Illustrata* (1667).

(*The Life of Master Li Xitai from the Great West*) (1630), whilst two other Jesuit fathers, Pierre Joseph d'Orléans (1641–1698) and Nicolas Trigault (1577–1628), authored a biography of the missionary from Macerata, published in German and entitled *Leben des P. Mathaeus Ricci, Missionärs in China, aus der Gesellschaft Jesu*, (*The Life of F. Matteo Ricci, Missionary in China from the Society of Jesus*), which was part of a series entitled *Leben des ausgezeichneten Katoliken der drei letzten Jahrhunderten* (*The Lives of Eminent Catholics of the Last Three Hundred Years*). D'Orléans published the very same title in French in Paris in 1693: *La Vie du P. Matthieu Ricci de la Compagnie de Jésus*. D'Orléans being born in 1641, he was not Trigault's contemporary, as the latter died in 1628. Therefore, we may deduce that Albert Werfer— editor of the German series—reread and copied D'Orléans, who in turn had reread Trigault. Nocentini admits that he only consulted the publication by Trigault, excluding any others that may have been available, explaining his reasons as follows:

In esso, come in tutte le biografie e scritti di missionari si tratta unicamente del Divulgatore della fede cattolica, dei risultati da esso ottenuti nell'adempimento della sua missione, dei mezzi impiegati per stabilirla, delle virtù e dell'ingegno di lui. È probabile per la qualità degli autori, che lo stesso sia degli altri scritti (1882, 54).³¹

Nocentini openly admits that he only reread one biography, as he considered Trigault the first in the supply chain and assumed that all of the deriving publications would be the same. He leads the reader to believe that the authors' common clerical origins left no room for the plurality of meanings that different kinds of authors from different backgrounds might have offered.

7.3 Inspiring sinologists since Matteo Ricci

The third and last task tackled by Nocentini's rereading of Matteo Ricci is to evaluate the legacy of the famous Jesuit father in the founding of sinology as a field of science. In so doing, Nocentini provides a handful of names: Thomas Hyde (1636–1703),³² Theophilus Siegfried Bayer (1694–1738),³³ Jean-Baptiste Du Halde (1674–1743), Étienne Fourmont (1683–1745)³⁴ and Antonio Montucci (1762–1829).³⁵ In Nocentini's publication, modern sinology is represented by a rose of five names, including four nationalities: English, German, French and

³¹ “This, like all biographies and writings by missionaries, deals exclusively with the Disseminator of the Catholic faith, his accomplishments in the execution of his mission, the means used to establish the mission, his virtues and abilities. It is probable that due to the kind of authors, the other writings are also the same.”

³² For more regarding Hyde and the development of sinology, see Lehner (2010).

³³ For a comprehensive biography of Bayer, see Lundbæk (1986).

³⁴ For more about the roles of Du Halde and Fourmont, see Lehner (2010).

³⁵ For the history of the Montucci family and a biography of Antonio Montucci, see Cherubini (2017, 2018).

Italian. While Hyde in England, and Du Halde and Fourmont in France, were active in their own countries, Bayer made his career in Russia and Montucci first in England, then in Prussia and finally in Dresden. Whilst Bayer and Montucci, born respectively in pre-unification Germany and Italy, were important sinologists, they pursued their careers abroad due to a lack of opportunities in their home countries. Undoubtedly, Nocentini rereads their career paths through a nationalistic lens. Yet, this list of names is very peculiar for two reasons. First, in a book published in 1882 there were only references to authors writing during the period spanning the end of the seventeenth and beginning of the eighteenth centuries. This is because Nocentini drew his information from the *Essai sur la langue et la littérature chinoises* published in 1811 by Jean-Pierre Abel-Rémusat. Nocentini cleanses his translation into Italian from any references to France's role in sinology and its primacy as the first country in Europe to have a chair of Chinese language and literature. Moreover, among those names quoted by Nocentini as inspiring sinologists, none had actually visited China.

Secondly, Nocentini rereads Abel-Rémusat and his dated publication, published more than 70 years before, and at the same time *Matériaux* by De Gubernatis (1876), which discusses the history of Italian sinology, because he wishes to credit Matteo Ricci as the creator of the discipline and to prove that Italy had been the first country in which modern sinology had gathered momentum.

8. Coda: rereading travels – a journey in history

Nocentini's rereading of Matteo Ricci concludes with a bitter dénouement. Nocentini comments:

La Cina ha pubblicato più volte e anche in questi ultimi tempi gli scritti di questo straniero [Matteo Ricci], ha posto il nome suo insieme con quello degli uomini illustri, ha inalzato per regale munificenza un monumento, nel quale le sue ceneri riposano venerate. L'Italia, che dovrebbe far suo vanto noverar fra le sue glorie il nome di Matteo Ricci e trarre oggi più che mai dalla memoria dei suoi Grandi forza e coraggio a riconquistare nel mondo il posto che le spetta, come ha onorato questo suo figlio? Il suo nome è quasi sconosciuto, i suoi commentari furono dati in luce sotto il nome di un altro, le sue lettere sono o perdute o confuse con altre, e le sue traduzioni, nessuno sa dove sieno! (1882, 59)³⁶

This statement looks flawed today, as Matteo Ricci is well known and his lasting influence is testified by the innumerable works on him, his writing and

³⁶ "Several times and also recently China has published the writings of this foreigner [Matteo Ricci]. It places his name alongside those of other illustrious men, by royal munificence it has erected a monument where his ashes rest venerated. How has Italy, which should boast of the name of Matteo Ricci, and today more than ever should draw from the memory of its Greats the force and courage to win back its rightful place in the world, honoured her son? His name is almost unknown, his commentaries published under the name of someone else, his letters either lost or confused with others, and his translations, nobody knows where they are!"

legacy. Nocentini's lament needs to be contextualized, however. It provides a useful insight into the perception of Italian sinology in the early 1880s as a discipline with great potential, but *only* if Italy and its institutions could prove that it was founded by Matteo Ricci. In Nocentini's eyes, this remaking of the genealogy of Italian sinology, acknowledging Ricci as its founding father, would help to reaffirm the primacy of Italian sinology and establish the importance of Italian genius to the world. Nocentini was the first secular author, a modern Italian academic, to remark on the contribution of Matteo Ricci to sinological studies; he identified the establishment of sinology as a discipline and traced it to the illustrious Jesuit father, and in so doing underlined the role of Italian travellers and modern sources as the origin of sinology in post-unification Italy.

Furthermore, to reread Nocentini with the help of Barthes, Derrida and Nabokov's approaches is to reinterpret the text. This method of analysis has provided Nocentini's *Il primo sinologo: P. Matteo Ricci* with explanations and contextualization, such as the eighteenth-century hiatus in scientific production about Ricci due to the connection between Enlightenment ideals and the Chinese Rites controversy. The analysis has explained the paradox between the Sinoophile position of Voltaire and the lack of reference to the Jesuits, and Matteo Ricci above all, during the silver age of travel literature, which was especially influenced by non-western "others". The historical contextualization has also provided an explanation of why the oldest and best-known sinological institute in Italy, the Collegio dei Cinesi in Naples, is not mentioned in the text.

Moreover, Nocentini's work on Ricci reveals a plurality of meanings within the text. On a number of occasions, Nocentini uses similitudes to validate his opinions and establish his academic authority. Nocentini equates Florence, the new capital, with Italy, seeing the city as the epicentre of the cultural life of the country. Consequently, Nocentini elevates the Istituto di Studi Superiori in Florence above the Collegio dei Cinesi in Naples and thus raises the secular approach to the study of Ricci pursued at the Istituto above the religious approach which predominated at the Collegio. Another example of the use of similitude is the association of Professor Antelmo Severini with Matteo Ricci. Nocentini portrays both—in different times—as masters of the Chinese language and the forefathers of sinological studies in Italy.

Finally, on the rereading of travel literature as a medium through which to interpret history, this study of Nocentini's *Il primo sinologo: P. Matteo Ricci* shows that for Nocentini, studying language was a way to reread travel. He rereads travellers—whether missionaries or merchants—as people learning a new language, but differentiates them according to the different goals pursued through their learning: utilitarian for merchants, scientific for Ricci and his missionaries.

At the same time, to reread Nocentini now means to reread Trigault, who in his turn reread and transcribed or translated Ricci; and Nocentini notices that Kircher reread Martini, who in turn reread Trigault. In these last rereadings, we also become aware that many seventeenth- and eighteenth-centuries publications on China, as well as some early-nineteenth-century publications, were written by authors/rereaders who had never visited China themselves, but in

their turn relied on publications by the Jesuit Fathers of the seventeenth century, who had first-hand experience of both the journey to China and residence in the country, but who also copied from Matteo Ricci's earlier writings about his personal experience. Therefore, Nocentini is right to claim that all this rereading stems from Matteo Ricci, a modern Italian traveller and the first sinologist.

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