

St. Francis Xavier: Letter from Japan, to the Society of Jesus in Europe, 1552¹

*Francis Xavier was one of the first members of the Jesuits. In 1541, he left Europe as a missionary to the "East Indies." He spent time in India, where he met a Japanese man named Anger who converted to Christianity and took the name Paul. Xavier travelled to Japan in 1549 and worked as a missionary there until 1552; he planned a missionary trip to China, but died of illness in 1552. These two letters report on his trip to Japan. The first was intended to be sent back to Europe and therefore gives more background information; the second was sent to the Jesuits in India and therefore has more detailed information.*²

May the grace and charity of our Lord Jesus Christ be ever with us! Amen. By the favor of God we all arrived at Japan in perfect health on the 15th of August, 1549. We landed at Cagoxima, the native place of our companions. We were received in the most friendly way by all the people of the city, especially the relations of Paul, the Japanese convert, all of whom had the blessing to receive the light of truth from heaven, and by Paul's persuasion became Christians...

Japan is a very large empire entirely composed of islands. One language is spoken throughout, not very difficult to learn. This country was discovered by the Portuguese eight or nine years ago. The Japanese are very ambitious of honors and distinctions, and think themselves superior to all nations in military glory and valor. They prize and honor all that has to do with war, and all such things, and

¹ From: Henry James Coleridge, ed., *The Life and Letters of St. Francis Xavier*, 2d Ed., 2 Vols., (London: Burns & Oates, 1890), Vol. II, pp. 331-350; accessed via Internet Medieval Sourcebook;

<http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/1552xavier4.asp>

² Introduction from New Advent Catholic Encyclopedia, <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/06233b.htm>

there is nothing of which they are so proud as of weapons adorned with gold and silver. They always wear swords and daggers both in and out of the house, and when they go to sleep they hang them at the bed's head. In short, they value arms more than any people I have ever seen. They are excellent archers, and usually fight on foot, though there is no lack of horses in the country. They are very polite to each other, but not to foreigners, whom they utterly despise. They spend their means on arms, bodily adornment, and on a number of attendants, and do not in the least care to save money. They are, in short, a very warlike people, and engaged in continual wars among themselves; the most powerful in arms bearing the most extensive sway. They have all one sovereign, although for one hundred and fifty years past the princes have ceased to obey him, and this is the cause of their perpetual feuds.

In these countries there is a great number, both of men and of women, who profess a religious rule of life; they are called bonzes³ and bonzesses. There are two sorts of bonzes---the one wear a grey dress, the others a black one. There is great rivalry between them, the grey monks being set against the black monks, and accusing them of ignorance and bad morals....

On certain days the bonzes preach publicly. The sum of all their discourses is that none of the people will be condemned to hell, whatever may be the number of their past and present crimes, for the founders of their sects will take them out of the midst of those flames, if perchance they are condemned to them, especially if the bonzes who have made satisfaction for them constitute themselves their intercessors...and there are numbers of men and women who intrust considerable sums to the bonzes, in order to receive tenfold in the next world, and the bonzes give them a

³ In Japanese, *bonso* means 'priest'; *bonzo* was used in Portuguese and French to refer to Buddhist monks and nuns (wikipedia article on "Bhikku").

security in notes, which they write. The ignorant people have no hesitation in believing in this multiplied interest on funds thus invested. The notes of the bonzes are carefully preserved, and people about to die order them to be buried with them, in the belief that the devil will fly at sight of them...

The Japanese doctrines teach absolutely nothing concerning the creation of the world, of the sun, the moon, the stars, the heavens, the earth, sea, and the rest, and do not believe that they have any origin but themselves. The people were greatly astonished on hearing it said that there is one sole Author and common Father of souls, by whom they were created. This astonishment was caused by the fact that in their religious traditions there is nowhere any mention of a Creator of the universe. If there existed one single First Cause of all things, surely, they said, the Chinese, from whom they derive their religion, must have known it....In the end, by God's favour, we succeeded in solving all their questions, so as to leave no doubt remaining in their minds.

The Japanese are led by reason in everything more than any other people, and in general they are all so insatiable of information and so importunate in their questions that there is no end either to their arguments with us, or to their talking over our answers among themselves. They did not know that the world is round, they knew nothing of the course of the sun and stars, so that when they asked us and we explained to them these and other like things, such as the causes of comets, of the lightning and of rain, they listened to us most eagerly, and appeared delighted to hear us, regarding us with profound respect as extremely learned persons. This idea of our great knowledge opened the way to us for sowing the seed of religion in their minds.

...The university of Bandou, situated in an island of Japan, which has given its name to its country, is the most famous of all; and a great number of bonzes are constantly going thither to study their own laws. These precepts are derived from China and are written in Chinese characters, which are different from the Japanese. There are two kinds of writing in Japan, one used by men and the other by women; and for the most part both men and women, especially of the nobility and the commercial class, have a literary education. The bonzes, or bonzesses, in their monasteries teach letters to the girls and boys, though rich and noble persons intrust the education of their children to private tutors...

St. Francis Xavier: Letter from Japan, to the Society of Jesus at Goa, 1551⁴

Last year, dearest brethren, I wrote to you from Cagoxima concerning our voyage, our arrival in Japan, and what had been done in the interests of Christianity up to that time. Now I will relate what God had done by our means since last year. On our arrival at the native place of our good Paul, we were received very kindly indeed by his relations and friends. They all of them became Christians, being led by what Paul told them; and that they might be thoroughly confirmed in the truth of our religion, we remained in that place a whole year and more. In that time more than a hundred were gathered into the fold of Christ. The rest might have done so if they had been willing, without giving any offence to their kinsfolk or relations [but the prince issued an edict forbidding further conversion.]...

⁴From: Henry James Coleridge, ed., *The Life and Letters of St. Francis Xavier*, 2d Ed., 2 Vols., (London: Burns & Oates, 1890), Vol. II, pp. 331-350; accessed via Internet Medieval Sourcebook; <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/1551xavier3.asp>

The interval after this was spent in instructing our converts, in learning Japanese, and in translating into that tongue the chief heads of the Christian faith... We have now translated this book [of the main teachings of Christianity]... into Japanese with great labor, and have written it in our own characters. Out of this we read what I have mentioned to those who came to the faith of Christ, that the converts might know how to worship God and Jesus Christ with piety and to their souls' health. And when we went on to expound these things in our discourses, the Christians delighted in them very much, as seeing how true the things were which we had taught them. The Japanese are certainly of remarkably good dispositions, and follow reason wonderfully. They see clearly that their ancestral law is false and the law of God true, but they are deterred by fear of their prince from submitting to the Christian religion. [When we left] we left with them Paul, their own townsman, who is an excellent Christian, to finish their instruction in the precepts of religion.

...[I] went on with Joam Fernandez to Yamaguchi, the seat of a very wealthy daimyo, as he is thought among the Japanese. The city contains more than ten thousand households; all the houses are of wood. We found many here, both of the common people and of the nobility, very desirous to become acquainted with the Christian law. We thought it best to preach twice a day in the streets and cross roads, reading out parts of our book, and then speaking to the people about the Christian religion. Some of the noblemen also invited us to their houses, that they might hear about our religion with more convenience. They promised of their own accord, that if they came to think it better than their own, they would unhesitatingly embrace it. Many of them heard what we had to say about the law of God very willingly; some,

on the other hand, were angry at it, and even went so far as to laugh at what we said. So, wherever we went through the streets of the city, we were followed by a small crowd of boys of the lowest dregs of the populace, laughing at us and mocking us with some such words as these: "There go the men who tell us that we must embrace the law of God in order to be saved, because we cannot be rescued from destruction except by the Maker of all things and by His Son! There go the men who declare that it is wicked to have more than one wife!" In the same way they made a joke and play of the other articles of our religion.

We had spent some days in this office of preaching, when the king, who was then in the city, sent for us and we went to him. He asked us wherever did we come from? why had we come to Japan? And we answered that we were Europeans sent thither for the sake of preaching the law of God, since no one could be safe and secure unless he purely and piously worship God and His Son Jesus Christ, the Redeemer and Saviour of all nations. Then the king commanded us to explain to him the law of God. So we read to him a good part of our volume; and although we went on reading for an hour or more, he listened to us diligently and attentively as long as we were reading, and then he sent us away. We remained many days in that city, and preached to the people in the streets and at the cross roads. Many of them listened to the wonderful deeds of Christ with avidity, and when we came to His most bitter death, they were unable to restrain their tears. Nevertheless, very few actually became Christians.

...we presented to the king there the letters and presents which had been sent as signs of friendship by the Governor of India and the Bishop of Goa. The king was very much delighted both with the letters and with the presents, and that he might reward us, he offered us a great amount of gold and silver. These gifts we sent back, and then asked him that, if he desired

to make some acceptable present to the strangers who had come to his city, he would give us leave to announce the law of God to his people, saying that nothing could possibly be more pleasing to us than such a gift. This he granted us with the greatest goodwill.

He accordingly affixed edicts in the most crowded places of the city, declaring that it was pleasing to him that the law of heaven should be announced in his dominions; and that it was lawful for any, who desired, to embrace it. At the same time, he assigned an empty monastery for us to inhabit. A great many used to come to us to this place for the sake of hearing about the new religion. We used to preach twice a day, and after the sermon there was always a good long dispute concerning religion...After disputes and questionings for many days, they at last began to give in and betake themselves to the faith of Christ...

When the Christians saw the bonzes convicted and silenced they were of course full of joy, and were daily more and more confirmed in the faith of our Lord. On the other hand, the heathen, who were present at these discussions, were greatly shaken in their own religion, seeing the systems of their fore-fathers giving way. The bonzes were much displeased at this, and when they were present at the sermons and saw that a great number became Christians daily, they began to accuse them severely for leaving their ancestral religion to follow a new faith. But the others answered that they embraced the Christian law because they had made up their minds that it was more in accordance with nature than their own, and because they found that we satisfied their questions while the bonzes did not.

The Japanese are very curious by nature, and as desirous of learning as any people ever were. So they go on perpetually telling

other people about their questions and our answers. They desire very much to hear novelties, especially about religion. Even before our arrival, as we are told, they were perpetually disputing among themselves, each one contending that his own sect was the best. But after they had heard what we had to say, they left off their disputes about their own rules of life and religion, and all began to contend about the Christian faith. It is really very wonderful that in so large a city as Yamaguchi in every house and in every place men should be talking constantly about the law of God.

...For those who have become Christians used to belong, one to one sect, another to another; the most learned of each of them explained to us the institutions and rules of his own way of belief. If I had not had the work of these converts to help me, I should not have been able to become sufficiently acquainted with, and so attack, these abominable religions of Japan. It is quite incredible how much the Christians love us...May God in His mercy repay them with His favor, and give us all His heavenly bliss! Amen.

Matteo Ricci, *Journals*, c. 1600⁵

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

⁵Text from "The Diary of Matthew Ricci," in Matthew Ricci, *China in the Sixteenth Century*, trans Louis Gallagher, (New York: Random House, 1942, 1970), accessed via <http://acc6.its.brooklyn.cuny.edu/~phalsall/texts/ric-jour.html>

Elements in Chinese. After a long delay he was finally allowed to enter the closed City of Peking in 1601, where he stayed for the rest of his life teaching science, mathematics, and Christianity to Chinese intellectuals.

Ricci's most important published work was his History of the Introduction of Christianity into China. But the journals that he kept and edited for publication allow one of the few glimpses of an outsider's view of Chinese society and government during a period when China was closed to foreign visitors.⁶

[On the description of Chinese government] We shall touch upon this subject only insofar as it has to do with the purpose of our narrative. It would require a number of chapters, if not of whole books, to treat in full detail... Chinese imperial power passes on from father to son, or to other royal kin as does our own... More than once, however, it has happened that the people, growing weary of an inept ruler, have stripped him of his authority and replaced him with someone preeminent for character and courage whom they henceforth recognized as their legitimate King. It may be said in praise of the Chinese that ordinarily they would prefer to die an honorable death rather than swear allegiance to a usurping monarch. In fact, there is a proverb extant among their philosophers, which reads: "No woman is moral who has two husbands, nor any vassal faithful to two lords."

There are no ancient laws in China under which the republic is governed in perpetuity, such as our Laws of the Twelve Tables and the Code of Caesar. Whoever succeeds in getting possession of the throne, regardless of his ancestry, makes new laws according to his own way of thinking. His successors on the throne are obliged to enforce the

⁶ Intro adapted from Mark A. Kishlansky, Sources of World History, Vol. 1 (New York: HarperCollins, 1995), p. 269.

laws which he promulgated as founder of the dynasty, and these laws cannot be changed without good reason...

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

Only such as have earned a doctor's degree or that of licentiate⁷ are admitted to take part in the government of the kingdom, and due to the interest of the magistrates and of the King himself there is no lack of such candidates. Every public office is therefore fortified with and dependent on the attested science, prudence, and diplomacy of the person assigned to it whether he be taking office for the first time or is already experienced in the conduct of civil life. This integrity of life is prescribed by... law... and for the most part it is lived up to, save in the case of such as are prone to violate the dictates of justice from human weakness and from lack of religious training among the gentiles. All magistrates, whether they belong to the military or to the civil congress, are called Quon-fu, meaning commander or president, though their honorary or unofficial title is Lau-ye or Lau-sie, signifying lord or father. The Portuguese call the Chinese magistrates "mandarins," probably from *mandando, mando mandare*, to

⁷ Ricci uses European terms for advanced degrees to refer to the civil service examination system used in China for government officials.

order or command, and they are now generally known by this title in Europe.

Though we have already stated that the Chinese form of government is monarchical, it must be evident from what has been said, and it will be made clearer by what is to come, that it is to some extent an aristocracy. Although all legal statutes inaugurated by magistrates must be confirmed by the King in writing on the written petition presented to him, the King himself makes no final decision in important matters of state without consulting the magistrates or considering their advice...

Tax returns, impost, and other tribute, which undoubtedly exceed a hundred and fifty million a year, as is commonly said, do not go into the Imperial Exchequer, nor can the king dispose of this income as he pleases. The silver, which is the common currency, is placed in the public treasuries, and the returns paid in rice are placed in the warehouses belonging to the government. The generous allowance made for the support of the royal family and their relatives, for the palace eunuchs and the royal household, is drawn from the national treasury. In keeping with the regal splendor and dignity of the crown, these annuities are large, but each individual account is determined and regulated by law. Civil and military accounts and expenses of all government departments are paid out of this national treasury, and the size of the national budget is far in excess of what Europeans might imagine. Public buildings, the palaces of the King and of his relations, the upkeep of city prisons and fortresses, and the renewal of all kinds of war supplies must be met by the national treasury, and in a kingdom of such vast dimensions the program of building and of restoration is continuous. One would scarcely believe that at times even these

enormous revenues are not sufficient to meet the expenses. When this happens, new taxes are imposed to balance the national budget...

...there are two special orders [of magistrates] never heard of among our people...consisting of sixty or more chosen philosophers...They correspond in some manner to what we would call keepers of the public conscience, inasmuch as they inform the King as often as they see fit, of any infraction of the law in any part of the entire kingdom. No one is spared from their scrutiny, even the highest magistrates, as they do not hesitate to speak, even though it concerns the King himself or his household...And yet they do their duty so thoroughly that they are a source of wonder to outsiders and a good example for imitation. Neither King nor magistrates can escape their courage and frankness, and even when they arouse the royal wrath to such an extent that the king becomes severely angry with them they will never desist from their admonitions and criticism until some remedy has been applied to the public evil against which they are inveighing...

The Chinese can distinguish between their magistrates by the parasols they use as protection against the sun when they go out in public. Some of these are blue and others yellow. Sometimes for effect they will have two or three of these sunshades, but only one if their rank does not permit of more. They may also be recognized by their mode of transportation in public. The lower ranks ride on horseback, the higher are carried about on the shoulders of their servants in gestatorial chairs. The number of carriers also has significance of rank; some are only allowed four, others may have eight. There are other ways also of distinguishing the magistracy and the rank of dignity therein; by banners and pennants, chains and censer cups, and by the number of guards who give orders to make way for the passage of the dignitary. The escort itself is held in such high esteem by the public

that no one would question their orders. Even in crowded city everyone gives way at the sound of their voices with a spontaneity that correspond to the rank of the approaching celebrity.

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

Another remarkable fact and quite worthy of note as marking a difference from the West, is that the entire kingdom is administered by the Order of the Learned, commonly known as The Philosophers. The responsibility for the orderly management of the entire realm is wholly and completely committed to their charge and care. The army, both officers and soldiers, hold them in high respect and show them the promptest obedience and deference...

Pere du Halde, *Description of China*, 1735⁸

Jean-Baptiste Du Halde (1674-1743) was a French Jesuit. In 1735, he compiled a four-volume work in French called A Description of the Geographical, Historical, Chronological, Political and Physical Aspects of the the Empire of China and Tartary. (It was also published in German and English translations almost immediately). Du Halde had not travelled to China himself, but he drew upon the written accounts of at least 28 other Jesuit missionaries to China, many of which were unpublished. In the passages below, he often refers to his sources (Pere Grimaldi, etc.).⁹

This nation [China], naturally proud, looked upon themselves as the most learned in the world, and they enjoyed this reputation without disturbance because they were acquainted with no other people more knowing than themselves; but they were undeceived by the ingenuity of the [Jesuit] missionaries who appeared at court. The proof which they gave of their capacity served greatly to authorize their ministry and to gain esteem for the religion which they preached. The late emperor, Cang hi, whose chief delight was to acquire knowledge, was never weary of seeing or hearing them. On the other hand, the Jesuits, perceiving how necessary the protection of this great prince was to the progress of the Gospel, omitted nothing that might excite his curiosity and satisfy this natural relish for the sciences.

They gave him an insight into optics by making him a present of a semi-cylinder of a light kind of wood. In the middle of its axis was placed a convex glass, which, being turned toward any object, painted the image within the tube to a great nicety. The emperor was greatly pleased with so unusual a sight, and desired to have a machine made in his garden at Peking, wherein, without being seen himself, he might see everything that

⁸ <http://www.fordham.edu/Halsall/mod/modsbook03.asp>

⁹ Introduction adapted from <http://www.univie.ac.at/Geschichte/China-Bibliographie/blog/2010/06/17/du-halde-1735/>

passed in the streets and neighboring places. They prepared for this purpose an object-glass of much greater diameter, and made in the thickest garden wall a great window in the shape of a pyramid, the basis of which was towards the garden, and the point toward the street. At the point they fixed the glass eye over against the place where there was the greatest concourse of people; at the basis was made a large closet, shut up close on all sides and very dark. It was there the emperor came with his queens to observe the lively images of everything that passed in the street; and this sight pleased him extremely; but it charmed the princesses a great deal more, who could not otherwise behold this spectacle, the custom of China not allowing them to go out of the palace.

Père Grimaldi gave another wonderful spectacle by his skill in optics in the Jesuits' Garden at Peking, which greatly astonished the grandees of the emperor. They made upon the four walls four human figures, every one being of the same length as the wall, which was fifty feet. As he had perfectly observed the optic rules, there was nothing seen on the front but mountains, forests, chases, and other things of this nature; but at a certain point they perceived the figure of a man well made and well-proportioned. The emperor honored the Jesuits' house with his presence, and beheld these figures a long time with admiration. The grandees and principal mandarins, who came in crowds, were equally surprised; but that which struck them most was to see the figures so regular and so exact upon irregular walls that in several places had large windows and doors. It would be too tedious to mention all the figures that seemed in confusion, and yet were seen distinctly at a certain point, or were put in order with conic, cylindrical, pyramidal mirrors, and the many other wonders in optics that Père

Grimaldi discovered to the finest geniuses in China and which raised their surprise and wonder.

...Statics likewise had its turn. They offered the emperor a machine the principal parts of which were only four notched wheels and an iron grapple. With the help of this machine, a child raised several thousand weight without difficulty, and stood firm against the efforts of twenty strong men. With respect to hydrostatics, they made for the emperor pumps, canals, siphons, wheels, and several other machines proper to raise water above the level of the spring; and among others, a machine which they made use of to raise water out of the river, called the ten thousand springs, and to carry it into the ground belonging to the emperor's demesnes, as he had desired.

...It was well known, as I have elsewhere mentioned, that what gave Père Ricci a favorable admission into the emperor's court was a clock and a striking watch of which he made him a present. This prince was so much charmed with it that he built a magnificent tower purposely to place it in, and because the queen-mother had a desire for a striking watch, the emperor had recourse to a stratagem to disappoint her by ordering the watch to be shown her without calling her attention to the striking part, so that she, not finding it according to her fancy, sent it back.

They did not fail afterwards to comply with the emperor's taste for great quantities of curious things were sent out of Europe by Christian princes, who had the conversion of this great empire at heart, insomuch that the emperor's cabinet was soon filled with various rarities, especially clocks of the most recently invented and most curious workmanship. Père Pereira, who had singular talent for music, placed a large and magnificent clock on the top of the Jesuits' church. He had made a great number of small bells in a musical proportion and placed them in a tower appointed

for that purpose. Every hammer was fastened to an iron wire which raised it and immediately let it fall upon the bell. Within the tower was a large barrel upon which Christian airs were marked with small spikes. Immediately before the hour the barrel was disengaged from the teeth of a wheel, by which it was suspended and stopped. It then was instantly set in motion by a great weight, the string of which was wound about the barrel. The spikes raised the wires of the hammers, according to the order of the tune, so that by this means the finest airs of the country were heard.

This was a diversion entirely new both for the court and city, and crowds of all sorts came constantly to hear it; the church, though large, was not sufficient for the throng that incessantly went backward and forward.

Whenever any extraordinary phenomena, such as a parhelion, rainbows, etc., appeared in the heavens, the emperor immediately sent for the missionaries to explain their causes. They composed several books concerning these natural appearances...

All these different inventions of human wit, till then unknown to the Chinese, abated something of their natural pride and taught them not to have too contemptible an opinion of foreigners; nay, it so far altered their way of thinking that they began to look upon Europeans as their masters.

...The Chinese like the European music well enough, provided that there is but one voice to accompany the sound of several instruments. But as for the contrast of different voices, of grave and acute sounds, they are not at all agreeable to their taste, for they look upon them as no better than disagreeable confusion. They have no musical notes, nor any sign to denote the diversity of tones, the rising or falling of the

voice, and the rest of the variations that constitute harmony. The airs which they sing or play upon their instruments are got only by rote and are learned by the ear. Nevertheless, they make new ones from time to time.

The ease wherewith we retain an air after the first hearing, by the assistance of notes, extremely surprised the late emperor...he ordered his musicians to play a Chinese air upon their instruments, and played likewise himself in a very graceful manner. Père Pereira took his pocketbook and pricked down all the tune while the musicians were playing, and when they had finished, repeated it without missing a note, which the emperor could scarcely believe...