

Biography of Sabatino de Ursis SJ, China missionary

Name and Name Modifications:

degli Orsi
des Ursins
Deursis Sebastianus
d'Orsi Sabbatino
Chinese: Xiong Sanba

Relevance for the China Mission:

Sabatino de Ursis belonged to the early Jesuits in the China mission. He does not belong to the great names of the China mission, nevertheless, he took an active part in the discussion about the Chinese terms and introduced European mechanic in China.

Dates of Birth and Death:

(*) 1575 in Lecce, Kingdom of Naples, today Italy
(†) 3 May 1620 in Macau, Portuguese enclave, today China

Family Data:

Sabatino de Ursis was descendent of a famous family in Naples.

Sabatino de Ursis entered the Society of Jesus on 6 of November 1597.

He made his four solemn vows in Macau on 17 February 1618.

Education:

Sabatino de Ursis studied at the Collegio Romano in Rome. Soon he felt attracted by the wish to go to the mission. He received the permission after having finished his theological studies.

Mission:

Departure for China was on 25 March 1602. Arrival in Macau in 1603.

Professional Career:

Originally, de Ursis was destined for the mission in Japan. But an entry to

Japan was no longer possible. Therefore de Ursis went to Nanchang in 1606. [Matteo Ricci](#) (1552-1610) SJ ordered him to come to Peking because of his good knowledge in astronomy and hydraulic in 1607. De Ursis helped him to translate Euclid's "Elements" into Chinese. During the persecution of Christianity, which started in 1616, he was expelled together with Fr. Diego Pantoja (1571-1618) to Canton on 18 of March 1617, and later to Macau.

In Macau, de Ursis played an important role in the hot tempered discussion about a Chinese terminology of Christian words. As the Jesuit fathers [Niccolò Longobardo](#) (1565-1655), Francesco Pasio (1554-1612), [João Rodrigues](#) (1561-1633) and most other Jesuits, who were expelled from Japan, de Ursis committed himself in his treaty to use Latin names for Chinese religious and theological terms as God, soul, angel etc. At the end and after the discussions of several years, the Jesuits decided in favor of the accommodation, i.e. it was permitted to use Chinese names.

Sabatino de Ursis introduced the European pharmacy and the distillation of essences in China. He was involved in the reform of the Chinese calendar, which was planned and started under the guidance of the Chinese state minister (Paulus) [Xu Guangqi](#) (1562-1633) with the help of the Jesuits.

Publications Sabatino de Ursis:

- *Taixi shuifa* (Hydraulic machines of Europe), 6 juan (Peking 1612) (included in Xu Guangqi's *Nongzheng chuanshu* (On agriculture, 1640).
- *Jianping yishuo* (Astronomical instruments), 1 juan, (Peking 1611).
- *Biao du shuo* (On the Gnomon), 1 juan, all three included in *Sikou quanshu* (Imperial catalogue of selected works), and in *Tianxue Chuhan*.
- "Zou shu" (alias Ju jie) (August 1616).
- "Yao lu shuo" (between 1610 and 1620).
- Anonym: *Xiangshu lun*, s.a. Nicolas Standaert, Ad Dudink (eds.), *Yesu hui Luoma dang an guan Ming Qing tian zhu jiao wen xian* (Chinese Christian texts from the Roman Archives of the Society of Jesus), vol. 6 (Taipei 2002) # 25.
- "Commentariolum de Sinensium festorum erroribus", in: *Litterae Annuae 1611*, com. Nicolas Trigault, 1612, in: *Litterae Societatis Iesu e*

regno Sinarum Annorum MDCX & XI ad R.P. Claudium Aquavivam...
(Rome 1615).

- “Report of Father Sabatino de Ursis, S.J., to Father Francis Pasio, S.J., on the Chinese Calendar, Peking, 1. September 1612”, in: Pasquale M. d’Elia, *Galileo in China; Relations through the Roman College between Galileo and the Jesuit Scientist-Missionaries (1610-1640)* (Cambridge, Mass. 1960) pp. 63-82.
- “Lettera dal P. Sabatino de Ursis sulla morte di P. Valignani, 1. Febbraio 1606”, in: Daniello Bartoli, *Il Giappone* (Roma 1660) pp. 569-571.
- “Lettera del P. Sabatino de Ursis S.J., Pechino, 20. Maggio 1610”, in: Piero Tacchi-Venturi, *Opere storiche del P. Matteo Ricci*, vol. II (Macerata 1915) pp. 483-487.
- Gaetano Ricciardolo (ed.), *Relazione della morte del P. Matteo Ricci: Uno dei primi padri della Compagnia di Gesù che entrarono nel regno della Cina con alcune cose riguardanti la sua vita* (Roma 2000).
- “Adnotationes super rebus memorabilibus a P. Nicolao Longobardi pro dirigenda re christiana ad P. Visitatorem Franciscum Vieiram anno 1617 conscriptae”, Ms.

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- Joseph Dehergne, *Répertoire des Jésuites de Chine de 1773 à 1800* (Rome, Paris 1973) p. 75.
- L.C. Goodrich, Chao-ying Fang (eds.), *Dictionary of Ming Biography 1368-1644* (New York, London 1976).
- Paul Pelliot, *Inventaire sommaire des manuscrits et imprimé chinoise de la Bibliothèque Vaticane* Takata Tokio (ed.) (Italian School of East Asian Studies Reference Series 1) (Kyoto 1995).

- Louis Pfister, *Notices biographiques et bibliographiques sur l'ancienne Mission des Jésuites de Chine 1552-1773* (Chang-hai 1932, repr. 1976) pp. 103-106.
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- Henri Bernard-Maître, *L'apport scientifique du Père Matthieu Ricci à la Chine* (Peiping 1935), English: Edward C. Werner (transl.), *Matteo Ricci's Scientific Contribution to China* (Westport, Connecticut 1973).
- Henri Bernard, “L'Encyclopédie astronomique du Père Schall (Tch'ong-tcheng li-chou, 1629 et Si-yang sin-fa li-chou, 1645. La réforme du calendrier chinois sous l'influence de Clavius, de Galilée et de Kepler”, *Monumenta Serica* 3 (1938) pp. 35-77, 441-527.
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