Matteo Ricci (1552-1610) was an Italian Jesuit missionary who lived in China during the Ming Dynasty and served as the court astronomer and mathematician. During his 27-year stay in China, he kept journals that were posthumously published in Rome in 1615. What do you learn about Chinese culture from these journal entries?

This country is so thoroughly covered by an intersecting network of rivers and canals that it is possible to travel almost anywhere by water. Hence, an almost incredible number of boats of every variety pass hither and thither. Indeed there are so many of them that one of the writers of our day does not hesitate to affirm that there are many people living on the water as there are dwellers on land. This may sound like an exaggeration and yet it all but expresses the truth, as it would seem, if one were to travel here only by water. In my opinion it might be said with greater truth and without fear of exaggeration, that there are as many boats in this kingdom as can be counted up in all the rest of the world.

This statement is true if we restrict our count to the number of boats sailing on fresh water. As to their ships that pass out into the sea, they are very few and not to be compared with ours either in number or in structure. Two or three things are entirely unknown to Europeans of which I must give a brief account. First, there is a certain bush from the leaves of which is decocted that celebrated drink, known to the Chinese, the Japanese, and to their neighbors as tea. Its use cannot be of long duration among the Chinese, as no ideography in their old books designates this particular drink and their writing characters are all ancient. Indeed it might be that this same plant can be found in our own fields. Here they gather its leaves in the springtime and place them in a shady place to dry and from the dried leaves they brew a drink which they use at meals and which is served to friends when they come to visit. On such occasions it is served continually as long as they remain together engaged in conversation.

The art of printing was practiced in China at a date somewhat earlier than that assigned to the beginning of printing in Europe, which was about 1405. It is quite certain that the Chinese knew the art of printing at least five centuries ago, and some of them assert that printing was known to their people before the beginning of the Christian era, about 50 B.C. Their method of making printed books is quite ingenious. The text is written in ink, with a brush made of very fine hair, on a sheet of paper which is inverted and pasted on a wooden tablet. When the paper has become thoroughly dry, its surface is scraped off quickly and with great skill, until nothing but a fine tissue bearing the characters remains on the wooden tablet. Then, with a steel graver, the workman cuts away the surface following the outlines of the characters until these alone stand out in low relief. From such a block a skilled printer can make copies with incredible speed, turning out as many as fifteen hundred copies in a single day. Chinese printers are so skilled in engraving these blocks, that no more time is consumed in making one of them than would be required by one of our printers in setting up a form of type and making the necessary corrections.