

THE CHINESE WORLD

THE CHINESE AND INDIAN OCEAN NAMES OF CHINA

Hi, everybody.

Welcome to the course about the European discovery of China. When trying to understand how westerners arrived at their image of China between the 13th and 17th centuries, the first question to ask is: when did westerners first know that the Chinese world existed?

The very existence of China, which now seems so evident from all points of view – geographical, political, cultural – has not always been so obvious for the western world.

In fact, China didn't even enter the intellectual landscape of Europe until the late 16th century.

A series of factors contributed to this absence, and the first of them was the lack of consistency with which the Chinese themselves referred to their territory.

In Ancient China, the Chinese had names to differentiate the political entities - the states or guo - that occupied their lands, for instance the states of Lu, of Yan, and so on. Some of these guo – the central ones, the Zhongguo - considered themselves to be the cultural and political nucleus of the civilized Chinese world.

That's why their maps don't give a specific political name for the whole country. The most famous Chinese medieval map is the Song dynasty's 11th century Yuji tu, Map of the tracks of Yu.

It is the first known map to use a cartographic grid, clearly stating that the sides of each square represents a hundred li (that is 50 km).

It also highlights that it displays the "Mountains' and Rivers' names of the Tribute of YU" as well as "Provinces and Prefectures from Past to Present". But it doesn't provide a general name for China.

Zhongguo is now the Chinese name for China, but until the end of the 19th century it was unusual for the Chinese to apply it to the country as a whole. For the Chinese, China was basically a cultural and ritual entity that was above the political states: the most usual name was Tianxia, meaning literally Everything under Heaven, a name that conveyed the idea that China was the very essence of civilization.

Tianxia is a name that appears mainly in the classical texts, while in the historical records it was more usual to name China after the reigning dynasty. That is why China was referred to by the Chinese as Han, Tang, or Ming, depending on the dynastic name of the reigning house.

By the 15th century the Chinese identified themselves as Da Ming, (the Great Ming) Ming being the name of the reigning dynasty at that moment.

When westerners first approached China, Daming was also the first name that they heard: **look for instance at Matteo Ricci's famous map, where Daming** refers to China, and Daming Hai is the name given to the China Sea.

So, from an outsider's point of view, there was no one unequivocal name for China. **In fact, China was first known to the West for its products. The "made in China" label, so to speak, came first of all.** Silk, for example, was seen by the western world, as coming from a faraway place that the Romans named after its product.

Silk came from the trees of Serica, the land of silk, and was collected by the Seres, a silent race that in Pliny's words, **"made a sort of noise by way of talking, having no language of their own"**.

Silk will retain in most European languages the hissing S initial sound that **once rang in Pliny's ears.**

Serica is still to be found in the Renaissance remake of Ptolemy's famous 2nd century map: Ptolemy's map placed Serica in the Far East.

The Indians, however, knew better than the Romans when it came to China. Towards the middle of the 3rd century BCE, there was certainly some kind of contact between the recently established Maurya Empire in India and the emerging Qin dynasty in China. By the end of the 3rd century, when the Qin founded the first Chinese empire, Indians were referring to these northern lands as the lands of Qin.

Indian merchants brought this name to the shores of the Indian Ocean. Ptolemy, who was from Alexandria, a Greco-Roman city well connected through the Red Sea with the Indian Ocean, probably heard the name Qin, which is why Sina also finds its way onto the far east of his map.

Sin, or rather as-Sin, became the usual name for China in the Islamic world. We find as-Sin in the narratives of Arab merchants, such as that of Suleiman in the 12th century, and in the travels of Ibn Battuta, in the 14th century.

Sin or Qin was a perfectly well known political and economic entity for anyone entering the Indian Ocean. This was the case, for example, for Benjamin of Tudela, a Jewish traveler from Tudela in the Navarre kingdom of the Iberian Peninsula.

In the 12th century he traveled mainly through the Mediterranean and Middle Eastern Jewish communities. On arriving in Basra in the Persian Gulf, he noticed vessels coming from Zin, **a land that he places "in the uttermost East"**.

He is credited with having been the first to signal the existence of China to the western world. But the West was not at that moment very receptive to such ideas, and Benjamin of Tudela's mention went unnoticed.