

## THE CHINESE WORLD

### THE EUROPEAN NAME OF CHINA

And now let's see what happened away from Indian waters.

From the 13th century onwards, another name for China - Cathay - had been gaining prestige in the West. It was, by any estimation, a peculiar name, related to the Khitai, a tribal group, that after establishing a kingdom in northern China, had afterwards fought and won some battles against the Muslims.

This gave the Khitai an impressive aura amongst the western Crusaders that were just at that moment fighting against Islam on the shores of the Mediterranean. The legends even went as far as claiming that these Khitai were in fact Christians governed by an extremely wise king, known as Prester John. So this is how some people in Europe, especially the Pope and King Louis in France, began to imagine an extremely rich and powerful nation in the Far East, named Cathay, after the Khitai that lived there.

This is the Cathay that 13th century western travelers were looking for when they headed for the steppes of Central Asia. This was also the name given to the Chinese by William of Rubruck, a Franciscan friar who in the 13th century was sent on a mission by the king of France to find out about the Tartars.

He called the Chinese Cathaians, and he was so impressed by them that he was the first to claim that Cathay and Serica were, in fact, the same place. A few years after Rubruck came Marco Polo, who embellished Cathay with powerful images of wealth and urban civilization.

The strange thing is that Marco Polo is supposed to have sailed in the waters of the Indian Ocean. And although he stopped in many ports in the Indian Ocean and in the Persian Gulf, he never mentions Sin.

Even if, for many people, his stories were far too fanciful, his influence on map making was decisive and Cathay appeared for the first time in 14th century western maps. This is the Cresques Catalan map, it clearly shows Catayo in the Asian Far East, with its large capital, its numerous walled cities and its wise and brilliant king.

This same preeminence of Cathay, appears in the narrative of Ruy de Clavijo, a Castilian traveler who in 1403 was sent by the king of Castile to Samarkand, as ambassador to Tamerlane.

While crossing the Iranian plateau he describes the wealth brought to Hormuz in the Persian Gulf by the boats coming from Cathay. For fifteen century Europeans Cathay was a real entity about which they were gathering real information.

Ruy the Clavijo tells of the arrival of Cathaian ambassadors to Samarkand's court and of the humiliations inflicted on them by Tamerlane. We will again find Cathay in Fra Mauro's map, produced in the mid-15th century. **Fra Mauro's map** displays an unusual knowledge of navigation in the Indian Ocean, but even so, only Catayo and Serica, are displayed in the far corner of Asia and there is no mention of Sin China appeared on world maps just after America did. On the famous 1506 Waldsemüller map, where an elongated silhouette of America appears shyly in the west for the first time, the fashionable 13th century name of Cathay still lingers in the far east.

In fact, those two names, Cathay and Qin, never mixed. Cathay never found its way to India, and neither did Qin reach Europe. It is to his great surprise that Vasco de Gama heard of the Chin when he first arrived in India in 1498.

On the Malabar coast, he even found Chinese place names left over from former periods of strong commercial contact between the Chinese and the Indians. And when the Portuguese went further east and were preparing for the conquest of the stronghold of Malacca, the name of Qin was so often mentioned that the King of Portugal felt compelled to tell his envoy: **"Ask for the chinjs, who they are and what they sell."**

The name of China appeared for the first time on a map in 1529. Diego de Ribero, who worked with data mainly gathered by the Magellan expedition that first circumnavigated the world, drew a map in which America is still emerging from the waves, while a hesitating China pops up in the Far East.

**This said, Diego Ribero doesn't seem sure of China's exact location or size.** It was in 1570 that China and America simultaneously found a permanent place on western maps. They both appear in the first atlas of the world, prepared by Abraham Ortelius.

The atlas contains 53 leaves, and China occupies one of them with its name clearly marked, and its great wall proudly in place. Even so, on the world map at the beginning of Ortelius' atlas, China shares space with a resilient Cathay.

To finish this lecture, let's recall that, as we have seen, up to the 16th century the name for China in fashion in Western Europe, was Cathay, while in the Indian Ocean it was Sin.

It will take still a few years for the west to fully understand that Serica, Cathay and Sin or China were the same. The credit for this goes to Martin de Rada, a Castilian Augustinian who traveled to China in 1575 and stated finally and for the first time that the entity that the Chinese called Daming, was the same one that the Venetian Marco Polo called Cathay, and that this country was China.