

## THE EUROPEANS DISCOVERY OF XINA POMPEU FABRA UNIVERSITY BARCELONA

### THE CHINA THAT EUROPEANS DISCOVERED: THE MING DYNASTY BOOKS, LIBRARIES AND BOOKSTORES

Meanwhile, in China, the hundreds of thousands of examination candidates obviously needed hundreds of thousands of copies of the Classics and other texts that were the subject of the exams. These were printed by the state and distributed to the schools, but there were also commercial publishers who, because they printed for profit, responded very quickly to the increasingly diversified demands of customers.

Taking into account the importance of examinations in Fujian it is not surprising that the biggest concentration of publishing houses was in a county of this province, Jianyang that also abounded in the bamboo used for paper making. From Jianyang came the great majority of what we would today call paperbacks, published on cheap paper and sold at a very low price. Rada and Ricci were both astounded by the cheapness of the books. Commercial publishers were not limited to the Classics; they also published dictionaries, historical novels, drama plots, geographies, medical texts, encyclopedias, school primers, religious texts, military texts, books on child care and even books on dreams. Some of these books went to private libraries, which since the Song times had been very important.

Wealthy and scholarly families could house libraries with thousands of volumes. But books were also sold to the general public, and the number of volumes published soared during the 16th century, just when our travellers were arriving in China. This is why both Rada and Ricci were able to buy so many books. Some Chinese books reached Europe by the middle of the 16th century. They are first mentioned in a book published in 1550, where it says that the king of Portugal has offered a Chinese book to the Pope.

**By the 1570's Chinese books were to be found in many European libraries: Montaigne saw one of them in the Vatican Library, the Portuguese were sending some of them to Lisbon and the king of Spain had a bunch of them in the Escorial library. Bookstores were found in every city. Some were general bookstores, as in Yuan times, and some were well-established business that displayed the name of the owner and advertised its specialities. In this case we can see that this bookshop is labeled Jiajing Tang and that it specializes in Poetry ancient and modern. Bookshops will inspire great wonder in the European travelers, who**

were only used to seeing books in libraries and certainly not in street shops. Scholars were to be seen everywhere in the cities, where they had their offices. According to the rule of avoidance, they couldn't serve in the county where they were born, and their appointments were changed every three to nine years. They were always on the move, with their characteristic headwear and their attendants following and preceding them. To ensure this mobility the Ming continued the Yuan courier system and expanded it, providing 1,700 stations to service routes that amounted to 84,000 kilometers. The aim of the system was to speed government communications, but officials and tributary embassies were also allowed to use them. All the European travelers from Marco Polo to the Jesuits travelled on them.

When Europeans reached China in the sixteenth century, they came from societies in which power was still mostly in the hands of priests and aristocrats. The Ming civil service stood in strong contrast to that, and its meritocratic model of society aroused astonishment and admiration in all the European travelers who encountered it. The travelers' accounts of this model will cause a storm of interest in the political and intellectual circles of Europe.

By the end of the 17th century, the Chinese Way of Government had already become a hot topic for European philosophers.

In the minds of the educated Europeans, Chinese scholars, embodied here in Confucius, displayed their power and dignity dressed in ceremonial attire and ruling over a world of well stacked libraries.