

THE EUROPEANS DISCOVERY OF XINA POMPEU FABRA UNIVERSITY BARCELONA

THE CHINA THAT EUROPEANS DISCOVERED: THE MING DINASTY THE PORTUGUESE RECOLLECTION OF ZHENG HE'S TRAVELS

Europeans, on the other hand, were not completely unaware of the late medieval Chinese presence in the Indian Ocean. In 1403, just before the Zheng He voyages, the Castilian ambassador to Samarkand, Ruy de Clavijo, brought news that ships from Cathay came regularly to Hormuz laden with small pearls.

Finally, Zheng He's expeditions will also end up filtering into 16th century Iberian texts, although without actually mentioning Zheng He's name. When the Portuguese reached the shores of India, they found Chinese buildings on the Coromandel and Malabar coasts and even a Buddhist temple that had been built by the Chijns.

In 1538 some Portuguese counselors advised the king of Portugal to abandon all his **fortresses in India "as the Chinese had done with theirs, which were numerous in those regions"**.

The most consistent Portuguese reference to the Chinese maritime voyages came from India, and was thanks to García da Orta, the famous Portuguese physician, botanist and Humanist who had to flee Castile and Portugal due to his Jewish origins. He was an exceptional man, whose genuine disinterested curiosity together with the clarity and detail in his observation of the natural world, place him amongst the most outstanding intellects of the Renaissance.

He spent most of his life in India trying to avoid religious persecution and there, in 1563, he wrote a splendid botanical treatise, *Coloquios dos simples*, that contain a lengthy mention of the Chinese voyages to India and Hormuz and a reference to the warehouse that the Chinese used to have in Calicut.

García da Orta's mention of the Chinese voyages was incorporated in the important book of the Portuguese Gaspar da Cruz, published in 1569. From there it passed on to a Spanish writer, Escalante, who constructed his own book by directly glossing Gaspar da Cruz.

Building on this, González de Mendoza, author of the extraordinarily influential book *History of the Great and Mighty Kingdom of China*, published in 1585, could affirm that the Chinese reached India with their ships, and that there was a lasting memory of them in the Philippine Islands, on the coast of Coromandel, on the sea of Bengal, and that in the Kingdom of Calicut, there were many trees and fruits that were brought by the Chinese.

A few years after the publication of **Mendoza's book**, **Matteo Ricci managed to establish the Jesuits firmly in China**. Ricci felt a genuine admiration for Chinese civilization, but he thoroughly despised Chinese ships.

Even if he admits that "there are as many boats in China as can be counted up in all the rest of the world," when it comes to the oceangoing ships he strongly asserts that "Chinese ships that go to the sea are very inferior to westerner's in both number and structure."

In his book, Ricci admits that "certain evidence of the presence of the Chinese has been discovered beyond the confines of the kingdom." But when coming to the Chinese travels on the Indian Ocean, he contradicts the Portuguese and Mendoza by saying that "after having studied the history of China in depth" he "never found any mention of these voyages."

His affirmation is proof that in the 17th century the memory of Zheng He had already totally vanished from China. At the same time, Ricci's utter denial of the Chinese voyages in the **Indian Ocean plunged Zheng He's** travels into oblivion for Europeans too.

The expeditions ended in the same year, 1434, in which Gil Eannes, strongly supported by the king of Portugal, Henry the Navigator, rounded Cape Bojador, thus opening up the route that would culminate with **Vasco de Gama's arrival in India in 1498. On the last stretch of the voyage, from Mogadishu to Calicut, he was sailing in the wake of Zheng He's ships.**

However, as can be seen in the famous Kangnido map, drawn at the beginning of the 15th century following Chinese sources, the Chinese knew well before the Portuguese, that Africa could be rounded and that Europe could be reached by sea.

But they never took this route because they were not interested in any European products.

The Chinese lacked the motives that pushed the Portuguese and Europeans to the East, and moreover Chinese merchants didn't have the political power to boost the discovery travels.

It is pointless to speculate on what would have happened if the five caravels of Vasco de Gama had crossed the 250 vessels of the Zheng He fleet in the Indian Ocean waters. And, anyway, they didn't.

The Chinese fleet had retreated forever. The eunuchs went where they were sent and when they were told; when there were no more orders there were no more voyages. What we can say, however, is that **the Portuguese voyages changed the world and Zheng He's voyages did not.**