

THE EUROPEANS DISCOVERY OF XINA POMPEU FABRA UNIVERSITY BARCELONA

CHINA IN THE SPOTLIGHT THE PORTUGUESE LANDING IN ASIA

Let's begin with a year of no special significance in world history: 1434. This is the year of the definite retreat of the Zheng He fleet. This year the Chinese left the Indian Ocean for good, crossed the Malacca strait for the last time and finally left their ships to moor along the riverbanks of China.

That same year, the Portuguese explorer Gil Eannes rounded the treacherous currents of Cape Bojador and reached the African continent south of the area of Muslim control. He had with him a single ship, a small crew, and the unflinching support of his king. The success of his expedition marked the beginning of the Portuguese exploration of Africa. From then on the Portuguese would sail south along the African coasts.

1434 marks a decisive point of divergence between the Chinese and European futures. A Portuguese chart of 1502, the Cantino chart, details beautifully the *modus operandi* of the Portuguese. The chart was drawn when the Portuguese had already arrived in India and when the line of the Treaty of Tordesillas, dividing the Portuguese and Castilian parts of the world, had already been drawn.

As was still usual in the 15th century, the chart has Jerusalem at its center, while the city that seems to dominate all Mediterranean trade is Venice. But Portuguese attention was focused on the Atlantic. On the coast of Africa, in Sierra Leone, the Portuguese approach to colonization is clearly shown: a big walled fortress, erected among African huts, protects Portuguese trade. Outside the fortress the lands are being tended by black slaves. Slave ships will no doubt carry them across the Atlantic to be sold to the sugar plantations that are so lavishly depicted along the Brazilian coast.

Along the African coasts, the Portuguese looked first for fisheries, then they looked for riches, like gold and ivory, and further on, especially when they had already secured Brazil, they looked for slaves.

The Portuguese aims took a new turn when they realized that crossing the tropical and equatorial zones entailed no danger, and when in 1488 Bartolomé Diaz rounded the southern point of Africa and found himself in the Indian Ocean.

In 1498 Vasco da Gama landed in Calicut, with the help of a competent local pilot from Malindi, familiar with the monsoon trails. Vasco de Gama assured the dumbfounded Indians that he had "come in search of Christians and spices", but those who closely followed him, like Albuquerque, relied on the technical superiority of their ships and guns to ensure that the discoveries continued and that their impact was lasting.

The Portuguese ships carried with them awesome weaponry. Their ship-borne artillery, firing through loop-holes, made their ships unassailable floating fortresses. The Portuguese ships, and after them all the other Western European ships, secured a naval superiority in the East that was to last for centuries to come.

That explains the ensuing European contempt for Chinese ships that the Jesuits will epitomize by the end of the 16th century. The Portuguese empire was predominantly a maritime and commercial empire, protected by the characteristic Portuguese fortresses that emerged all along the monsoon routes of the Indian Ocean.

Goa was conquered in 1510 and it became the centre of Portuguese Asia. By then the Portuguese had already secured Hormuz at the gate of the Persian Gulf, and were heading to Malacca, which was conquered in 1511.

Once they took hold of Malacca, the way to the Spice Islands and the Chinese seas lay open to the Portuguese. The Cantino map is also the first to significantly reduce the size of Asia to something nearing its correct proportions.

By then the Portuguese were already conscious of the importance of the Chinese traders in eastern waters. In 1508 the King dom Manuel, then preparing for the conquest of Malacca, had **already issued instructions to gather information about the Chinese, saying "Ask about the Chijns, where they come from, and from how far."**

He was interested primarily in their trading and secondly in their military capacity, although he also inquired about their religious position, mainly to clarify whether they would be allies or enemies.

From Malacca, the Portuguese reached the Moluccas that is the Spice Islands, in 1513. But the **spices didn't divert them from their drive to China and in 1514 Portuguese private explorers** first aimed their ships towards China itself.

From the very first moment the Chinese were seen as essentially different from the African and American natives that the discoverers were encountering elsewhere. Already in 1515, one of the discoverers stated clearly that the Chinese were "of our quality, di nostra qualitatá ", although a bit ugly and with eyes too small for the Portuguese taste.

In fact, the Chinese had a similar negative aesthetic perception of westerners, whom they labeled as having a cat's eyes, an eagle mouth, their face the colour of white ashes, and a thick and curly beard.