

## THE EUROPEANS DISCOVERY OF XINA POMPEU FABRA UNIVERSITY BARCELONA

### CHINA IN THE SPOTLIGHT THE LETTERS FROM TWO PORTUGUESE PRISONERS

With the conquest of Malacca, more and more detailed news of China and of its trade routes began to reach Lisbon, together with a handful of silks and porcelains that fetched enormous prices.

One very early text, written in 1515 by an Italian who sailed in a Portuguese ship, emphasized **that China, which was not yet identified with Marco Polo's Cathay, had "the greatest wealth that in the world can be"**, and highlighted the huge size of the country, the great urbanization of its territory, and the importance of rivers as a means of communication.

He also made admiring mention of its laws, already hinting at the image of social wonder that China will provide. The text contains jumbled allusions to the perfect kingdom of Prester John **at the edge of the known world, and also to Marco Polo's wonderful Cathay.**

China appears as a faraway land of riches and plenty, inhabited by a highly civilized people that westerners can consider their equal. By 1517, the first official Portuguese embassy arrived in China. The Chinese local authorities viewed it with considerable suspicion, but even so, the first contacts were established and in 1520 the embassy was sent all the way up to Beijing.

But the ambassador was little prepared for the strict rules regarding Chinese foreign trade, where the only foreigners allowed to trade were the handful of tributary states established by the emperor.

Furthermore, the letter from the Portuguese king addressing the emperor of China on equal terms shocked and bewildered the Chinese court, and everything fell apart when the Chinese gathered evidence that some Portuguese ships were smuggling and using occasional violence along the Chinese coast.

The embassy was stopped, and both the ambassador and many other members of the Portuguese expedition died in prison or were executed. A general edict was affixed to the

gates of the city of Canton saying: "The men with beards and large eyes should no more be permitted within this realm".

The ban to enter Canton sent the Portuguese up the Chinese coast and in the next decades they smuggled and even occasionally joined the pirates in their storming of the coasts of Guangdong, Fujian and Zhejiang, from Canton to Ningbo.

In the 1530s the offshore islands near Ningbo became an active illegal centre for international trade in the Far Eastern seas, and the Portuguese settled as smugglers in the vicinity.

The ban on foreign traders also left behind a handful of prisoners, and in 1527, two of them, Cristovao Veyra and Vasco Calvo, managed to send a couple of letters from inside the prison.

Once in Lisbon, the letters were held in absolute secrecy, in accordance with the stealth policy applied by the Portuguese to any news regarding their possessions.

This stealth policy, that kept all the early Portuguese documents secret, is known as the Portuguese sigilo, and it would remain undisclosed until the middle of the 16th century.

Even so, there were some cracks in the system, as we have already seen when talking about the map that Piri Reis produced in 1513 in the Ottoman empire, and where he claimed to have used several Portuguese charts.

But maps were much more coveted than texts, and the letters sent by the Portuguese prisoners were held in unflinching secrecy for centuries.

These letters contain a substantial amount of information about China. The prisoners had secured a Geography book, with provincial maps and figures of the main administrative units in each province.

They copied the figures related to the three coastal provinces that were their main interest, Guangdong, Fujian and Zhejiang, and included in their letter a map of the Guangdong province.

They listed the fifteen provinces, and identified the main positions in the provincial civil service, adding that the men in charge were appointed by Beijing, were changed every three years, had to be from another province, and were regularly assessed by the censors.

The prisoners had clearly identified the territorial administrative pyramid of the Ming state: that it included cities and counties, and that only these administrative units were walled. They noticed that China had a huge population, but also that people were all tied to their place of birth and couldn't move without special permission, and that the whole family was considered responsible for any misdeed of one of its members.

And they were also well aware that there was a huge gap between the few very rich and a majority of very poor. The letters also contain a certain amount of information about Chinese justice, and constant references to the wealth of China, naming both its main products and the variety of its artisans.

There is an allusion in these letters to the ever-normal granaries that store grain to deliver it when prices rose too high. The prisoners highlight the economic importance of Chinese rivers and the infinite number of Chinese boats and ships.