

## THE EUROPEANS DISCOVERY OF XINA

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#### CHINA IN THE SPOTLIGHT

##### THE MACAU-JAPAN TRADE

Meanwhile, the Portuguese had become a growing presence on the south China coast, especially in Fujian and Guangdong, where the coastal inhabitants depended on foreign trade for their living, and where the Portuguese involvement in Sino-Japanese trade had reached a peak.

The Portuguese increasing activity in South China brought with it the need for a permanent entrepôt: by 1554 Lionel de Souza had procured a commercial agreement with the Chinese authorities and three years later, in 1557, the Chinese local authorities granted the Portuguese a permanent establishment at the mouth of the Canton delta, Macau.

By the end of the 16th century, there were 400 Portuguese households in Macau, each household with about six slaves, mostly "negroes", while the great majority of wives were Chinese. Portuguese fidalgos went around on palanquins or sheltered under umbrellas.

The city housed an astonishing quantity of churches and religious orders, which were under the protection of the Portuguese Padroado, an entity entrusted by the Pope to Christianize the Far East. Obviously, the city lived on maritime trade, and ships of all kinds plied its waters.

On the upper left side, two big galleons are arriving from Goa or Malacca; while in the bottom right a couple of carracks are sailing to Japan. The absence of fortifications of any kind – which is very rare in the fortress crowded Portuguese empire – also points to the peculiar status of Macau.

It was simply tolerated by the Chinese. The fortune of Macao was linked to Sino-Japanese trade and the traffic that linked Macau to the Japanese port of Nagasaki was one of the most profitable in the whole Portuguese empire.

The best period for Macau was between 1567, when the Ming lifted the ban on maritime trade and 1639, when Japan forbade the Portuguese to come to trade. During this period both Macau and Nagasaki rose from being obscure fishing villages to being entrepôts with a world-wide reputation.

The situation of Macau in the Guangdong province assured it a continuous provision of silks and porcelain, which the Japanese could only pay for with silver because they had little else to offer, besides swords and fans.

Furthermore, their recently discovered silver mines came to meet the growing demand for silver in China, that just at that moment was beginning to shift its monetary system towards a silver currency, and had not enough bullion to back it.

The trade between Macau and Japan left a most inspiring historical relic in the so-called "Southern Barbarian screens", the many folded Japanese screens that depict the arrival of Portuguese ships in Japan.

These ships, laden with all kinds of items and manned by a crew with many negro slaves, are shown unloading their merchandise on the shore. In the middle of the screen, a procession is shown bringing exotic Arabian horses, Indian wild animals, and Ming furniture, while mothers inside the houses hold up their small children so that they can have a look at the foreign Barbarians.

At the end of the street, friars from various orders and Jesuit priests come to welcome the arriving group. Jesuits are ubiquitous in the screens and are often seen talking with the Japanese businessmen.

From Macau, the Portuguese gathered an enormous amount of information about China, and quite a lot of reports and maps were sent to Lisbon in the first half of the 16th century, like the letters of the Portuguese captives that we saw in the previous lecture.

But the Portuguese stealth policy regarding discoveries in the East, kept all these reports out of general sight. It was not until 1552 that the great Portuguese historian Joao de Barros began to publish his *Decadas*, and the third one, which is the one devoted to Asia, didn't come out until 1563.

Furthermore, Very few copies were printed, probably only about 400 and very few people had access to them. It was, and still is a book more quoted than read.

Furthermore, the book is more concerned with the activity of the Portuguese than with describing China, probably because this went into another book, the *Geographia*, which is now lost. But we know from what he says in the *Decadas* that his *Geographia* included detailed provincial descriptions and statistical figures.

He must have taken them from some Chinese Geography book, like the one that the Portuguese captives had already used, and similar to the ones that Rada and Ricci will procure for themselves in the near future.

From this book Barros gathered that "the Emperor has a greater income than all of the kingdoms and principalities of Europe". He also had access to a Chinese map, and had all the Chinese characters translated with the help of a Chinese interpreter that he bought for this purpose.

By the mid 16th century, the new knowledge of the East had begun to filter into the maps. In this Portuguese world map of 1554 drawn by Lopo Homem, a highly prestigious Portuguese cartographer, the general profile of East Asia is much more accurate than ever before.

Malacca, Sumatra, Java, Borneo and the Philippines are more or less in their exact positions, and there is an approximation of the Chinese coast with the Shandong Peninsula and the Bohai gulf clearly recognizable.

Japan looms large in the Far East and the Riukyu islands - known as Lequios by both Portuguese and Castilian - are strongly highlighted in accordance with their importance as middlemen in Sino-Japanese trade.

Furthermore, Korea appears as a peninsula and not as an island as was usual before and after the Homem map. This is an extraordinary document that confirms the involvement of the Portuguese in the already existing routes of the Far Eastern trade.

By mid-16th century the Portuguese were not exploring anymore, but taking advantage of the accumulated know-how of the Asian peoples.