

THE EUROPEANS DISCOVERY OF XINA POMPEU FABRA UNIVERSITY BARCELONA

CHINA IN THE SPOTLIGHT THE CIVILIZED GENTILES

By the middle of the 16th century, the first Portuguese books written in China about China began to reach Europe.

The first of them was written by Galeote Pereira and this is what we'll look at in this lecture. Galeote Pereira left Portugal in 1534 en route for the eastern colonies. From Goa, he went to Malacca and from there he traveled many times to the Chinese coast, trading and smuggling for over a decade.

In 1549 the campaigns of Zhu Wan against smuggling and piracy caught him and he was taken prisoner and carried in chains to Fuzhou. But on being taken to court by Zhu Wan, he saw his judge impeached and he himself set free.

He was sent into exile to Guilin, in south China, and from there he managed to escape and go back to India where he wrote his memoirs. The book was immediately included in the letters that the Jesuits were sending from Goa, and was soon translated and published in English and finally included in a highly popular collection of travel narratives.

It is a rather short book - the modern Portuguese edition has just 29 pages - but it was the first book written by a European inside China and it was far more comprehensive than the **short letters that the Jesuits were sending**. It is **Pereira's design that provides the first global European image of China**.

His general layout will have a decisive influence on all the great 16th century Iberian books on China. As had been the case with the first Portuguese travelers to China, he couldn't make out what the name of the country was.

Pereira heartily admires Chinese justice. He even suggests that "doing justice these Gentiles exceed Christians" and that "their system of justice is unique, bettering even that of the Romans."

These were highly sensitive statements in a Christian world that justified European conquests on the grounds of the moral superiority of Christianity and its Classical heritage. In fact, all sentences claiming the superiority of the Chinese over westerners were immediately suppressed from his text by the ecclesiastical censors.

Even though he is well aware that in prison a great many people die of hunger and cold, he deems the judges to be patient above measure during their hearings, and states clearly that in China, unlike what happens in Portugal, all the proceedings are done openly in front of everybody, so that there cannot be false witness.

He goes on to say that in China, unlike in Portugal, no process can be falsified, because the judges write all the proceedings themselves. He certainly knew that penalties were severe, and he had firsthand knowledge about the board that the Chinese put at the culprits' necks and that kept them from rest and from eating, and also about the hanging cage in which prisoners were carried from one place to the other.

But even so, his comparative vision of an exceedingly good Chinese justice system will have a permanent influence on all the European narratives about China, until the end of the 18th century.