

THE EUROPEANS DISCOVERY OF XINA POMPEU FABRA UNIVERSITY BARCELONA

CHINA IN THE SPOTLIGHT THE SPLENDOUR OF CHINESE CITIES

Chinese justice wins his praise, but he is also enthusiastic about China's wealth. Pereira is amazed by the sheer size of the country, saying that "Chinese provinces may be compared to mighty kingdoms", and the capacity of the Chinese to govern such huge entities makes him argue that "China is one of the best governed lands in the world."

He is fascinated by the multitude of rivers that provide passage from one city to the other, and by the thousands of ships that ply their waters. Once he notices a pontoon bridge of boats made of 112 barges, which opened once a day to let 6000 ships pass up and down stream.

He marvels at the intensive use of the territory, exclaiming that "no piece of land is left untilled and that "they plough the soil with only one ox." Both practices were unusual to a European, coming from lands where a considerable part of the agricultural soil was left fallow for long periods, and where many animals were needed to pull the plough.

He is astounded by the Chinese population, but he remarks that "the Chinese are poor due to the swarms of children they have." His enthusiasm for Chinese justice and wealth also covers Chinese urban life. Pereira is utterly amazed by the Chinese cities, their number, their size, their mighty walls and their expanding and lively suburbs.

He admires Fuzhou, which reminds him of Venice, with its many streams flowing through the city, and its long and solid bridges. Some of these bridges have 40 arches that allow for a comfortable walk and are extremely convenient for transporting merchandise.

The cities' streets are all paved and they are very long and straight. Covered porches, with all kinds of shops, surround them. All merchants advertise on a large board at their door the things they have to sell: this is the practice that we have seen already in the Song dynasty scroll and that by Ming times had become general custom.

Pereira is astonished by the variety of things being sold, umbrellas, shoes, handkerchiefs, medicines, books, paintings, antiques, and all kinds of food, meat, vegetables and groceries.

The huge variety of goods on offer goes hand in hand with the pressing demands of the crowds that roam the streets. The Portuguese came from European cities that like this Italian one, were crowded with tall brick and stone buildings that provided a definite skyline for the city.

Churches, guildhalls, palaces and warehouses jostled to dominate the skyline. By contrast, Chinese cities intrigued him for their one storey houses, all of them leveled to an equal height, and extending over a huge territory devoid of churches and public buildings.

This lack of significant public buildings made him - and all other European travelers - very sensitive to the numerous ceremonial arches that - like this one in Huizhou - stood up in the streets honoring illustrious men.

The cities strike him as being extremely clean, something that he attributes to the general practice of selling human excrement.

Neither beggars nor sick people were seen about the streets, because, according to Pereira, all cities have hospitals where the poor and disabled are given a bed and food to sustain them. And he praises again the good practices of these Gentiles.

Pereira also finds the country extremely well governed, and even if he doesn't show the utter respect for the Chinese civil service that will become usual in later European documents, he understands well that the mandarins, whom everybody serves and fears, owe their high status not to birth but to a series of highly demanding exams.

He notices that the great officials can never serve in their place of birth and are so often displaced that they have no time to become corrupt. But Pereira doesn't take them too seriously: on the contrary, he says that once at the top, these scholars pass their time eating and drinking.

He sees the great palaces in which the princes of the royal bloodline were lodged, but what really strikes him is that they are nonetheless put under the provincial officials and cannot have any public charge as long as they live.

By contrast with the friars and priests that will write about China, Pereira is not very attentive to Chinese religion. He claims that the Chinese are great idolaters and he more or less distinguishes between Taoist and Buddhist temples, without ever naming these two religions.

He also mentions that they pay homage to the devil, which he finds much uglier than ours. But, on the whole, he doesn't take seriously the religion of the Chinese, because he points out that when they make their idolatries they laugh at themselves.

And he concludes that these people know no other thing than to live and die. This he attributes in part to the exceeding love of the Chinese for food. He is fascinated by the quantity of food available in China, and he points out that "the Chinese are the greatest eaters in the entire world" and that they formalize every occasion with great banquets.

He was surprised about how cleanly they ate with the help of two sticks, to the point of not having to use table-cloths or napkins. And what really strikes him, coming from a Catholic country, and used to the company of Moors and Jews, is the absence of alimentary taboos.

This allows the Chinese "to eat everything, even dogs, cats, rats and snakes, and all other unclean meats." There is only one thing that arouses his repulsion and that is Chinese homosexuality, a pervasive comment in all Portuguese sources.

Homosexuality was not penalized in Ming China, but in the Iberian world it was called a heinous sin and was considered a crime against nature. Pereira decries Chinese sodomy, which he finds very common among the lower sort, and not uncommon among the highest. But he concludes that this is their only sin.

Pereira's narrative had a very scarce diffusion, but it found its way into the book of the Dominican Gaspar da Cruz, who thoroughly used Pereira's text, albeit systematizing it. His book, printed in 1569, is the first great book entirely devoted to China. Fray Gaspar da Cruz travelled almost 20 years through all Portuguese Asia and in 1556 he spent a few months in Canton and its whereabouts. He went back to Portugal in 1569, reached Lisbon in the year of the plague and died next year as a result of it.

But he was a very cute observer and made excellent use of the short time spent in China. Even so, Da Cruz's book, published in the midst of the great plague, never achieved a wide circulation. But his book, that summed up all the Portuguese first hand first vision of China gained in fact great influence through the Spanish version of it made by Bernardino Escalante. Escalante directly paraphrased Da Cruz, text, glossing or copying it directly. Written in Spanish, a language much more spread than Portuguese, Escalante's book was immediately translated to English, and found a place in the great travel surveys of 16th century. Still more important, Escalante's text, written in elegant Spanish, was in turn glossed or directly copied by many Spanish writers, first of all by González de Mendoza, the author of the 16th century bestseller about China, published in 1585 and immediately translated to all European languages.