

## THE EUROPEANS DISCOVERY OF XINA

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#### CHINA IN THE SPOTLIGHT

##### CHINESE CURIOSITIES AND CHINESE BOOKS

From the 16th century onwards, members of the European aristocracy developed a strong interest in East Asian things, and non-textual representations of China were eagerly collected throughout Europe.

In their cabinets of curiosities, European rulers stored a wealth of information from the wider world. There are many testimonies to the interest aroused by the presence of Chinese artifacts - like desks, chairs, cupboards, paintings, silks, porcelains and books - both in the Mediterranean and the northern countries.

Mention of Chinese things had been included in the Portuguese texts throughout the 16th century, and from the late 1570s they began to appear in the Spanish texts.

In the first letters coming from the Spanish governor in the Philippines, he names painted boxes among the many items that the Chinese were bringing to Manila.

Escalante, the Spanish author who in 1577 introduced Portuguese sources in Spain, in 1577, mentions many of them, and Mendoza notes that Chinese beds and tables, as well as paintings were already in Spain in 1582. The fascination for Chinese porcelain in Europe will last for centuries, to the point that China is the name for the ware that is still in use today.

Europeans coveted it for its brilliancy, transparency and crystal like sound. But in contrast to the Islamic use of Chinese porcelain, the European imports were mostly displayed as decorative pieces.

First exhibited in the palaces, blue-and-white porcelain also found its way to the high middle class houses, where it became an ostentatious luxury object.

The latest Chinese objects to reach Europe were books. Even if neither Portuguese nor Castilians realized that paper was a Chinese invention, Chinese paper and Chinese books aroused much curiosity in 16th century Europe: the travelers were amazed by the ubiquitous

bookshops, by the cheapness of the books and by their omnipresence, though they found the Chinese paper of very bad quality, too thin to be written on both sides, and too yellowish.

The first Chinese books were first seen in Europe just before the middle of the 16th century: Paolo Giovio, in his *Historia Sui Temporis*, published in 1550, says the king of Portugal made the present of a Chinese book to the Pope.

We know that Joao de Barros, the Portuguese author of *Decadas de Asia*, had many Chinese books by the mid-century in his personal library, and both Escalante and Mendoza affirm having seen them in the court of Lisbon, in El Escorial and in Rome.

Europeans were struck by the fact that these books were printed. That's what prompted Rada and Mendoza to insist on their claim that printing was first invented in China, from where it was introduced to the West.

Chinese books were valued, of course, as objects. European curiosity centered on their paper and their characters. Paper and books were by then much rarer and more expensive in Europe than in China.

The French writer Montaigne saw one of these books in the Vatican library and he included some critical comments about their paper in his highly influential writings.

That also proves that he had access to Mendoza's book - from where he copied the few sentences that cover this subject - immediately after its publication.

If the paper aroused their interest, so did the Chinese characters that appeared on it, and it was not long before they tried to copy them.

The first three Chinese characters to be published in Europe were first included in Escalante's book. Escalante, who never went to China, might have seen those characters in some of the maps that were sent from China in 1572 and 1574, one of them translated by Rada.

Even if highly corrupted, Escalante's rendition of the Chinese characters for heaven, king and city, will greatly impress the European audience.

From Escalante's book these characters were copied twice, first by a Portuguese cosmographer, called Barbuda, who wrote the description of China in Ortelius's *Theatre Orbis Terrarum*, published in 1584; and also by Gonzalez de Mendoza in his text in 1585. Escalante, Mendoza, Barbuda and Ortelius had never been to China.

But in the last decades of the 16th century, with *Serica* and *Cathay* already belonging to the past, China itself was beginning to make its way to the West.