

## THE EUROPEANS DISCOVERY OF XINA

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#### THE FRIAR'S MISSIONS AND MENDOZA'S BOOK WHAT A CHINESE TOLD RADA

The Castilians reached the Philippines in 1565 and a few hundred of them remained in the islands, although they never exceeded 1,000 during the 16th century, and only a few hundred lived in Manila. But from the moment they settled in Manila in 1571, the city became one of the greatest hubs in world history, the one that will control trade between America and China, and with it the influx of Chinese will grow exponentially.

By 1599 there were already 25,000 Chinese in Manila. But who were these Chinese immigrants, the producers and middlemen who guaranteed the traffic between Asia, America and Europe, the first global trade in history? Referred to by the Spanish as Sangleys, probably meaning either they come often or they come to trade, they lived in a special quarter called Parián, a Mexican name meaning market.

By the late 1570s, they already outnumbered the Spanish by twenty to one, and brought with them all kinds of trades. At first, the majority arrived with the monsoons, sold their wares and then left. But by the mid-1570s the demands of the Manila colonists was superseded by the huge demand of the Spanish colonists in Mexico and Peru.

The Parian was soon stocked with all kinds of shops, selling everything from exotic spices to everyday bread. All kinds of craftsmen were present: masons, blacksmiths, carpenters, boat builders, painters, sculptors, and tailors. Everything could be found in the Parian, restaurants that catered to the Spanish, doctors that tended the sick, and theatres that offered colorful representations of Chinese Operas, to the dismay of Castilian priests. They even had printers, and the range of Chinese books available in Manila allowed Juan Cobo to translate an anthology of classical Chinese sayings into Spanish, and to translate into Chinese an adaptation of a book by the highly influential author fray Luis de Granada. And there was already a Chinese printer in Manila capable of producing a bilingual edition using both the Chinese and the European printing systems.

There was certainly a close connection between the Sangleys and the highly educated elite of Fujian, a south-east province that in Ming times was noticeable for having one of the highest numbers of jinshi - that is, scholars of the highest level - of the whole Empire. In Ming China, especially in the South, the literati gentry were quite willing to invest their surplus capital in mercantile activities. If there were several brothers in a family of high social standing, at least one would serve in office, others would engage in trade, and the rest would manage the family's agricultural lands.

By mid-16th century, power in Fujian came not only from the exams that opened the access to official positions, but also from the extremely lucrative maritime trade. From time to time, the Ming closed the ocean border, with the result that the profits coming from the sea trade were even greater for the Chinese merchants willing to take the risk of breaching the blockade. In the wake of the so called Japanese pirate attacks, the complicity between smugglers and the great Fujian families is well known. Many of the Manila Sangleys were offspring of Fujian elite families and had a cultural and economic background far more impressive than that of the Spanish newcomers. Even before the Spanish transfer to Manila, when they were still settled in the southern islands of the Philippines, one of these Chinese Principals stayed for 6 months in the Augustinian's house in Cebu. And at the request of Martin the Rada - who was an extremely cultivated Augustinian friar - this Chinese Principal, named Canco, produced a description of China which is by and large the most accurate to have reached Spain before Rada's expedition to China in 1575. It contains the essential information about China written in very clear terms: that China is the biggest country in the world, and that it takes five months to cross it from the coast to its northern border, where an awesome wall of 1,000 leagues divides it from Tartary.

Canco also explained to Rada the hierarchical provincial division of China, and the fearful respect that ordinary people showed to the governors, never talking to them without dropping to their knees, eyes fixed on the ground, He also explains that no governor, civil or military, could serve in his place of birth, and that no position lasted for more than three years. And after listening to Canco saying that the Chinese carry no weapons, and don't even have any in their own houses,

Rada neatly concludes that when it comes to war the Chinese are the most despicable lot on earth. After listening to Canco, Rada sent a letter summarizing what he had told him. This was the first text to present systematic information about China, in strong contrast with the occasional comments about it contained in the letters of the Philippine governors or the Mexico Viceroy. And that is why it was taken into account by the Spanish cosmographers of the Council of Indies that had access to it.

The Canco information collected by Rada constitutes the bulk of the pages on China that Velasco, a well-known humanist who had just been appointed to the position of chronicler and cosmographer of the Council of Indies, wrote in his *Geografia* in 1574.