

THE EUROPEANS DISCOVERY OF XINA

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THE FRIAR'S MISSIONS AND MENDOZA'S BOOK

MARTIN DE RADA: A TRIBUTARY MISSION'S PROTOCOL

Martín de Rada used his first years in the Philippines to decry the pointlessness of the Spanish settlement in the islands. He claimed that the Filipinos were too poor, that their conversion to Christianity was totally superficial, that the Spanish were depopulating the islands with their abuses and that the only possible advantage of the Philippines was their proximity to China. On this point, at least, the hungry colonists in the Philippines seemed to agree with him. But the Chinese kept on coming and when the capital moved from Cebu to Manila, contacts with China intensified as the first Mexican galleons began to arrive.

The increase in economic activity immediately attracted both new settlers and pirates. In 1574 one of these pirates, called Limahon, attacked Manila with 72 boats and 2,000 men, and a clear intention to settle there. Manila was set on fire, but in the end the Spanish succeeded in fending off the pirate attack, and cornered Limahon on a nearby beach. In the heat of the fight, a couple of Chinese official ships also arrived in pursuit of the pirate. In gratitude for their efforts against the pirates, the Chinese Fujian authorities that were on board invited a group of Spanish colonists to visit China.

The expedition was formed of twenty people and at least two of them left a written account of it, together with a general description of China: these two were the Augustinian Martin de Rada, and Miguel de Loarca, a soldier and tenant who went with it. Both are excellent accounts that gather an astonishing amount of information, if one considers that, in all, they stayed only 45 days in China. It is obvious that they discussed their Reports with each other: both have an identical structure, made evident by the headings that organize the text, and both have two parts: one itinerary and one general description of China. The report that Martin de Rada wrote about his trip to China is surprising in its modernity.

Rada's is an impressive text, probably meant for publication. With a thorough humanist education in Paris and Salamanca, Rada had the concern for empiricism, classification, comparison and logical coherence that anticipated modern scientific methods.

In the absence of an official guide, the governor of the Philippines gave the expedition a collection of casual instructions. After transmitting to the Chinese authorities the Spanish desire to open diplomatic relations with China, and to obtain a permanent trading place there, the Spanish were expected to report back about the quality of the Chinese people and the soil, China's social customs, its trading habits and the secrets of the land. A final part was specially intended for the soldiers that went with the expedition: don't hassle the women, don't mock the idols, avoid walking the streets by night and don't pay excessive attention to Chinese things.

The embassy was escorted along the Chinese coast from Xiamen to Fuzhou. They proceeded through a densely populated territory, often surrounded by curious crowds, and followed one of the main courier routes of the Ming Empire.

Rada begins his report by identifying China both with the name Daming with which the Chinese named it, and with Marco Polo's name Cathay, thereby putting an end to centuries of confusion. From this text the links between Manila's sangleys and the rich merchant families of Fujian become obvious, as well as Chinese rivalries to control trade with Manila. The expedition was received by the Chinese as a tributary embassy, even if the Spanish didn't realize it. But despite the fact that this impromptu tributary embassy was only minor and of scant political consequence, it is an important primary source to understand the proceedings of a tributary embassy in China. The costs of the trip were completely assumed by the Chinese state, the visitors were given gifts in all the cities they entered, they were compelled to move around on sedan chairs to honor their position, and they were offered banquets, enlivened with theatrical and musical entertainment, in every city, big or small, that they crossed. Rada noted with surprise that even the leftovers of the banquets were packed for the guests to take home.

In their encounters with high officials, kowtow was the norm and they complied with it, even if it was easier to accept for the friars than for the soldiers. As was usual for tributary embassies, the expedition spent the night either in government houses or in pagodas. Some of these buildings can be identified, especially the Kaiyuan temple in Quanzhou, with its exceptional cultural blend of Chinese and Indian cultures.

Rada's travel account, which occupies more than half of the total report, reports the personal experiences of the travelers and unfolds in slow motion the Chinese local social fabric and its geographical landscape. The second part of Rada's report offers systematic information about China. For the first seven chapters he used the books that he had bought while in China. Rada was the first to write about China relying heavily on Chinese sources. The five remaining chapters were based on his own observations and also on what he had already learned from the Chinese living in the Philippines, known as the sangleys. Rada provides a clear summary of how Chinese bureaucracy worked, the hierarchical organization of both officials and territories, and the regulatory framework that all appointments had to follow: an official could not work in the place where he was born and each position was limited to three years.

Rada praises the Chinese political system for the absence of nobility, describing the meritocratic civil service that was employed instead. But he also notices the officials' reticence

towards merchants, and complains that in spite of their public claims to morality it is difficult to deal satisfactorily with them without greasing their palms.

Unlike the Portuguese writers' extremely positive opinion about Chinese legal proceedings, Rada is less impressed by Chinese justice. He gives first hand information about punishments applied not only to the culprits but also to the culprits' whole family: the son, wife and mother of his interpreter Sinsay were seized by the Fujian authorities when Sinsay was accused of unfair competition due to his relationship with the Spanish embassy. He also notices the compulsory need for transit permits for any trip and that nobody can leave his district without written permission. He pays close attention to the cumbersome protocol used by the powerful mandarins who always go around preceded by armed guards, who use heavy sticks to hit anyone who gets in the way. And he concludes that the Chinese are strongly dominated by the overwhelming presence of their officials. He is amazed by Chinese cities, like this one that was on Rada's itinerary and is shown there in a 17th century drawing. Rada describes their large and straight streets, their river courses crossed by multiple bridges and the crenelated walls and towers that surround the cities.