

THE EUROPEANS DISCOVERY OF XINA

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THE FRIAR'S MISSIONS AND MENDOZA'S BOOK

MARTÍN DE RADA: THE CHINA THAT HE SAW

Rada's text coincides closely with the Ming version of the Qingming shanghe tu scroll made in the mid-16th century that depicts city life under the Ming. Rada makes a clear difference between the living styles of rich and poor. He is fascinated by the way the lower class people work: how much they work, how efficient they are, the amount of weight that they can carry, and their willingness to work. And he links the cheapness of goods in China to the hard work of the Chinese and to the high productivity of the agriculture with irrigated fields that are never left fallow.

He is decided in his view that China is a human anthill and that even being a very rich country the Chinese are poor due to the infinite number of people. Furthermore he notices that being so many they have to take advantage of everything, which is why they never waste anything. At the other end of the social spectrum, he is amazed by the habits of the high status people, by how they comb their long hair, boast about their long nails, display a variety of outfits on every different occasion, conduct their social life with extremely polite rituals, and eat a fantastic variety of foods. He understood that the gap between high and low status was also cultural and became manifest in the love of high status people for reading and in their use of a special language, the wenyan, the courtly language that opens the access to high positions. Rada exclaims that the streets serve as market places, where all kinds of goods are to be found, with butchers selling pork and lamb, and fowl sold by weight.

There are restaurants on every corner, and tea-drinking is a pervasive habit to be enjoyed everywhere, while wine, very usual in banquets, is also sold in the street. He is fascinated by the omnipresence of shops that line the city streets where boots, bonnets and straw sandals could be bought, while other shops sell scissors and kitchen implements. But he notices the absence of weapons in all the houses they visited. He is struck by the rows of houses of similar height, and describes in detail the living rooms and yards they entered. In describing the physical appearance of the Chinese, he affirms that they are white: in European writings the Chinese will be white until the 18th century when, under the colonialist influence, they'll

mutate to yellow. He praises the children's beauty, but finds the grown-ups very ugly, with their scarce beards and small eyes.

He is amazed to see so many bookshops where one could find all kinds of books, as he himself did. He is astonished that the books are so plentiful and so cheap. In fact when traveling across Fujian, the center of cheap, commercial printing, he bought what we would today call paperbacks published on cheap thin and yellowish paper and with very many characters crowded onto every sheet. Rada has a poor opinion of the scientific and technical capacities of the Chinese: he despises Chinese ships, even observing that an infinite quantity of them patrols the coastline. He dismisses Chinese compass and Chinese cartography, even though he admits having seen routers in the Chinese ships.

He is very attentive to religion, but rather than providing a general overview he describes what he sees: a colorful multitude of idols to be found everywhere, both inside the houses and engraved on the rocks up in the hills. He notes the importance of Heaven, and the multiple invocations to black and red devils. Even so, he finds Chinese devils much less harmful than Christianity's Satan, and this allows him to qualify the Chinese invocations to the devil as simply ridiculous.

He pays special attention to Buddhist religious figures and ceremonials, but what he understands better is the cult to the goddess of the sea, which was very common in maritime south China.

Rada paints a vivid and realistic picture of Chinese religious sensibility: the offerings of paper money, animals and fruits, the rice thrown into the sea from the sailing boats with all the crew shouting on board, the written pieces of cloth appended to the gifts accounting for what was being offered. And he entered a Taoist temple, where his fondness for divination found a complete reward. Even without identifying them by name, he drew a sharp contrast between the vegetarian and ascetic Taoists living outside the villages, and the big Buddhist monasteries, holding complex and musical rituals in the center of cities, and where everything could be eaten even if the monks begged for alms across the streets. Rada's text was an excellent document that widely qualified him to proceed in his dealings with China. But although Rada was a highly religious and learned man, and a first rate scientist and humanist, he was in Asia primarily to serve his Crown.

Rada arrived in the Philippines with his astronomical instruments in hand, spent most of his time measuring stars and longitudes, despised all the governors under which he served, and died near Borneo while being forced to assert the exact position of the island.