

## THE EUROPEANS DISCOVERY OF XINA

### POMPEU FABRA UNIVERSITY BARCELONA

#### THE FRIAR'S MISSIONS AND MENDOZA'S BOOK

##### MIGUEL DE LOARCA: GIFTS, BANQUETS AND PLAYS

Martin de Rada's report on China immediately became a prestigious document that was widely quoted in the most circulated Spanish books on China. The same cannot be said of his fellow-traveler Miguel de Loarca, whose text is much more often copied than quoted. Loarca's report is longer than Rada's, especially in the first part, centered on their personal experiences when fighting the pirate Limahon and when traveling to China. But being a less prestigious figure than Rada, Loarca's general comments are more often than not attributed to the Augustinian. But Loarca was by no means a mediocre person.

Born in the 1540s in Asturias, in the northern maritime fringe of the Castilian Kingdom, he participated in the first Spanish settlement in Florida. From there he went to Mexico and in 1566 he left for the Philippines on an expedition sent to support the newly established colony. His capacity for dealing with a rebellion on board marked him out as a man of consequence. In 1571 his capacity to quell riots and to settle the Spanish presence in the Philippines, earned him an *encomienda*, in other words a hereditary piece of land with many hundreds of Filipinos attached to it. Four years later we find him fighting the pirate Limahon, as a result of which he was included in the expedition that the governor of the Philippines sent to China. On his return, Loarca remained in the Philippines, where he also wrote a general report about the Philippine islands and their Filipino inhabitants, which turned out to be an important and unique anthropological document.

In many points Loarca's narrative and his general account of China is similar to that of Martin de Rada. They went through similar experiences and used the same Chinese sources, even if the translators used by Rada were of far better quality than the ones who served Loarca, and more often than not blurred names and numbers beyond recognition. But despite their similarities, both records provided a different insight in many crucial points. To begin with, Loarca expanded on many parts of Rada's report. As we have seen in previous lectures, Loarca provided the complete list of the books that Rada bought in China. His report also includes all the letters that were exchanged between the Limahon pirate, the Spanish assailants that

cornered him, and the Chinese authorities that came in his pursuit. They vividly portray the links of the sangley community with coastal China. Loarca's report also contains the letters exchanged between the governors of the Philippines and the provincial authorities in Fujian: these letters give a clear perception of what the Chinese and Spanish understood about each other. Loarca also details the constant gifts that they were given while in China, thereby providing a first-hand insight into what the tributary missions were like. Gifts came with every encounter, the higher the official position the richer the gift. The friars received pieces of silk, sun umbrellas and horses; the soldiers received half the quantity, and there were blankets for the slaves. When they left they were given 40 pieces of silk, sun umbrellas, a sedan chair and many horses for every high authority in Manila, plus more presents for the Manila soldiers amounting to 40 pieces of silk, 300 blankets and 300 sun umbrellas.

The importance of gift exchange in Chinese foreign relations will be duly noted in Spanish official circles. Loarca's is also a firsthand source for information about Chinese theatre. Rada and almost all those who went to China in the 16th century noticed the importance of all kinds of entertainment at the banquets they attended. Both the Portuguese and Castilians felt that the Chinese were quite a merry lot and that they had much more fun than they themselves did. Coming from a society where feasts were the exclusive patrimony of the church, with mass and processions as the central performances, they were bemused by the proliferation of feasts, both public and private, that went on, night and day, in the Chinese world. But it is Loarca, who always talks more than the others, who provides a detailed account of the Chinese banquets and the entertainments that came with them. He describes how the tables were arranged in a circle with acrobatics and comedies being staged in the center, while they kept on eating ever-changing delicious and abundant dishes, that due to their variety he qualifies as tapas. This is not a minor remark: it points to the amazing creativity of Chinese cuisine that had crystalized, centuries before, as can be seen in those Song paintings, in tables tended with a myriad of little plates, each one holding a different kind of food. Loarca is the only one to include the plots of the plays they watched, so making his writings a firsthand source for the study of Chinese theatre.