

THE EUROPEANS DISCOVERY OF XINA

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THE FRIAR'S MISSIONS AND MENDOZA'S BOOK

MIGUEL DE LOARCA: LITERACY, WOMEN AND DIFFERING SEXUAL LIVES

Loarca was also amazed by the generalized literacy of the Chinese. He notices that schools teaching children how to read are to be seen on every street, and that there are also other schools that prepare those who already know how to read and write for the examinations.

The founder of the Ming, Hongwu, would have been happy with Loarca's observations, because this was exactly what he had intended, although education never actually became as general as Hongwu desired and Loarca inferred. Loarca also mentions the written signs that he saw everywhere.

As we can see in this Chinese scroll, they were present on stones and walls, on doors, houses and streets, in cities, villages and even mountains. His capacity to see the signs contrasts with medieval travelers. As we have seen in previous lectures, Marco Polo didn't notice them even if they were already ubiquitous in all urban spaces. Loarca concluded directly that all Chinese people could read and write, even though their letters were very difficult to learn. Even if this was an overstatement, it was a radical idea, because it implied that the literacy rate of a country doesn't depend on the difficulty of the script, but on the real opportunities that literacy provides. This stood in sharp contrast with the situation in his native Spain, where the literacy rate was much lower than in China, and where social mobility based on education was almost nil.

Rada had said almost nothing about Chinese women: he knew about foot-binding and accurately described it, but also affirms that women were only to be seen working in the fields, because in the cities they either go in sedan chairs or stay inside the houses. Certainly, Ming legislation had stripped women of the legal rights they had traditionally enjoyed, and they were more secluded than they ever had been. But Loarca was interested in sex, and he saw beyond the legislation. One afternoon, when strolling down the streets with the other soldier on the expedition, a Chinese man stopped them and begged them to stay there for a moment, because some principal women were gazing at them through the doors of several big houses.

Having contemplated the two men for a while, the women sent word asking them to enter the house, and the travelers enjoyed some refreshment in the yard, under the intense scrutiny of their hostesses. It is a puzzling story, because women were secluded precisely to sever any contact of them with outer males. After parting with them, they went to a brothel, similar to the qing lou figuring in the Ming scroll. There the sexy ladies danced and played music for their clients, and, among other pleasures, gorgeous food was served at well tended tables.

The joy of sex didn't prevent Loarca remarking that Ming women found themselves in a dire situation: they could be killed by their husbands when they were adulterous, they could be sold by them, and could even be pimped in exchange for some extra cash. Like Rada, Loarca saw a big difference between the hard-working peasant women and the city ones. These he described as heavily shaved and having pock marked faces, due to a recent epidemic. He adds that it is a wonder how the Chinese multiply, and that there are so many children that it seems that every woman delivers every month. Rada avoided writing about sex and everything related to it, but Loarca wrote down whatever he saw when strolling down the streets. One day in Fuzhou he saw a boy complaining to the authorities that having engaged in homosexual practices with two older men, they hadn't paid him. The two men were arrested and flogged, not for their homosexual deeds but for not having paid. Loarca affirms that all the Chinese practice this nefarious sin, especially older people who generally enjoy it with a couple of boys. He makes it clear that nobody is punished for that, this was a radical observation as since the 13th century the Castilian crown had homosexuals burned at the stake and in the 16th century thousands of them had been burnt to death. But in Ming China neither homosexuality nor male prostitution were a criminal offence, especially not in Fujian, where Loarca saw it, and where Taoist gods were often shown intertwined with male mates.

The offence that Loarca witnessed was not sexual but economic: what was punished was not a sexual deviation but a breach of contract.