

THE EUROPEANS DISCOVERY OF XINA

POMPEU FABRA UNIVERSITY BARCELONA

THE FRIAR'S MISSIONS AND MENDOZA'S BOOK

TORDESILLAS : THE WRITING DEMONS

The second Spanish expedition coming from the Philippines was directed by a Franciscan friar, Alfaro.

The Alfaro expedition was a complete failure from the very start, as we know through the two reports that came from it. A Franciscan who went with Alfaro, fray Tordesillas, wrote up the travel account, while one of the soldiers, Dueñas, added a general overview of China, which although much less systematized than the previous ones, had a lot of first-hand remarks.

The Tordesillas text deals with the itinerary. He provides a vivid description of their arrival at Canton and of the thousands of ships plying the Chinese ports, to the point of looking like a big city.

The Chinese took Alfaro and his fellow travelers for pirates, and they passed from one court of justice to another for successive interrogations. They were bothered by the curiosity of the Chinese multitudes, astonished by the difficulties of traveling inside China, surprised that despite their uncertain status the Chinese state gave them pocket money during their stay, and indignant at the widespread corruption that noticeably lessened the amount of money they received, to the point that they even had to beg for alms in the streets.

They were offered no banquets, had to sleep in their boat, were made a laughing-stock for their beards, long noses and cat eyes, and were constantly abused by officials and interpreters. Tordesillas is more concerned with the problems of religious proselytism than with the objective description of the other.

Even so, he provides some striking images of practices in Chinese popular religion, and quite a lot of information about Chinese judicial proceedings. Tordesillas reported the fantastic modus operandi of a devil who attempted to send a message to the crew of Tordesillas' ship.

The pious Tordesillas is dumbfounded at how the devil, unable to send his words through the mouth of a possessed medium, decides finally to write his message using a flying stick that draws the characters on some rice lying on the ship's upper deck.

Part of the astonishment of the friar, who strongly believed in devils himself, came from the fact that the Chinese demons could write, and the Chinese crew could read, something that went far beyond his Castilian experiences.

In fact the differences between the Spanish and Chinese devils do not lie only in the literacy of the latter. The Chinese devil was also much less dramatic and menacing than the fearsome Castilian one.

A few years before, Rada had taken with him five small religious printings, that he gave as a gift to the insisting Viceroy. For the Chinese, the message conveyed in those printings was highly exotic and startlingly incongruent. Three of them figured the crucifixion, Christ tied to a pillar and Christ public humiliation as *Ecce Homo*: for the Chinese all this suffering was more reminiscent of public punishments than of divine greatness. And the two remaining images, featuring the coronation of Virgin Mary and the ecstasy of saint Brigitte, suggested a woman status that was nowhere to be seen in China. Like Rada, Tordesillas took with him some religious prints with the intention of attracting the interest of the Chinese. When he offered them to an official, this one enjoyed the image of Mary Magdalene, but when shown a crucifixion of Christ, the official asked in astonishment what had happened to him, and laughed heartily on hearing Tordesillas' explanation about the passion of Christ. Some years later, the Jesuit Matteo Ricci will face the same problem with the crucifixion images.

Tordesillas report is also a good source for Chinese judicial proceedings: he provides a vision of low level Chinese justice, where bribery was common among judges, interpreters and officials.

He also gathered information from what he saw in the streets. One day he saw a bloody street dispute that ended at the local court. When the bloodied victim identified the three low status men who had beaten him, the judge had them immediately arrested and sentenced to twenty lashes.

Tordesillas was particularly struck by this because in Castile, where the government lacked the adequate administrative channels to impose its political purposes, private revenge prevailed up to the 18th century.

Tordesillas bears witness, as Loarca had done, that the courts were very active, at least in the cities. They saw trial courts in every city district and remarked that the higher level courts systematically delegated punishment to the smaller ones. As recent scholarship on Chinese law is beginning to realize, formal legality was a far more pervasive factor in daily life than had been assumed.