

THE EUROPEANS DISCOVERY OF XINA

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THE FRIAR'S MISSIONS AND MENDOZA'S BOOK

THE MIXED SOURCES OF GONZÁLEZ DE MENDOZA

As we have seen, the Manila's expeditions to China produced an impressive amount of reports, but the Portuguese had also developed a consistent trend of narratives about China.

Galeote Pereira's text had a very scarce diffusion, but it found its way book of the Dominican Gaspar da Cruz, printed in 1569. Da Cruz had already travelled almost 20 years through all Portuguese Asia when in 1556 he spent a few months in Canton and its whereabouts. But he was a very cute observer and made excellent use of the short time spent in China, and he thoroughly used Pereira's text, albeit systematizing it. He went back to Portugal in 1569, reached Lisbon in the year of the plague and died next year as a result of it.

Even so, Da Cruz's book, published in the midst of the great plague, never achieved a wide circulation. But his book, that summed up all the Portuguese first hand first vision of China gained in fact great influence through the Spanish version of it made by Bernardino Escalante. Escalante directly paraphrased Da Cruz text, glossing or copying it directly. Written in Spanish, a language much more spread than Portuguese, Escalante's book was immediately translated to English, and found a place in the great travel surveys of the 16th century. Still more important, Escalante's text, written in elegant Spanish, was in turn glossed or directly copied by many Spanish writers, first of all by González de Mendoza.

By 1581 the Spanish king, who had already browsed the accounts of the Rada and Alfaro expeditions, was duly impressed about the importance of China, and decided to send an embassy to China and to entrust Gonzalez de Mendoza, an Augustinian friar living in Mexico, as the head of it. As entitled ambassador he had access to all the documents about China then available in the Spanish empire. Those documents included reports from the Philippines governors,) the letters coming from the Augustinian mission to China and also the reports sent by the Franciscan expedition, letters from almost everybody of the colony, and Escalante's small book that summed up the main Portuguese sources: it is from them that Mendoza's book retains the memory of the Zheng He travels, albeit not mentioning him by name.

Mendoza gathered a lot of presents for the Chinese Emperor, and talked extensively with everybody in Mexico that was knowledgeable about China, even probably with some of the 85 Chinese that, according to him, were already living in Mexico. Mendoza acknowledged the sources that were more prestigious to quote, like Martín de Rada and Gaspar da Cruz. But notwithstanding this great variety of sources, he followed systematically whatever source was more practical for him to use, and he prioritized those with the language more fluid and the text more lively. His book more often than not copies directly from two of them: Loarca and Escalante.

But when the Spanish empire got involved in serious international troubles, Mendoza's embassy amounted to nothing, and his gifts for the Chinese Emperor were sold in public auction. Even so, by then he had both the information and the connections required to try to publish what he had learnt about China, and in 1584 the Pope asked him to do it: the first great compendium about China came through the hand of an armchair travel writer who had never been there.

The first edition was published in Rome in 1585 and more than 30 editions in all European languages were to appear before the end of the century. In fact, the intellectual impact of Mendoza's book seems to have been more important in Europe than in Spain.

The book sought to impress an European audience with the size and power of a Chinese civilization that was presented as a model to follow. He spoke about China, but he contrasted it with the world that he and his audience knew: and that's why he caught the interest of the European readers. And, last but not least, the book also intended to gain support for the Catholic missions amongst European donors, especially with the Pope, who in the last analysis was the patron of the book.