

## THE EUROPEANS DISCOVERY OF XINA

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

If Chinese Justice was presented as a model to follow, religion was a much more complex issue. The big problem with the Chinese was that even being highly civilized gentiles, capable of a social organization based on ethics and courtesy, they were also stubborn idolaters.

The general idea of Mendoza was that the Chinese had been converted by Saint Thomas, but, due to the lack of contacts, their monotheism had degenerated into idolatry.

They had however been left with a moral philosophy quite close to the Christian faith, a fact that he repeats more than five times. But even with the hint of a monotheistic past in Chinese religion, and believing that there were plenty of Chinese souls in Paradise, Mendoza had to deal with the thousands of idols that his sources encountered everywhere.

Mendoza claimed that even if their religion had no structure or profundity, the Chinese were profoundly religious and were constantly invoking their idols. Certainly, Chinese idols did not involve the bloody components that the Castilians had encountered in Mexico, where the practice of human sacrifice was a usual one. Even so, for the European minds, idolatry was a serious problem because, in contrast with polytheism, it involved a pact with the devil, who was seen as the inspiration behind the omnipresent superstitious practices.

This was the case for instance with the devil message that Tordesillas had witnessed on board his ship. The negative perception of Chinese idolatry was somehow smoothed over by the very familiar treatment that the idols received.

The idols were prone to the same dangers of reward and punishments as the officials. If the idols didn't comply with the petitions that were asked of them, they suffered real penalties like repeated whipping or drowning that went on until they complied with the petitions.

Feeling awkward with all these idols, Mendoza diverted his attention to another element, Heaven, which could counterbalance the impact of popular religion and was much easier for Europeans to comprehend.

Heaven was a more common cult among the high classes than among the lower ones which is why it appears in the Rada and Loarca accounts, and is missing from Tordesillas and Dueñas. But Mendoza failed to understand that the Heaven cult was the peak of the state religion.

He missed the link between Heaven and the Emperor's title of Son of Heaven, which he mentions, but without giving the emperor's cult the core position that it holds in Chinese religion. Mendoza provides a clearer picture of the Chinese afterlife: angels in Paradise for the good ones, a gloomy hell with torments without end for the very bad, and a Purgatory for those accused of minor faults.

The idea of Purgatory also served him well to explain the ancestor cult that his sources had encountered in all houses. The worship and sacrifices that the families offered to the ancestors' shrines were understood as the family prayers to release their deceased ones from Purgatory.

Monks and temples receive a lengthy mention. There is a clear distinction between Taoists and Buddhists, both in their personal dress and living habits. And he stresses the importance of temples and shrines all around China, because that's what everybody had seen.

Buddhist and Taoist temples went along with those consecrated to the cult of meritorious officials. Simultaneous devotion to various religions was widespread in China, and temples built to all kinds of deities filled the Chinese landscape, as can be seen in this drawing of Nanjing in Ming times.

Huge temple compounds were common all along the Chinese territory, while the pagoda's silhouettes dotted the Chinese skyline, and temples with mixed cults climbed the mountains and hanged from the cliffs.

Mendoza provided a general framework for Chinese religion, but neither he nor any of his sources ever mentions Confucius or Confucianism, because they simply didn't identify it as a religion. They saw the ancestor cult in the houses, the importance of Classical learning, the meritocratic character of Chinese government, the ethical backbone of Chinese social life, but they never considered this as a form of religion.

That will be the doing of the Jesuits.