

THE EUROPEANS DISCOVERY OF XINA

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THE FRIAR'S MISSIONS AND MENDOZA'S BOOK THE BOXER CODE'S TESTIMONY

Spanish sources neatly recognized the variety and importance of this plethora of gods and tried to disentangle their divine functions. They certainly felt more at ease with Taoist and Buddhist establishments, because they had an organizational structure that they could recognize. When it came to Chinese Popular religion, they felt more at a loss, but they didn't dismiss the multitude of gods that proliferated in every village and city in China and were also prevalent among the migrant Chinese. We have a good source for that in there, an Iberian collection of texts and images, produced between 1574 and 1591, and compiled in Manila as a gift of the Philippines' governor for the Spanish emperor Philip the 2nd, eager to gather information from the new found worlds. Miguel de Loarca might have been its compiler. The purpose of the Boxer Codex is similar to the one that inspired, 50 years earlier the gorgeous Codex Mendoza, compiled by the governor of Mexico to show Charles the 5th both the sweetness of everyday life and the dreadful plight of those caught up in their internal wars.

The Boxer Code comes with lovely colored illustrations, probably drawn by the Chinese Sangleys and available in the Parian, the Chinese quarter of Manila. One drawing depicts the arrival of the Manila Galleon to the first stop encountered on its way from Acapulco to Manila, and detail the exchange of goods with the nude inhabitants of the island of Guam, that, as the text goes "como nacen andan", "as they are born so they walk". A series of these drawings feature China's tributary neighbors, and also a sample of the Philippines' islands native populations, as the Pintados, meaning the Painted Ones, so called by the Spanish due to their exuberant tattoos. In contrast, the natives of the Manila plain are already wearing the gorgeous silk ornaments brought by the Manila Sangleys. On the other hand, the Chinese migrants in Manila, the Sangleys, are seen as a highly civilized group and are grouped together with the main characters of the Chinese empire, that is the emperor and the Royal princes.

A long set presents the gods that were probably most revered by the Manila Sangleys.

Some of these gods came from the Classical Historical texts, like Huangdi, the inventor of sailing and ships, dressed as a high ranking mandarin, and Lu Ban, also in mandarin attire, a

master craftsman and the patron saint of Chinese builders. Others were local deities, like the city god of Quanzhou, the great Fujian city from where came the great majority of the Manila Sangleys. There are quite a lot of gods to protect the Chinese against demons, like Tianzun who is the lord over the demons and the one who binds them and prevents them to harm the Chinese; Nazha that keeps away the demons and kills the dangerous monsters that threaten people's security, or Hamtam, who goes around with a chain to shackle the demons. Even so, Rada had noticed that images of demons were also quite usual in Chinese temples and that the Chinese worship them to prevent demons of doing harm. Another god keeps a written record with the names of all the inhabitants of China, and whenever anyone behaves badly he scratches his name from the book and immediately he dies. Another one stretches out his ear to hear everything that is said in China. Others like Tudigong take care of all animals, be they wild or domestic, and quite a lot of gods like Zhendi have a solid reputation as physicians and herbalists and take care of the health of the Chinese.

There were thousands of Chinese gods, and their names and functions often changed from province to province. There were gods of mountains and rivers, gods that covered all the occupations of China, gods that lived in heaven and gods that lived in the underworlds, and even insect gods and tiger gods. Certainly some gods had a predominant position over the rest, and their authority is enhanced by their ceremonial attire and their power over other divinities. But, in stark contrast with Chinese society, the Chinese spiritual world was not a hierarchical pyramid.

The whole pattern of Chinese life was heavily colored by a world of gods, spirits and specters that could be invoked by a vast array of priests, shamans and sorcerers. Furthermore, magic was everywhere, and was also at the root and in the daily practices of the great Buddhist and Taoist religions. And, finally, the unsatisfied ghosts of those who had met an untimely death, haunted the living.

For the newly arrived missionaries, the Chinese were stubborn idolaters, with an infinite proliferation of cults and practices that carried no apparent ethical connotation, even if the sheer variety of the Chinese supernatural world also suggested that there was great depth in the Chinese spiritual landscape.