

THE EUROPEANS DISCOVERY OF XINA

POMPEU FABRA UNIVERSITY BARCELONA

THE FRIAR'S MISSIONS AND MENDOZA'S BOOK THE PROSPECT TO CONQUER CHINA

In his account of China, González de Mendoza did his utmost to embellish the place. But why and how did he do it?

Mendoza lived through confusing times regarding Imperial Spain's attitudes towards China, with the Court swinging between proposals to send embassies to China, proposals to conquer it, and serious complaints about the swift penetration of Chinese commodities into Spanish America.

It is in this climate that Mendoza took on the commitment of providing a thorough appraisal of China. The prospect of conquering China had been on the table among the Iberian colonists for quite a long time.

It can be found in the letters of the first Portuguese prisoners, in the first Jesuit letters sent from Goa, and even in an early letter of Rada.

As soon as knowledge about China became deeper, many of the early proponents of conquest, among them Rada, stepped back from the idea, although it hung on among Philippine colonists for a while. This was the case, for instance, of Governor Sande, who was Philippine's governor when Rada and Loarca came back from China.

With them, the Chinese sent a massive delegation of 500 Chinese that stayed six months in Manila. This aroused the utter irritation of the new governor, doctor Sande, who expressed an outspoken dislike towards all the Chinese.

In a long letter of 80 points that he sent to the King together with the reports of Rada and Loarca, he stresses Chinese idolatry, luxury and sodomy, qualifies them as robbers and cowards, and proposes himself as leader for the conquest of China.

He claims that this could be achieved with 4,000 to 6,000 men or even half that number if just one big province was targeted. Some years later, in 1583, another governor, suggested that in fact 8,000 Spaniards would be needed.

The project to conquer China never gained the decisive support of the imperial court where it was mostly met with growing reticence. But it alarmed those who were decidedly against it.

Throughout the 16th century, especially after the conquest of Mexico, the Castilians had been debating their moral right to conquer the Indies, that is America. Most of the conquerors justified their right to conquest on the basis of American Indian vices, especially idolatry, cannibalism and sodomy, and also upon their incapacity to enact laws and establish judges to punish those who broke the law.

Some of those so-called vices filtered into other 16th century European sources, where Amerindian cannibalism and homosexuality became also prevalent

Meanwhile, the defenders of the Indians vehemently denied any such accusations. Some of them, as was the case of fray Bartolomé las Casas, even argued against the right of the conquerors to remain in America and fiercely opposed the Castilians's sense of entitlement in subjecting the American Indians.

As result of a heated debate, the New Laws of the Indies, limiting the conqueror's rights, were issued in 1542. On their arrival in Mexico, where, to use the colonists own words, the laws were obeyed but not complied with, the discussions became as sharp as they were bitter.

The Mexican Augustinians were intensely involved in the debate over rights, and their superior, fray Alonso de Veracruz, stood as a strong defender of Indian rights and as a strong critic of the way in which the conquest of America was being carried out.

All this had a direct influence on Martin de Rada and Mendoza. Veracruz was the direct superior of Martin de Rada, and the one to whom Rada sent multiple passionate letters denouncing the crimes and abuses that the new Castilian settlers were committing in the Philippines.

Mendoza was a great admirer of fray Bartolomé Las Casas. When the proposal to conquer China began to gain momentum, first in Manila and America, and then in Madrid, neither Rada in Manila nor Mendoza in Spain, wanted to give its proponents any pretext on which to build this project, and they so omitted the elements that could provide the hardliners with arguments for their just title to confront China.

And that's why Mendoza minimized or erased from his sources anything that could be used to justify an attempt to conquer China.