

THE EUROPEANS DISCOVERY OF XINA

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THE FRIAR'S MISSIONS AND MENDOZA'S BOOK WHAT MENDOZA DIDN'T TELL

Now let's look at how he polished his sources. In the first place, Mendoza, who entirely relied on Escalante when talking about Chinese jails, omitted all of Escalante's scabrous details about Chinese prisons: the cruelty of the prisons, for example, is clearly edited out.

The Portuguese sources, and Escalante with them, talked of the rats that infested the Chinese prisons and ate the dead, and added that out of hunger even the prisoners would eat their dead companions.

Mendoza cuts that out, as it could be considered cannibalism, one of the three great vices that justified conquest. He also cuts any mention of the scars that almost everyone had as a result of frequent beatings.

And he also removes the enormous quantities of prisoners that according to the Portuguese, were locked in Chinese jails, or the gruesome method of getting rid of those who had died in prison.

Second, Mendoza affirms that in China capital punishment consists in hanging, burning and impaling. In fact these were the common methods in Spain but not in China, where the only two death penalties contemplated in the Ming code were strangling and beheading.

Mendoza had a good source about Chinese justice in Dueñas, who had roughly identified the main penalties imposed by the Chinese courts. But probably the equalizing of Chinese and Spanish death penalties allowed him to better highlight the different proceedings of Castilian and Chinese courts, in favor of the latter.

Having a law code and being capable of enacting it in a much better way than the Spanish did, was a proof of being highly civilized and thus unfit for conquest. On the other hand, to avoid problems, he erased all mention of the death by a thousand cuts that Dueñas had described in vivid detail, because it would have tainted his idealized vision in the chapters on Chinese justice.

Third, Mendoza decided to omit from his sources the Loarca testimony on Chinese homosexuality for fear that it could provide the hardliners with arguments for their entitlement to launch the conquest of China.

Sodomy was, together with cannibalism and idolatry, one of the great vices that could justify a conquest. That's also why Martin de Rada, who was a fellow traveler of Loarca and who had no doubt heard about it, omitted the anecdote from his narrative, and didn't include in it the slightest mention of Chinese homosexuality.

Fourth, Mendoza admits that some Chinese are poor, but affirms that beggars are strictly forbidden, that the state takes care of the crippled in hospitals specially built for them, and that the destitute blind, be they men or women, are induced to work.

He presents a utopian scenario, very close to the one depicted by the Ming painter Qiu Ying in the Ming scroll that we have looked at in many of the previous lectures. Both Mendoza and Qiu Ying describe utopian cities with no beggars, no cripples, and no public executions.

But all of these elements could, in fact, be found in Mendoza's sources, as well as in other Ming scrolls, like the one made by the Ming painter Zhou Chen, that depicts beggars, cripples, vagabonds and blind people roaming in misery through the streets.

Fifth, Mendoza also erases from his text any mention to the eunuchs that appear in many of his sources. When it comes to sex, Mendoza doesn't want problems. When talking about polygamy, he remarks that only the first wife is considered a legitimate spouse, the others being something like friends.

He talks very openly about prostitution, but this was a thoroughly accepted practice in 16th century Europe, and Mendoza praises the orderly way in which the Chinese manage it.

Sixth, Mendoza never mentions Muslims, although they were the subject of a long paragraph in Escalante explaining their origin from Central Asia and their current settlement in Canton and the northwest.

Rada had even identified them by their Chinese name, Huihui, and reported that they lived mostly in the southwest, that is Yunnan. Mendoza also completely ignores the mention of Jews that appears only in Dueñas text.

In fact, Muslim communities were spread all over China, their Mosques shone in most Chinese cities, and Muslim astronomers played a decisive role in the state astronomical departments.

The Jewish community was much more scanty, and mostly concentrated in Kaifeng. But both Muslims and Jews were the archenemies of traditional Castile, and they were severely persecuted by the Spanish Inquisition.

It was convenient for Mendoza to avoid the mention of either.

Seventh, the religions of the Chinese being a sensitive point, Mendoza had to tackle the difficulty of finding any Chinese beliefs in the immortality of the soul.

To solve this, he distorted the list of books bought by Martín de Rada in China, that was in the Loarca report. Mendoza added to the list one new title about the immortality of the soul, that he even minutiously describes as their opinions of the immortalitie of the soul, of the heaven, and of hell.

And he also suppressed two other books, one on astrology to cure the ill and the other on spells, because these kinds of books were explicitly banned by the Catholic Church, and it was better to silence that the Chinese were publishing them.

To summarize, even if Mendoza never went to China, he had access to a wide variety of sources and he had the training to systematize them. But even so, he invented a dream country that fitted the model he wanted to present.

In part he did this to accommodate the political twists and turns of the Spanish empire, but also in part to fit a stereotype that he already had in mind. His paradigm of Chinese justice will live on for a couple of centuries, providing the framework for European books on China up to the 18th century.