

## THE 17<sup>th</sup> CENTURY

### THE EUROPEAN WITNESSES

The Ming Qing transition was the first Chinese political event to be recorded in European texts. All the testimonies were due to foreign priests.

They were not a large number, 25 Jesuits scattered all over China and 10 Dominicans, most of the latter living in Fujian province.

Neither the last Ming, the Manchu, the bandits, the pirates or the Southern Ming made a special target of them, but they were caught in the general turmoil and sent reports leaving testimony of it.

During the long cataclysm of the Ming-Qing transition, the Jesuits proclaimed loyalty to whichever party around them was in power.

The court Jesuits, like Adam Schall, served the Ming until the end and then they transferred their loyalty to the Qing: in 1645 Schall was already back again at the Imperial Astronomical Bureau. The insignia embroidered on his mandarin dress highlights his prominent position, and so does the dubious certificate hanging on the wall. He is surrounded by mathematical and astronomical instruments while a rather bad sketch of a world map proclaims the Jesuit commitment to cartography.

The new Manchu emperor, a very young boy, took a strong affection for Adam Schall, and seemed to the point of conversion himself, but the arrival of a Tibetan lama turned his interest towards Lamaism and he became a fervent Buddhist.

A couple of Jesuits who were in Sichuan when the bandit Zhang Xianlong took it, **were summoned to the bandit's court and accepted two positions as astronomers.** They claimed to have converted a handful of Zhang's retainers, until they finally had to run for their lives.

Another Jesuit perished in the flood that devastated Kaifeng when both Li Zicheng and the Ming armies broke the Yellow river's dykes.

Yet another Jesuit, Michel Boym, was sent to the Pope begging for help by the Catholic mother of one of the Southern Ming emperors: he was the first Chinese ambassador sent to Europe by a Chinese emperor. On his way to Europe he drew many maps and wrote many books.

Only a few leaves of these maps are still extant.

His book *Flora Sinensis* with its beautiful drawings was a great success in 17th century Europe.

Amidst plants and animals of China the book also contained a claim to the **Catholic Church to support the Southern Ming emperor.** The Jesuits' texts were

assembled in a book written by the Jesuit Martino Martini in 1655, *De Bello Tartarico*.

The book was short and written in a very lively style.

It became a bestseller and was immediately translated to all European languages: 25 editions and translations of it had appeared before the end of the century. The book's great success was due in great part to the fact that it rang true.

With it, its readers took contact with an event of world-wide significance.

Martino Martini had a firsthand experience of almost all the contending parties. He had entered Ming China in 1643 and spent 13 years there, most of them in Hangzhou.

In 1644, after the fall of the Ming, he swiftly transferred his loyalty to one of the short-lived Southern Ming princes.

As soon as the Manchu defeated the Southern Ming, Martini quickly switched sides again, shaved his head, put on a Manchu style dress and offered his services to the newcomers.

Martino Martini had a clear insight of the Ming-Qing turmoil, and in fact his book is still today one of the primary sources for this period.

He noticed the importance of the ginseng trade in the financing of the Manchu state, as well as the Chinese initial military superiority due to their use of firearms and muskets.

He pointed out that Macao's expertise on cannons was introduced in China by the Jesuits.

And he highlights the importance of Chinese collaboration in the Qing conquest of China.

He is rather prone to exaggeration specially when talking about the bandit's daring exploits: he systematically kills the Chinese by hundreds of thousands. But that was not so shocking for an European audience that had just come out from the Thirty Years War the deadliest European religious war of all times, with eight million casualties and an unparalleled show of cruelty.

Martino Martini also gives testimony to the rise of the Zheng family of pirates-traders in the South China coast and plainly states that their armed force and richness equalled or surpassed those of the Chinese emperor.

Martino Martini provides a detailed profile of the Zheng family trade network: its connexions with India, SE Asia, Macao, Manila and Japan.

The huge commercial network was handled by a huge fleet of 3.000 boats. A third book by Martino Martini, *Sinicae Historiae Decas Primas*, published in 1658, was the first long systematic account of Ancient Chinese history to reach Europe.

The book aroused immediate polemics.

The Chinese had preceded the flood, survived to it and were not descendent from Noah.

This undermined the biblical chronology and challenged the Bible itself.

The Jesuits were not the only witnesses of the Ming-Qing cataclysm.

A Dominican priest, Vittorio Riccio, lived and preached in a small house just in front of one of Koxinga's headquarters in Xiamen.

He was sent by Koxinga to Manila to test the attitude of the Philippine's governors towards the Ming cause and he wrote a long text about all the period.

The Dominican's friars' propaganda's equipment was not as consistent as the Jesuit's one and Riccio's long text remains unpublished until today.

But even so, lengthy fragments of the Riccio's text went into the famous *Tratados* of Fernández de Navarrete, published in 1676.

Navarrete was also familiar with Martini's text.

He appended to his own book his notes on Martini's narrative, while he criticized **Martini's Atlas for its fantasies and errors. Another source came from a different background.**

The formation of the **Zheng family's empire with the biography of Zhang Zhilong, Koxinga's father, appeared in a book published in 1670 by Palafox, the bishop of Puebla in Mexico: the Chinese affairs were finding its way to the world news.**

The first page of the book reproduces Martino Martini's map of China.

That had become the standard image of China in the West. Even so, Palafox doesn't seem to have borrowed either from Riccio or from Martini.

He probably used Spanish and Chinese sources coming from Manila. The news of the Ming-Qing cataclysm had an enduring impact on the European image of China.

The highly positive image of China remained untarnished for the whole 17th century, but a remote and changeless country was replaced by a more dynamic China.

For the first time, the Europeans became conscious of living in the same world with the Chinese.