

THE 17th CENTURY

CHINA IN MAPS: NOVUS ATLAS SINENSIS

Dutch and English merchants had begun to ply the Asian waters and at the turn of the century Dutch maps became increasingly important.

In 1596, van Linschotten, a famous Dutch merchant that travelled extensively along Portuguese East Asia, published his book *Itinerarium*.

The book was not intended for Popes or Kings, but for traders.

Van Linschotten map of East Asia, drawn with the East on top, is a chaotic piece. Korea is shown as an island, Japan appears in a quite eccentric position and the Chinese provinces are placed at random.

But even so, South East Asia, which was the place of interest for the Dutch, is very accurately drawn.

Macao stands neatly at Canton's vicinity, the Manila bay is drawn in painstaking detail, and Malacca, which will soon become a stronghold of the Dutch, is strictly delineated. In a second edition, van Linschotten's *Itinerarium* incorporated a very famous world map drawn by another Dutch, Petrus Plancius.

As had been the case with Ortelius map three decades before, Europe appears as the richest and dominant continent, with the world, the music and a musket at her feet.

On the other upper side, a luxurious Asia is also clad in silk garments.

In contrast, America and Africa are nude.

Plancius' Far East showed already Korea and Japan at their right place, and was extremely rich in detail when it went to South East Asia, where cloves, nutmegs and sandal wood are specifically highlighted. At the first decade of the 17th century, the most influential world map was probably, the Mercator-Hondius map of 1610.

As had been the case with van Linschotten's map, Hondius map displays rudimentary geographical information, with Korea standing as an island and Japan in a queer position.

The map holds a strong political message: the killing of Christians in Nagasaki is a reminder of the closing of Japan to foreign traders, while the double presence of Chinese junks and European boats on the China Sea suggests the commercial possibilities of East Asia. A wonderful Great Wall closes the country, while the ingenious Chinese wind carriage guarantees a comfortable arrival to China.

Following the trend of Petrus Plancius world map, in Hondius general map of Asia the ancient name of Cathay stills lingers around, albeit retreated to the north, and

Beijing appears three times, two of them with its ancient name Khambalic, the name given by Marco Polo to the Yuan dynasty capital. In 1655, 25 years after the Mercator-Hondius map, Martino Martini, the Jesuit author of *De Bello Tartarico*, published another book, *Novus Atlas Sinensis*, that gained enormous popularity and provided a much more clear understanding of Chinese geography. In its cover, the Pope sheds a light that illuminates both Company of Jesus and a candle held by an angel who opens the doors of China.

At the threshold, angels are playing with a map of China and a world globe that also shows China.

The China prize was the Jesuit dream. Martino Martini's maps of China were highly publicized by the Jesuit order that used his general map of China as frontispiece of **Kircher's *China Illustrata*, published in 1667.**

In it, the two leading Jesuits of the China mission, Adam Schall and Ferdinand **Verbiest hold Martini's map as their main piece of identification. Martini's atlas** contained a general map, a long comprehensive narrative on China, and a detailed description of China's provinces.

Each of them was appended with a provincial map.

Both the descriptions and the 17 provincial maps follow the basic patterns of the 16th century Chinese Geographical encyclopaedia the *Guangyu tu*.

The *Guangyu tu* was the most complete compendium of Chinese geography, and one that both Martin de Rada and Matteo Ricci had used thoroughly: both missionaries reproduced in their respective texts the statistics contained in the book.

Martini probably also consulted local gazetteers and other Chinese sources and drew on his personal observations.

But there is a considerable similitude between Martini's regional maps and the regional maps of the *Guangyu tu*.

This is the case for instance with the Shandong peninsula: Martini's map follows the trends of the Chinese previous map.

Martini's general map highly improved the maps of China available in Europe up to the middle of the 17th century.

Martini added to each province a ruler to clarify the distances involved, and one or two drawings reminiscent of the main characteristics of the province.

The Beijing province or Peitchili comes with the image of the emperor and his consort under a ceremonial umbrella; Nanjing, that was China's secondary capital, displays Jesuits and their lay assistants in a bookish environment; Huguang appears as a highly agricultural province; Sichuan as a place for armies and bandits; and Yunnan as a region inhabited by barbarians and elephants with a **northern border that opens into Buddhist's lands. Martini's Atlas also came with** an appendix that provided the definitive identification of China with Cathay. Even if long ago Martin de Rada had identified China with Marco Polo's Cathay, a century later some European scholars still believed this question to be unresolved. The *Novo Atlas Sinensis* gained great diffusion when it was included in the most

prestigious world atlas of 17th century, published in Amsterdam by Johannes **Blaeu**, even if **Blaeu's general map of China discarded Martino Martini's silhouette** in favour of the more established model of Mercator-Hondius. Martini's Atlas popularity was enhanced by the fact that by the mid-17th century maps were becoming usual decorative elements in European interiors, as can be clearly seen in the paintings of the Dutch artists. The great Delft painter Vermeer includes maps in many of his works, and that is also the case with other Dutch painters like Jonathan Maes.

In merchant houses, those maps proudly proclaimed the link of their owners with the real world. Martini's Atlas deserved its popularity, even if his real merit was adapting to European aesthetic a well-known Chinese Atlas whose statistics and texts had already gone to the accounts of Martin de Rada and Matteo Ricci. But his coloured maps and their beautiful cartouches provided for the first time a precise geographical profile to the Chinese provinces.