

THE 17th CENTURY

THE FIRST INTERNATIONAL TREATY

In 17th century the Russians began to colonize Inner Asia. By 1647 they had established towns and forts all along Siberian rivers and lakes until they finally reached the Pacific Ocean. The main interests of the Russians in Siberia were its precious furs, such as ermines, silver foxes and sables.

And China offered an excellent market for them.

The Russians went along carefully because they wanted land in Siberia as much as they wanted trade with China.

All along 17th century the Russians tried to send embassies to China but Kangxi had too many problems with the Ming-Qing transition to pay attention to them.

The Russian colonization of Siberia meant no threat for the Chinese until they reached the Amur river.

There they reclaimed lands that were held by Chinese tributaries and, furthermore, the Russians could form an alliance with the Mongol tribes.

Moreover the Dzungars still posed a serious threat to Kangxi, Galdan had been defeated, but the Dzungars still occupied the very region where the eastward push of the Russian empire encountered the northern expansion of the Chinese empire.

Finally a Chinese Russian treaty was signed at Nerchinsk in 1689.

The Manchu side was assisted by two Jesuits, Gerbillon and Pereira, useful for their knowledge of law and Latin.

Mongolian could have been the bridging language of the Treaty, but the Jesuits imposed Latin as the authoritative language of the treaty.

That allowed the Jesuits to favor the Manchu side and thus obtain better terms for their Chinese mission.

This is the first treaty signed between an European power and the Chinese state.

The treaty dealt with matters of trade and diplomacy and it settled the borders of Russia and China along the Amur, Argun and Kerulen rivers. In a further treaty in Kiakhta in 1727, a Russian Hostel was set in Beijing, to house official trade and diplomatic missions from the Russians: that was the first permanent foreign embassy in Chinese history.

The Russians were also allowed to build an Orthodox church, with some priests attached to it, and to open a Chinese language school for Russian students.

Thus began in Russia the first European tradition in Chinese studies that goes up until today.

The Treaty of Nerchinsk provided the Jesuits with its peak of prestige in the Chinese court.

In accordance Kangxi issued the Edict of Tolerance in 1692.

But their glorious days were nearing its end because the Rites Controversy was in the air.

For almost half a century they has enjoyed a Papal privilege that reserved China to the Jesuit mission with exclusion of all the others religious orders.

And that had fuelled an unyielding animosity from Dominicans, Augustinians, Franciscans and so forth.

Things got worse in the 30s when the first Dominicans arrived in Fujian and their missionary methods clashed with those of the Jesuits.

Besides, even inside the Jesuit order, the accommodation method that Matteo Ricci had started encountered significant opposition.

The whole methodology of the Jesuit Chinese mission was put to question and discussions took a poisonous trend.

The question was: the Chinese rites, especially ancestor worship, where civil ceremonies or a form of idolatry? A Papal delegation to clarify the situation was sent to China in 1705.

The enmity of the Papal legate with the court Jesuits opened Kangxi's eyes to the European religious rivalries.

That same year he issued an order that all missionaries, to stay in China, had to obtain an imperial permit and follow "the rules of Matteo Ricci".

The Jesuit enterprise in China had been designed with a high visibility at court and the clash between the papal instructions and the Emperor's decree put them in dire straits.

To preserve the Imperial favour the court Jesuits tried to make themselves useful. This was the case of the French Jesuits that had arrived in 1687 and that will play a decisive role in the first scientific mapping of China.

This was also the case of Giuseppe Castiglione, who became a renowned and highly prolific court painter.

His works mingled European and Chinese aesthetic sensibilities, and covered a great range of subjects from the Manchu banner men to the impressive deployment of Manchu and Chinese troops in Qianlong's Inner Asia' campaigns.

He also designed the Western Mansions of the Yuanming yuan, the Old Summer palace, to meet the Emperor's taste for exotic buildings.

The palace was thoroughly looted and destroyed by the French and British troops in 1860, during the Second Opium war. But new priests, other than Jesuits were entering the Chinese court.

Two of them, played significant roles in the relations between China and the West and both were immediately at odds with the Jesuits. One of them, Mateo Ripa, became an extraordinary engraver and sent to Europe the copperplates on the gardens of Jehol that he had made for the emperor: they were decisive in the development of the Chinese style gardens, especially in England. Another, Teodorico Pedrini, wrote the first treatise on western music to be published in China.

His influential book introduced baroque music in the Chinese court. And was included in the great Qianlong enciclopaedia. 18th century Jesuits remained very influential in Europe where they letters were published and strongly publicized as Edifying and Curious letters. But they never regained in the Chinese court the coveted post of head of the Astronomical Bureau, and their political influence vanished forever.