

THE 17th CENTURY

FOREING EMBASSIES

The Russians were not the only Europeans to send embassies to China in the 17th and 18th century.

Portuguese and Dutch knocked many times at the Chinese door.

Kangxi authorized (ppt) four cities as ports of arrival for foreign embassies.

Canton was the port assigned to Europeans.

Embassies had to follow a very strict protocol.

Upon arrival of the embassy the provincial authorities revised its presents and made sure that the newcomers knew the Chinese protocol, specially the ways to address the Emperor.

Among them was the kowtow, that meant kneeling with the head touching the ground.

This gesture impressed Europeans: it was one of the first Chinese characteristics to enter European imagery.

Then the embassy was taken all the way up to Beijing, and had to wait to be received in audience. At dawn, all foreign ambassadors were assembled at the doors of the Forbidden city, while the Chinese officials waited for them and their gifts were publicly displayed.

The usual gifts of the tributary states were species, exotic products, exotic animals, jewels and also humans, both men and women.

For a Korean, Vietnamese or Cambodian envoy paying homage at the core of their cultural universe was a very impressive ceremony.

But 17th century European embassies took it more coolly.

Some of those that went with the embassy took sketches of what they saw, and once in Europe made them into copper engravings.

Blue and white porcelain had first spread Chinese images throughout 16th century Europe.

In the 17th century it was engravings that opened European eyes to things Chinese.

But, in contrast with ceramics, engravings were produced by Europeans, who saw China through their own eyes.

And this made their images more credible.

This was the case of Johan Niuehof, who in 1655-57 travelled from Canton to Beijing, sailing the south China rivers as far as the Yangzi and taking there the Grand Canal until Beijing.

His book, published in 1665, combines the author's first hand observations with the information taken from the great books on China already existent: Martini, Semedo, Trigault.

And even González de Mendoza, from where he copied the list of books that Martin de Rada bought in China.

He took sketches of an extraordinary quantity of Chinese cities, and published a narrative of his travel together with 150 copper engravings. 17th century Europeans saw Canton for the first time surrounded by its long walls, and opening to a lively port full of European boats and Chinese junks.

The relevance of the ceremonial arches scattered through the city didn't escape Nieuhof, even if to enhance their importance he placed them in a fully European piazza.

More often than not his Chinese cities had an unmistakable European skyline.

A detailed view of Beijing shows the extremely long wall that surrounds it, together with the main gates of the city.

The roads leaving to it are crammed and the well-tended agricultural plots provide the necessary food to the huge city.

He stressed the Great Wall winding on the mountain tops.

He was dumbfounded by the Forbidden city, and he reproduced faithfully its central avenue. To enhance the solemnity of the arrival of the embassy to the Forbidden city, he over-decorated the buildings surrounding the waiting grounds of the embassy.

In a corner of the square Mongol ambassadors were also waiting.

They are dressed in gorgeous silk robes obtained as a gift in previous embassies. The Mongols were very well treated by the Manchu. Another prominent group in the Qing capital are the Tibetan lamas: the good relations of the Manchu state with them is essential to maintain the hold on the Mongols.

He depicted Chinese men in their Manchu style clothes and their queues standing in front of an European style tower and a pagoda.

Chinese women were shown with their small feet and not far away from their homes.

Further on, the walls of Nanjing open to a long waterway that connects the city to the mighty Yangzi river. A Nanjing street evoked the commercial vitality of Chinese cities.

At the center of an imposing religious compound stands the porcelain pagoda erected 200 years ago by Zheng He, before one of his long maritime voyages. For some time now Europeans had heard of the Chinese temples, full of gods and smoke: this was their first opportunity to take a look at them. Nieuhof reproduced in painstaking detail the big cities encountered along the great Canal, highlighting the importance of the maritime traffic and the ubiquitous walls that protected them. That was a land of richness where fruits and trees grew amazingly high.

High society could enjoy life by sailing with wonderful boats along rivers and lakes.

And small people found all kind of attractions to spend a good time. Some critical remarks on China sparkle Nieuhof's narrative and filtered in his engravings as when he shows beggars with a canga at their neck. Nieuhof's engravings had conveyed personal observations and had rendered Chinese landscapes and cities convincingly.

They gave Europeans their first graphic glimpse of the Chinese world.

It was an exhilarating vision and Nieuhof's engravings gained enormous popularity and resurfaced once and again in the most seminal works on China all along the 18th century. Other two authors whose engravings also impacted European imagination had never been to China.

The first, the Jesuit Athanasius Kircher, used the huge repository of Jesuit accounts to publish his book, *China Illustrata*, in 1667.

Some of his engravings, like the unfinished profile of the Potala palace in Tibet, had a deep impact upon European minds propelling a romantic vision of Tibet.

But his Chinese buildings look everything except Chinese.

And his Chinese ladies costumes and attitudes are as incongruous as his calligraphic renderings.

The second one, Olfer Dapper, had never traveled either, but he followed attentively the numerous travel reports that were increasingly reaching Europe.

His main sources were the Dutch embassies to China and his engravings followed closely their descriptions.

Some of the engravings of his book on China, published in 1671, became extremely popular.

This is the case of this scene of the Dutch embassy waiting in early hours in front of the imposing gate of the Forbidden city.

Among the objects that the Dutch embassy displays in the forefront, a world globe points to the importance of cartography in diplomatic exchanges with China.