

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

Jesuits had always been aware of the power of images.

In their early days in China, they had adapted the Christian imagery to the Chinese aesthetics and sensibility.

And Matteo Ricci soon discovered the Chinese interest for cartography.

He complied, with a map that showed the world with China.

In the 17th century other Jesuits in China produced new maps of the world. This was the case of Giulio Aleni in 1623: his map followed closely that of Matteo Ricci retaining even the distorted profile of the Mediterranean world. In 1674, Verbiest succeeded Adam Schall as head of the Astronomical Imperial Bureau.

Both were the most prominent 17th century Jesuit figures in China. They both appear in this tapestry, Adam Schall teaching astronomy to the Shunzi emperor, and Verbiest entering the scene book in hand giving a glance to the boy that was to become the Kangxi emperor.

The Jesuits were well aware of the Chinese interest in maps and Ricci's map had become one of their landmarks.

As had been the case with Schall, Verbiest is also portrayed with Ricci's map on the wall.

Verbiest produced still another world map: at the south of the western hemisphere a group of African animals stroll around.

Among them we find Zheng He's giraffe, a memory of the Zheng voyages that the Jesuits strongly dismissed before.

In the 17th century the emphasis of the China Jesuits switched from mapping the world for the Chinese to mapping East Asia for the Europeans.

The first consistent image of China's territory came in 1655 with Martino Martini's Atlas.

But as time went by, Martini's Atlas seemed insufficient because it lacked scientific methodology.

In the meantime, the French Academy of Science in tune with the imperial claims of Louis XIV had started a mapping of the world.

The Jesuits in France were being trained in mathematics, geometry and trigonometry.

They acquired the tools to proceed with scientific geographical surveys.

In 1685 Louis XIV sent a group of Jesuits to China with the express instruction to collect observational data for the French Academy of science.

Immediately after their arrival, one of them, Gerbillon, became a very useful member of the Chinese delegation that signed the treaty of Nerchinsk with Russia.

He might have hinted to Kangxi the possibility of mapping the whole empire, but in any case Kangxi was already conscious of the need to make a general geographical survey of the rapidly expanding Chinese empire. The survey was made by a mixed team of Jesuits, Chinese and Manchu experts: in a decade, from 1708 to 1718 the team produced maps of all Chinese provinces and of the outlying regions of Tibet, Tartary and Korea, using a combination of western and Chinese survey methods.

The maps were extraordinarily accurate, and fully reliable.

In this map, for instance, of the Guizhou province, the detailed geographical annotations turn to blank areas when reaching the regions inhabited by the tribal Miao, because they were still non subjected to the Manchu state. In 1719 a definite version of the complete Atlas was presented to Kangxi and a copy of the copperplates was also sent to Louis XV and to the Jesuit's superiors in France.

A Jesuit father in Paris, Du Halde, asked the great geographer d'Arbillon to make an European version of the maps.

D'Arbillon was completely faithful to the maps but he gave them a form more palatable for the European audiences.

The painstaking detail of the original maps was respected: the result was a highly reliable map of China that will remain the authoritative piece for more than a century.

To reach a broader audience colour was added to the maps and elaborate cartouches were added to the provinces.

In some of them, as in the Guangdong province, a European merchant was added. The Kangxi Atlas, often mentioned in Europe as the Jesuit Atlas, had a vibrant reception in Europe.

But in China it remained practically unknown and no copy of it crossed the palace doors.

Its influence on Chinese indigenous mapmakers was nil. 18th century Chinese maps went on with the Chinese traditional representation of space. The westernization of Chinese cartography came with the aftermath of the Opium wars, not with the Jesuit's mapping.

Du Halde included the maps in his great book, the Description of China.

That gave the Kangxi Atlas a decisive impact on the European scholars. The four volumes of Du Halde's book The General History of China were published in Paris in 1735 and became immediately an outstanding reference for the European elites of the Enlightenment.

The book rendered homage to Kangxi: his obituary opened the book with a westernized image of the late Chinese emperor. The numerous illustrations of the book provided a highly baroque image of Chinese society, be it the pompous ceremonies coming with every outing of the viceroy, or the elaborate rituals of Chinese funerals. The commercial vitality of the Chinese found its expression in

the variety of boats touching its shores, with the dragon boat taken directly from Nieuhof engravings at its center.

The book gave unusual attention to Chinese technology, introducing many of the elements contained in the letters that the Jesuits were sending to Europe and that were being published in the Edifying and Curious letters since 1702.

But the Chinese encyclopedia on technology, the *Tiangong Kaiwu*, also filters into Du Halde's work. The technological illustrations of the book come mainly from the Chinese text, be it the silk reel with a tank of boiling water or the draw loom for figure weaving. Du Halde also includes the letter of father d'Entrecolles revealing the secrets of porcelain making: and its content also depends heavily on the *Tiangong kaiwu* text.

Nieuhof sketches had given a face to the Chinese and a skyline to their cities.

And Du Halde's maps provided the precise geography of China.

In 1587 a group of Jesuits published *Confucius Sinarum Philosophus*, that contained the *Analects of Confucius* and other canonical writings that had been required readings for the civil service examinations.

This closed the gap.

Europeans now had the maps, the images and the texts that gave them the keys to enter the Chinese world.

The European Enlightenment will read the Jesuit letters and the Jesuits' translations with unrestrained enthusiasm.

19th century Europeans will have to check this general picture with the Chinese real world.

How this was done is altogether a very different story.