Part I

Western Images of China's Present down to 1949

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Early Western Images of China

THE ancient Romans knew of the existence of China; they called it Serica and its people the Seres or Sinae. The term Seres derives from the clearest image in their extremely hazy knowledge of China: that it traded silk. The famous *Historiae Naturalis* (*Natural History*) of Pliny the Elder (AD 23–79) mentions the labour involved in making silk fabrics: 'so has toil to be multiplied; so have the ends of the earth to be transversed: and all that a Roman dame may exhibit her charms in transparent gauze'.[1] However, he was unaware that silk was produced by silkworms. Like Virgil (70–19 BC) and many other Roman poets down to Claudian (*c.* 370–*c.* 404),[2] he believed silk was combed from the leaves of the forest.

It is possible that Chinese traders entered Roman territory from the first century BC, but no official Chinese missions visited the city of Rome itself. Pliny believed the Seres to be 'inoffensive in their manners indeed'. They keep to themselves, he adds, and do not seek trade with other people, but are prepared to engage in it if others seek it.[3]

The first Western writer to discuss China coherently in detail extending beyond a paragraph or so is the Egyptian Greek Theophylact Simocatta, whose work dates from the early seventh century. He calls the Chinese Taugas and names their ruler as *Taissan*, identified as the great Tang emperor Taizong (reigned 626–49). We are now in the era when Christianity had become dominant in the Byzantine Empire, so it is not surprising to find Theophylact Simocatta raising the criticism that 'the nation practises idolatry'. Still, his comments are broadly positive. The Chinese 'have just laws, and their life is full of temperate wisdom'. This is a large, powerful, and rich country with a thriving commerce. The emperor is said to have 700 concubines.

'The king's women go forth in chariots made of gold, with one ox to draw them', while the women of the chief nobles use silver chariots. Already China comes over as a rich and exotic marvel, an idea which was to dominate Western images for many centuries. And, of course, Theophylact praises the Chinese for their 'skill and emulation' in raising silkworms and producing silk filaments of various colours.[4]

Theophylact's work was not particularly influential in his own time. Despite his remarks on Chinese silk production, the silk trade between Byzantium and China had fallen on bad times simply because Nestorian monks had smuggled silkworm eggs from China to the West, and Byzantium had begun its own silk industry. Theophylact Simocatta was roughly contemporary with Muhammad (*c.* 570–632) and not long afterwards Muslim power placed a curtain between China and the West. Europe forgot about China. It was not until the medieval crusaders began returning from the east 'with their tales' that 'the store of factual knowledge' was again increased.[5]

The First Great Age of Sino-European Contact

Although the legend of the Eastern Christian ruler Prester John began to circulate in the middle of the twelfth century, the medieval era of European consciousness of Eastern Asia reached its height through a sense of threat from the Mongol empire. The feeling of threat was not without foundation. In the early 1240s, Mongol troops scored substantial victories in Poland, Silesia, and Hungary. In the spring of 1242 they reached within a few miles of Vienna and were about to attack it when news reached them of the death of the Great Khan Ögödei on 11 December 1241. 'The presence of all the princes and military leaders was immediately required for the convocation' which elected the new khan.[6] Central and Western Europe's escape was indeed a narrow one.

Yet for Western Europe there could be advantages in the Mongol conquest. Up to this point it had done incomparably more damage to Russia, not to mention the arch-enemy Islam, than to Western Europe. Why not attempt to convert the Mongols to Christianity and use them as allies against Islam? The Pope, Innocent IV (reigned 1243–54), despatched two embassies to

Mongolia. One of them was never heard of again; the other, led by the Franciscan friar John of Plano Carpini, returned to Europe in 1247 after a voyage to Mongolia of about two-and-a-half years. According to one writer, 'although the Mongols had carried many European slaves into Asia, John is the first European on record to proceed east of Baghdad and return to tell his tale'.[7] He is thus historically important, but he did not succeed in converting the Mongol khan or persuade him to co-operate with the Christians against Islam.

Although John of Plano Carpini wrote extensively of his travels and heard about China, he did not actually visit it. The image he conveyed of the Chinese was of an affable, kind, and hard-working people, fine craftsmen, with a language of their own. He believed they worshipped one God, and honoured Jesus Christ, but needed to be baptized. China itself he believed 'very rich in corn, in wine, gold, silver, silk, and in every kind of produce that tends to the support of mankind'.[8] His was an idealized view which included a measure of wishful thinking. Yet he appears to be the first Western writer to mention China who had actually seen a Chinese. He is also the first to call them Cathayans.

John of Plano Carpini was followed by others. William of Rubruquis, a Flemish Franciscan, stayed eight months at the Mongol capital of Karakorum from December 1253 to August 1254. Like John, he did not visit China. However, he did meet many Chinese in Karakorum and was generally impressed with them. 'They are first-rate artists in every kind of craft, and their physicians have a thorough knowledge of the virtues of herbs, and an admirable skill in diagnosis by the pulse', he writes. And later he continues, 'they do their writing with a brush such as painters paint with, and a single character of theirs comprehends several letters so as to form a whole word.'[9] William's account also contains its share of myths, but although he was struck by several of the same features mentioned by his predecessor John, he does not make the mistake of seeing the Chinese as quasi-Christians.

In 1264 the Mongols extended their control south of the Great Wall and made Khan-balik (Beijing) their capital. In 1279 they completed the reunification of China by conquering the south. Meanwhile the first visitors from Europe were arriving in China itself, including the Polo brothers Niccolò and Maffeo

from Venice. Khublai Khan (1215–94) received these two in audience and asked them about Europe. When they proved unable to satisfy his curiosity, he dispatched them to request the Pope to send to his capital 100 learned men who could teach his court about Europe and debate there with people from other countries.

The Polos were appointed apostolic delegates to the Khan's court and left Europe again for Khan-balik in 1271. This time they took with them Niccolò's seventeen-year-old son Marco. They went overland through Persia and what is today Xinjiang; they crossed the Gobi desert, passed Chang'an (now Xi'an), and arrived in the capital in 1275.

The Polos stayed in China for seventeen years. At Khublai's request Marco travelled widely, including to Yunnan, and took notes for the Khan on his experiences. However, the claim made in most, though not all, the manuscripts of his travels that he was Governor of Yangzhou for three years is not confirmed in Chinese sources and is very unlikely.

The Polos left China in 1292, accompanying a Mongolian princess who was travelling by sea to marry a Mongol ruler in Persia. The intended husband had actually died in 1291, even before they left China, so instead she married his son. The Polos pressed on to Italy, arriving back in Venice in 1295. Marco was later a naval officer and was a prisoner-of-war for nearly a year in 1298 and 1299. It was during his imprisonment that he dictated to a fellow captive, Rustichello of Pisa, an account of his experiences in China. The fact is of profound significance and makes Marco Polo's extraordinary fame quite natural.

Other Europeans lived and worked in China during the thirteenth century, but Marco Polo was the only one, so far as is known, to travel and work there and to write an account of his experiences. For the first time in history Europe possessed a detailed narrative about China and its neighbours based upon more than hearsay and speculation.[10]

The book he dictated is usually called in English *The Description of the World* or *The Travels of Marco Polo.* Probably Rustichello's original manuscript was destroyed, but well over 100 copies and adaptations survive, in various languages. The book was immediately popular and consequently influential as a source

of images of the China of its time, though it is only fair to add that Marco Polo had a reputation as a story-teller and did not always command belief. Even today, his account has to be treated cautiously, and there are signs that Rustichello was not above embellishing what Marco Polo had told him if he thought the romance of the story demanded it. There are also some curious omissions, such as any mention of the Great Wall, tea cultivation, or foot-binding. For the present purposes, however, what matters is not so much its accuracy as the view of China it imparted to Europe.

Khublai Khan comes out of Marco Polo's account very well; there are no criticisms of his policies. The overall thrust of *The Description* is immensely laudatory of China and its civilization, but not so positive about relations between the Mongol rulers and the Chinese people.

A few salient points should be recounted. Marco Polo was very impressed by China's richness and prosperity. Indeed, because of his account, Cathay, as he called North China, 'became for over two centuries synonymous with Eldorado — a fabulous land of wealth on the far side of the world'.[11]

Marco Polo was also much struck with the flourishing commerce and inter-regional trade he found in China. In particular, he admired the emperor's personal concern for his people's well-being. The Great Khan 'sends emissaries and inspectors throughout all his dominions' to find out if there has been a crop failure anywhere. 'And if he finds that any have lost their harvest, he exempts them for that year from their tribute and gives them some of his own grain to sow and to eat.' Marco Polo calls this 'a magnificent act of royal bounty'.[12] It is but one of a whole list of imperial kindnesses to the people, which gave Marco Polo the impression of a happy country indeed.

Polo was completely bowled over by Chinese cities. Kinsai (Hangzhou) he states flatly is 'without doubt the finest and most splendid city in the world'.[13] He describes the West Lake in the city: 'And all round it are stately palaces and mansions, of such workmanship that nothing better or more splendid could be devised or executed. These are the abodes of the nobles and magnates.'[14] It is also a very prosperous city with numerous and well stocked market-places.

Khan-balik is nearly as magnificent and prosperous. Palaces

and fine houses abound. 'The streets are so broad and straight' that 'you can see along the whole length of the road to the gate opposite'. There is much traffic but all is well controlled. 'The whole interior of the city is laid out in squares like a chess-board with such masterly precision that no description can do justice to it.'[15] Strong words indeed! Marco Polo does not dwell on the poverty he must have seen around him, perhaps because it was not as bad as what he was used to at home.

Marco Polo records the use of coal, which was apparently new to him and not in use in his native Italy, although it was certainly used in Britain in his time. All over the country of Cathay 'there is a sort of black stone, which is dug out of veins in the hillsides and burns like logs'. Wood exists in plenty also but the stones burn better and cheaper.

But the population is so enormous and there are so many bath-houses and baths continually being heated, that the wood could not possibly suffice, since there is no one who does not go to a bath-house at least three times a week and take a bath, and in winter every day, if he can manage it. And every man of rank or means has his own bathroom in his house, where he takes a bath. So it is clear there could never be enough wood to maintain such a conflagration.[16]

In the manner of his day, Marco Polo categorized people according to religion, not culture or race. Given the circumstances of Europe in his time, it is not surprising to find him extremely hostile to Islam. Yet towards the Buddhists he was very tolerant, even admiring. Although he called them 'idolators', the term was clearly not intended as insulting. He gave to the 'sages of the idolators' credit for the fact that the Great Khan provided alms to the poor.[17] He marvelled at the 'huge monasteries and abbeys, of such a size that I assure you that some resemble small cities inhabited by more than 2,000 monks'. The feasts they made for their 'idols' were splendid and accompanied by 'the most magnificent hymns and illuminations that were ever seen'.[18]

On the other hand, Marco Polo was not oblivious to certain political problems. He was well aware that the Mongols were overlords in someone else's country. 'The Great Khan had no legal title to rule the province of Cathay, having acquired

it by force.' For that reason he put authority not in the hands of Chinese, but in those of 'Tartars, Saracens, and Christians'. Polo recognized that, because of the domination of foreigners, 'all the Cathayans hated the government of the Great Khan'.[19] He is also quite open about the savage punishments meted out to rebels, such as being flayed alive, and about the dreadful beatings suffered by criminals.[20] His wording, however, everywhere suggests support for Mongol rule and the assumption that the Great Khan's opponents are in the wrong.

The Polos were travellers, merchants, and servants of the Mongol government, and there were others like them. Italian merchants, especially from Genoa, remained active in China up to the middle of the fourteenth century. Trade existed and Chinese silk was still sold in Europe, even though by this time there were also thriving silk industries in Sicily, Spain, and other places nearer home than China.

Franciscan friars travelled in China for missionary and other religious work. Among them the one to leave the most detailed record was Odoric of Pordenone (*c.* 1286–1331), who lived in China for some three years in the 1320s. Like Marco Polo he was much impressed with the splendour of Chinese cities; he described Hangzhou as 'the greatest city in the whole world'[21] and shared Polo's awe at Khan-balik and the Great Khan's court.[22] Unlike Polo, he noticed the custom of foot-binding and is the first Westerner to write of it: 'And with the women the great beauty is to have little feet; and for this reason mothers are accustomed, as soon as girls are born to them, to swathe their feet tightly so that they can never grow in the least.'[23]

The lack of any criticism of China's government or customs, even of so unfamiliar and cruel a custom as foot-binding, is symptomatic of Odoric's extremely positive attitude towards China. If anything, he is even more enthusiastic than Marco Polo. Constantly he uses superlatives, the biggest or finest, to describe something he has seen.

It is true that some people in the fourteenth and later centuries refused to believe Odoric's story. Yet it became extremely famous in his own day. Indeed, among the various medieval travelogues of the monks, which, of course, do not include Marco Polo's narrative, Odoric's was 'the only one that enjoyed great popularity throughout the ages',[24] and that is ample testimony to its role as a creator of images.

In the middle of the fourteenth century China and Europe again became cut off from one another. The collapse of the Mongol dynasty in China made the overland route to the west much more difficult to pass. Trade and interest in Europe or its religion dried up. The Black Death, which killed about a third of Europe's population between 1348 and 1351, created conditions which stopped European merchants or missionaries from travelling to far-off places. The first great era of Sino-European contact was over.

The Century of Discovery

In 1508 the Portuguese King Manuel I sent Diogo Lopez de Sequeira to reconnoitre Malacca and gave him the specific instruction to 'ask after the Chijns, and from what part they come, and from how far'.[25] For the next century or so, a revived interest in China centred on Portuguese and Spanish authors.

Three men produced eyewitness accounts of parts of southern China which formed the basis of sixteenth-century European knowledge and images of China. Galeote Pereira was a Portuguese soldier, sailor, and merchant adventurer who was captured off the coast of Fujian for smuggling in 1549 and unfortunate enough to be held under arrest for several years. Gaspar da Cruz was a Portuguese Dominican, while Martin de Rada was a Spanish Augustinian priest whose writing reports his visit to Fujian in 1575. All three wrote accounts of their stays in China, but only the first two were printed in their own day, Pereira's in Italian translation in 1565 and da Cruz's in its original Portuguese in 1569–70. Pereira's work covered not only China but also other places as well and circulated fairly widely in its time. Da Cruz's book, by contrast, remained rather rare, possibly because it was published in Portugal during a plague epidemic. Being in Portuguese it could not hope to achieve as wide a readership as Pereira's account.

Pereira emphasizes the large size and population of China. He has quite a bit to say about the officials who 'are served and feared'. He describes them as 'an idle generation, without all manner of exercises and pastimes, except it be eating and drinking'.[26] Having been closely involved with it himself, Pereira also describes the legal system in great detail. He notes the beatings with bamboo whips, which make 'the standers-by

tremble at their cruelty',[27] and the effects they produce on the sufferer, as well as the severe prisons from which escape is impossible. At the same time, Pereira's experience made him believe the Chinese law system fair. The public trials rendered false testimony out of the question. His summation is that the Chinese are better than Christians 'in doing justice' and 'more bounden than they to deal justly and in truth'.[28] Clearly Pereira's favourable verdict resulted from the outcome of his own case. Viceroy Zhu Wan, who was initially responsible for his arrest, committed suicide after losing a power struggle over his strong enforcement of anti-smuggling and foreign-trade laws. Though he may not have known it, Pereira's own trial probably functioned to gain incriminating evidence against Zhu Wan.

Gaspar da Cruz's *Treatise in which the Things of China are Related at Great Length* 'may fairly be claimed as the first book devoted to China which was printed in Europe'.[29] Unlike Marco Polo's book, much of which is about other countries, da Cruz's is about 90 per cent directly concerned with China. It thus occupies a major place in the history of Western literature on China, even if its relatively narrow circulation puts it lower in the scale of sixteenth-century Western image-formulators of China than Pereira's account.

Gaspar da Cruz spent only a few months in China altogether, and much of his work is based on Pereira, a debt which he frankly acknowledges. Yet da Cruz was a most observant and honest traveller and his book contains many interesting and perceptive comments. Like many others he was impressed with China's prosperity, and while he saw poverty he could state that 'these poor people notwithstanding do not live so poorly and beggarly in their apparel as do those who live poorly in Portugal'.[30] He also commented favourably on Chinese agriculture, and on the industriousness of the people. 'China is almost all a well husbanded country', he observed, where the people 'are great eaters' and 'every one laboureth to get a living, and every one seeketh ways to earn their food'. But they are not so kind to the underdog or the lazy, as da Cruze goes on to point out: 'A great help . . . is that idle people be much abhorred in this country, and are very odious unto the rest, and he that laboureth not shall not eat, for commonly there is none that do give alms to the poor.'[31]

The only chapter to be designated 'notable' in its title is that which deals with those 'who are sentenced to death, and . . . other matters that pertain to justice'. Although this chapter is at least partly based on Pereira's experience, the overall impression it gives the reader is in fact very much more critical. While da Cruz follows Pereira in suggesting that open trials made false testimony very rare, he has more to say in more gruesome language about the savagery of the penal and prison system which obtained in the China of the sixteenth century.[32]

As is to be expected, Gaspar da Cruz suffered from the religious intolerance of his age. Yet in some respects he was remarkably, even extraordinarily, broadminded. For instance, he was the first, and for quite a long time the only, European writer to remark upon Chinese music. Moreover, he took the trouble to understand some of the various musical instruments and singing styles, and did so not to condemn but to appreciate. He describes the Chinese as 'commonly very ingenious and cunning with their hands' and comments on their achievements in the arts, with 'many inventions in every kind of work', especially masonry and painting.[33] In fact, Gaspar da Cruz's *Treatise* was a remarkable achievement, which deserved a wider readership in its own day than it got.

About 1583, in response to considerable and growing interest in China among educated Europeans, Pope Gregory XIII (reigned 1572–85) ordered the composition of a comprehensive history of China. The chosen author was the Augustinian priest Juan Gonzalez de Mendoza. Basing himself on Pereira's, da Cruz's, as well as de Rada's and other accounts, he produced the best-selling and pathbreaking *History of the Great and Mighty Kingdom of China*, published in Rome in Spanish in 1585.[34] He never realized his dream to visit China and was the earliest of a number of great European scholars whom circumstances prevented from setting foot in the country which fascinated them so much.

Mendoza tried, and largely succeeded, in collecting together in one volume everything which was known in the West about China, the first man ever to attempt such a task. This alone makes his *History* very significant. It was also very successful, and consequently influential. No other book created images of China in late sixteenth-century Europe as this one did. By the end of the sixteenth century it had been reprinted

46 times in seven European languages: Spanish, German, Dutch, Italian, French, English, and Latin. As the scholar C. R. Boxer aptly writes: 'It is probably no exaggeration to say that Mendoza's book had been read by the majority of well-educated Europeans at the beginning of the seventeenth century'.[35] Its authority was so great that 'it became the point of departure and the basis of comparison' for all later works on China written in Europe before the eighteenth century.[36]

Like Marco Polo and other early writers, Mendoza is much impressed by the size of China. It is 'the most biggest and populous that is mentioned in all the world'.[37] The title of the book itself, with its reference to 'the great and mighty kingdom', already shows the thrust of Mendoza's view of China. The cities he writes of in exuberant terms, emphasizing the magnificence of their walls, and the splendour of their streets, which are 'very well paved, and so broad that 15 horsemen may ride together in them'.[38] The highways everywhere in China are, according to Mendoza, 'the best and gallantest paved that ever hath been discovered'. Both in their streets and their houses, the Chinese are 'marvellous clean'.[39]

Mendoza writes of the central and local bureaucracy in much detail and with admiration. The highest officials he says 'generally have a marvellous moral virtue, and that is, they be all very patient in hearing any complaint'.[40] He is aware of the examination system by which men entered the public service and describes it in enthusiastic terms.[41]

On the other hand, Mendoza is harshly critical of the legal system. He notes the savage punishments given out by the courts and describes in great detail the 'cruel torments' used to extract confessions. Admittedly, he is defensive even here: 'yet do they execute none of them [the tortures] except first they have good information',[42] as if innocent people hardly ever confessed under torture, but the picture is pretty grim all the same. The prisons are 'as terrible and as cruel' as the punishments, and since the population is so large, 'so have they many prisons and very great'. In this way the officials can 'keep in peace and justice this mighty kingdom'.[43]

Like most other relevant writers of his time, Mendoza was very favourably impressed by the Chinese family system. The women are not only attractive but also virtuous, 'secret and

honest',[44] meaning that one does not often see them in public. And foot-binding he discusses in some detail without criticism. 'She who hath the least feet is accounted the gallantest dame', he says, quite correctly. The reason for the custom he believes to be to immobilize women, both in the home and outside it,[45] almost certainly a very incomplete analysis.

Finally, Mendoza treats the subject of religion in China with spectacles rosily tinted by his own Christian beliefs. He does not appear to have understood Confucian rationalism at all and his accounts of monastic life read like descriptions of Christian monasticism. He states directly that the Chinese believe in the immortality of the soul: the soul of a virtuous person 'shall live eternally with great joy, and shall be made an angel' whereas that of an evil one 'shall go with the devils into dark dungeons and prisons'.[46]

Mendoza's book was strongly attacked by the Constable of Castile, D. Juan Fernández de Velasco, soon after it was published. The basic ground was that Mendoza's account extolled China's greatness too much.[47] What is crucial is that Mendoza appears to have carried the public with him and European images of China followed his version rather closely. In other words, they remained dominantly positive and more detailed than at any earlier time.

It is necessary to remember that what most concerned Mendoza and many others was the conversion of the Chinese to Christianity. There were even some who wished to impose Christianity on China by military force. In 1576 the governor of the Philippine Islands, Dr Francisco de Sande, formally proposed a military attack on China, but King Philip II of Spain fortunately rejected the suggestion the next year and instead suggested 'good friendship' with the Chinese. Mendoza was clearly in the 'peace camp', but the eyes with which he viewed China were just as dedicated to Christianity none the less.

The sixteenth century was, for Europe, the age of discovery. Although India, the East Indies, and the Philippines had loomed larger in Europe's consciousness in the first half of the century, China and Japan replaced it in the dominant place from about 1550 on. Most of the authors and readers on China were not only genuinely interested in it, but also very favourably disposed towards it. Their aim to convert it to Christianity was senseless

and futile but not yet imperialistic. At the end of the sixteenth century, Europe may have believed it could teach the Chinese, but was still prepared to admire them.