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## **China of Marvels**

### **Reality of a legend**

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Since that day in 53 B.C., at Carrhae in Asia Minor, when the Roman soldiers were dazzled by the bright colors of silk flags held by the Parthian army, the mysterious country associated with the production of that marvelous material, i.e., China, has always occupied a quasi-mythical place in the dreams of the Western people.<sup>1</sup>

But dreams about far away China have been very different from one epoch to another. One could say, in a rather schematic way, that after the image of a *China of Marvels* introduced by the medieval travellers, there came the *China of Enlightenment* praised by the Jesuits and 18<sup>th</sup> century French philosophers, followed at the time of European expansionism and "break down of China", by *China of exotics*, still much in favour to this day.

It may look a paradox that among these three approaches, only the earlier one has been fair enough to China, which for several centuries, especially under the Song and Yuan dynasties, was truly much advanced in most fields, compared to Western countries. It is from the Opium War onwards that the prejudices against China have been the strongest, just at the time when travels being easier to undertake, scholars had found a renewed interest in the study of faraway countries and undertaken new research on the manuscripts left by the numerous medieval travellers who had gone to China.

Their critical analysis of most of these texts helped to elucidate a number of problems, especially those related to the alterations which had occurred in the process of copies and translations. Thank to these studies, and to the development of geographical sciences, it became then clear that many stories told by medieval travellers, which in their time were considered as mere fables (everyone knows the surname of *Milione* given to Marco Polo by his countrymen), were in fact absolutely faithful to a reality that, in some cases, has been kept alive to this very day.

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Luce Boulnois, *La Route de la soie*, éditions Olizane, Genève 1986, pp. 17-18.

While shooting a documentary film on Zayton in June 1988, I have been myself quite impressed by the fact that the big sea junks which are still being built around the bay of Quanzhou are very similar to the ones described with great accuracy by Marco Polo, Ibn Battuta and others.

After the discovery in 1974 of the big sea junk of Song dynasty now exhibited by the "Museum of Overseas Communications" in Quanzhou, the work undertaken by the archeologists provided another confirmation of the veracity of the descriptions made the medieval travellers.<sup>2</sup>

When I read the four volumes published by Sir Henry Yule entitled *Cathay and the way thither*.<sup>3</sup> I tried to look at this compilation of medieval notices on China, not only with the eyes of Sir Henry who was mostly interested in historical geography, but with the preoccupations of nowadays historians who can find in these texts valuable information for a comparative study of mentalities and behaviours in both China and Western countries. Such an approach should allow us to get a better valuation of the medieval world, too often looked upon as backward and narrow-minded, but in many occasions, these texts are here to prove that it was more open minded and more able to accept alterity than our modern times.

After many centuries of aperture, all of a sudden, at the end of the Yuan dynasty, the situation changed completely and China unanimously praised by all medieval travellers as a country of peace and tolerance, came through a long period of anti-foreign reaction. When sea trade was prohibited at the beginning of the Ming dynasty, many foreigners had to leave the country and the rise of xenophobia obliged the ones who had stayed to hide their differences. The Chinese-western relationship was entering a new era.

About one century later, when Portuguese landed near Guanzhou and tried to enter China, the spirit had so completely changed, that for many years the missionaries would not believe this country was the marvelous place described as Cathay in Marco Polo's book.

In their time, the Jesuits were great connoisseurs of China and truly admired a mode of government which, through their writings became a source of admiration as well as a model for 18<sup>th</sup> century European philosophers, especially the French. But, in fact, as shown clearly

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. *Wenwu*, October 1975, n° 10; cf. also Claudine Salmon and Denys Lombard in *Archipel*, n° 18.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Sir Henry Yule, *Cathay and the way thither*, 2nd ed. revised by Henri Cordier, Hakluyt Society, London 1915-1916.

by Jacques Gernet<sup>4</sup>, the misunderstandings between them and the Chinese were very deep and the antagonism between their theories and Chinese traditional thought became more and more apparent after Matteo Ricci's death.

The Jesuits were very educated and knew China pretty well, but what to say of other missionaries who were not always so keen to understand the local people and tried too often to impose their ways. From 19<sup>th</sup> century onwards, the collusion between missionaries and colonial powers developed a strong animosity among the Chinese people.

The Opium War evolved a deep traumatism and destroyed the last remnants of trust between two worlds that had become antagonists in most fields and were now unable to understand each other anymore. From that time on, western powers became more and more aggressive and, by way of compensation, the feeling towards China grew more and more prejudiced. The Boxer rebellion drove that situation to a paroxysm when the Germans tried to justify their own will of conquest by creating the fake of "*yellow peril*" which met a lasting success among the foreigners.

The image of China had indeed undertaken great changes: in best case scenario it was presented as a beautiful and strange place, somehow frightening in many aspects, a sort of faraway planet where things were totally different and always mysterious, not to say unintelligible. The French book *Le Jardin des supplices* by Octave Mirbeau is representative of that state of mind. It is after Opium war that a connotation of useless intricacy has been attached, in most western languages, to the word Chinese... But at the same time the old feeling of admiration for Chinese civilization has kept very strong which raises contradictory reactions.

On the Chinese side, one can find the same sort of prejudice, with even today foreigners called "devils" by many local people, even though the official language has tried to change it to "old friends" or "distinguished guests".

The Chinese used to say that from the Opium War onwards, the conflicts with the foreigners and the treaties they imposed by force have established an "unequal" relationship. It is a rather mild way to characterize the many aggressions then committed against China but at the same time it is recognition of a previous time when the relations had been "equal",

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. Jacques Gernet, *Chine et Christianisme*, éditions Gallimard, Paris 1982.

which was obviously the case for centuries from what we can learn from the medieval archives.

One of the oldest manuscripts kept in the Paris *Bibliothèque nationale* is a compilation of Arabic-Persian texts of the 9<sup>th</sup> century by the merchant Sulayman and the scholar Abu Zayd which describe China in a way very similar to that of later medieval travellers. Written in the 14<sup>th</sup> century, the *Travels of Ibn Battuta*, the famous Moroccan who spent all his life wandering in Asia, show a sincere admiration for China "*which people of all mankind has the greatest skill and taste in the arts*", "*the safest and the pleasantest of all the regions on the earth for a traveller ..* " Very similar praises can be found in the texts left by Marco Polo, Friar Odoric of Pordenone, John of Monte Corvino, John de Marignolli and many others. All of these people had really been to China where they had spent quite a lot of time, so it seems difficult not to take their testimony into consideration.

But it seems that the letter sent in 1326 by Andrea, then bishop of Zayton, to the superior of his ancient convent in Perugia, remains one the most beautiful testimony ever written on China, as well as a piece of anthology. Some excerpts give an idea of the spirit prevalent at the time:

“... On account of the immense distance by land and sea interposed between us, I can scarcely hope that a letter from me to you can come to hand ...”

“As to the wealth, splendour and glory of this great emperor, the vastness of his domination, the multitudes of people subject to him, the number and greatness of his cities, and the constitution of an empire, within which no man dares to draw a sword against his neighbour ... “

“It is a fact that in this vast empire, there are people of every nation under heaven, and of every sect, and all and sundry are allowed to live freely according to their creed. For they hold this opinion, or rather this erroneous view, that everyone can find salvation in his own religion. Howbeit we are at liberty to preach without let or hindrance ...”

Except from that letter, no other record of Andrea has been kept. Only a stele found in Quanzhou and now exhibited in the Museum of Overseas Communication, has been authenticated as his tombstone by John Foster<sup>5</sup>, but it bears Latin characters by the hand of a

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. l'article de Louis Hambis « Les cimetières étrangers de la région de Zaytoun » in *Comptes-rendus de l'Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres*.

local engraver which is not easy to decipher and nobody knows for sure. Anyway, the most important remains Andrea's letter which speaks of a time when peace and tolerance prevailed in China. That was more than six centuries ago and there is no reason why in modern times it would not be possible to recover such an ideal.