

Reflections of the Orient

The image of China through European cartography

Land of legend, above all others, that the Western world dreamed of yet also feared. For more than two millennium the Orient was the destination aimed for by the European merchants, missionaries, and travelers to satisfy their thirst for riches and knowledge. A fascinating and enchanted world of vast resources from where came valuable wares, silk, precious stones, and spices.

Faced with this mirage, it is not surprising that groups of navigators, explorers, and travelers lost themselves at sea, in the desert, on the mountains and in the forests while seeking to reach this mysterious and legendary country that during the Middle Ages was equaled to the Garden of Eden.

Maps, charts, books, paintings, astronomical, nautical, and topographical instruments all tell of this long journey, dotted with successes and failures, through which the East and West met. It is the story of a voyage that pushed man to explore and search for even more clever and sophisticated techniques and instruments.

Maps and charts also reveal how China's image changed throughout the centuries of European culture, the interactions that took place between these two worlds, and they show the reciprocal stimulus in favor of knowledge and civilization.

During this European Year of Intercultural Dialogue, the Castello del Buonconsiglio hosts this exhibit organized by the Centro Studi "Martino Martini" of Trento with the collaboration of the museum and the Soprintendenza ai Beni Librari e Archivistici of the Autonomous Province of Trento, presenting to the public the meeting of European civilization with that of the Chinese civilization.

ANTIQUITY.

THE SILK ROADS

In ancient times, the Mediterranean Sea was a formidable basin of communication between Europe, Asia, and Africa.

The people that were settled along its coasts revealed a great interest for voyages, exploration, and commerce along the Mediterranean routes as well as inland: half of these incessant searches were for the Orient, where rare and precious products such as spice, balms, rare stones and fabrics could be obtained.

The existence of a great and powerful empire beyond the steppes and mountains was known even in ancient Rome. Nevertheless, information about the Middle Kingdom brought by merchants and travellers, was often confusing and generated myths and falsehoods.

The voyages made by the Greeks, Phoenicians, and Egyptians combined with astronomical studies, made it possible for the Hellenistic geographers to create the *ecumene*, literally “that part of the world inhabited by man”. It consisted of a scheme based on two perpendicular axes: a fundamental parallel that crosses the length of the Mediterranean Sea, and a fundamental meridian which passes through Rhodes and joins the two poles. In Alexandria, Egypt, already in the 3rd century B.C. Eratosthenes was able to calculate the earth’s circumference with an approximation very near that of the real value, while subsequently, in the 2nd century A.D., Claudius Ptolemy devised a grid of meridians and parallels with which it was possible to identify every relevant geographic object.

The Romans created maps for practical purposes, introducing the principle of symbolism, as documented by the *Tabula Peutingeriana*, a medieval copy of a Roman road map.

THE MIDDLE AGES.

CHINA BETWEEN MYTH AND REALITY

“Know that Catayo (China) is at the end of the face of the Earth, in line with l’España (Spain) and borders with the empire of Armalec (Bengal) towards the west; with the Oriental sea towards the east; and towards the north to the Caspian mountains that form a barrier to the walled Tartaria”.

Libro della conoscenza di tutti i Regni, Paesi e Signorie che esistono nel Mondo, ca. 1350

The first centuries of the Middle Ages in Europe were marked by instability and political break-up brought about by the decline of the Roman Empire and by the formation of new Kingdoms; in the Mediterranean countries from Morocco to Persia, the Islamic expansion created a new and imposing linguistic and religious community.

Peoples and cultures met and clashed.

Beginning in the 11th century, merchants from the Old Continent resumed trading on the eastern shores of the Mediterranean Sea, connecting with the caravans from central Asia. The Orient, with its exotic and precious products, attracted the curiosity and interest of travelers and merchants. Marco Polo, whose voyage lasted twenty-four years, is probably the most famous explorer of a faraway, different and mysterious world known only through legends and fantastic stories. Throughout his book, *Il Milione*, he describes in detail those places that intrigue, revealing to his contemporaries a civilization that opens itself up to the western world.

The maps of that period reflected the widespread feeling of fear and uncertainty: the earth inhabited by monsters and violent beings, in a whirl of frightening allegories that foretell the end of humanity. The map of the *ecumene*, symbolically oriented towards the east, places Jerusalem in the centre.; in the Far East is the Paradise of Eden and in the north of China, the feared Land of Gog and Magog, the demons of the end of the world.

Unlike these maps, the ones used by merchants appear more practical and concrete. Thanks to exchanges with Arab sailors, to the expeditions by travelers like Marco Polo, and to the use of the compass, an invention traditionally attributed to the Chinese dating from the 12th century, the western merchants acquired information always more detailed and useful concerning the regions known as the “East Indies” or the “land of Spices”

THE SIXTEENTH CENTURY.

THE ROAD TO INDIA

“China, is to be considered one of the greatest empires that has ever been”.

Giovanni Botero, *Le Relazioni Universali*, 1591

A new faith in man and his abilities, combined with a renewed interest for classical culture, considered a model for perfection, marked the first decades of the modern era. Between the 15th and 16th centuries, many inventions and discoveries allowed man to cross new frontiers of knowledge and of the world.

Thanks to the introduction and perfecting of certain instruments, such as the astrolabe and the nautical quadrant, and to a more precise calculation of the latitudes, the European mariners headed out to the open seas, surpassing the limits imposed on medieval man due to ignorance, superstition and technology. The East Indies continued to be the half-way point through new maritime routes. It was during one of these voyages that Christopher Columbus in 1492 discovered by chance a new continent, America. The Portuguese navigators opened a direct sea route to China thus providing access to the country.

Geographical explorations and new discoveries forced cartographers to continually update maps and charts. Continuing the tradition of the medieval pilot's book and nautical charts, these were most always limited to descriptions of ports and coastlines only, with few notations concerning the inland, towns, mines and their deposits, and production centres for precious materials such as silk and spices

Thanks to printing, a Chinese invention introduced to Europe by Johann Gutenberg (1456), larger and more economical maps, richer in detail, were produced and widely distributed. The most famous works are the atlas published by Abraham Ortelius, and Gerardus Mercator's maps based on new calculations and a projection system using crescent latitudes.

THE SEVENTEENTH CENTURY. EXPLORERS AND MISSIONARIES

Some call it Serica, others Sina or China and the Tartars Catai, or Mangin (...) but the Chinese on the other hand, give the name Chunghoa (Zhonghua) and Cungque (Zhongguo) to their Empire.

Martino Martini, *Novus Atlas Sinensis*, 1655

Travels and geographic explorations were not only privileges of merchants and mariners but also Christian missionaries. Already in the Middle Ages, in the *pax mongolica* period, Dominican and Franciscan monks sent by the Pope or the King of France reached northern China with diplomatic and apostolic duties.

In the 17th century, the missionaries that headed to the Orient belonged to the Society of Jesus, founded in 1534 by the Spanish nobleman Ignatius di Loyola, with the purpose of defending the Christian faith and converting the people of the just recently discovered land.

The Jesuits were the first Westerners to learn the native language and put together bilingual dictionaries; they are among those with the most thorough knowledge of the territory and of the Chinese culture. Matteo Ricci created a map of the world based on Ortelio's atlas, incorporating the superior technical levels reached in Chinese cartography. In the 1600 version, printed and distributed in hundreds of copies, China is actually positioned in the centre.

Martino Martini, the author of the *Novus Atlas Sinensis* (1655), was from the Trentino area, and was also a Jesuit. For his drafting, he collected, examined, and summarized the immense quantity of data, precise and detailed, that the Chinese functionaries had noted for tax purposes concerning the inhabitants, territory, and resources. For almost a century the *Atlas* was considered the most reliable work on the Chinese empire ever to be published in Europe.

From Trento to China

The Jesuit Martino Martini, great explorer of the 17th Century

Among the great European explorers of China emerged the figure of the Jesuit, Martino Martini, born in Trento in 1614. He grew up in this frontier city between the Germanic

Empire and the Italian peninsula, in the lively and dynamic mercantile quarter shared by merchants and artisans of different nationalities. One of the more gifted students of the Jesuit College founded at that time in the Trentino capital, he was sent on to the prestigious Collegio Germanico of Rome where influential professors helped nurture the inclinations that took him to the faraway Orient.

In China, Martini distinguished himself as an attentive observer of the country and its culture, an extraordinary witness to the tumultuous transition from the Ming dynasty to that of the Qing, as told in his *De Bello Tartarico Historia*. He is the first Western scholar to approach the great Chinese geo-cartographic tradition in a systematic and respectful way, and at that time, the Chinese geographers had already reached a noteworthy level of development. Making use of this knowledge, the Trentino Jesuit was able to put together an original description of the great Asiatic country, the *Novus Atlas Sinensis* in 1655, based on the more important Chinese works, supplemented with his own findings and observations. It is thanks to this work that the European intellectuals broadened their geographic knowledge of China, of its history, its language and its customs.

THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY.

SCIENCE AND PASSION FOR THE ORIENT

China is the only Asian country that has geographical dimensions, because the Emperor Kangxi used Jesuit astronomers to draw exact maps.

Voltaire, *Philosophical Dictionary*, 1764

In the 18th century, faith in the sciences supported by the ideas of the Enlightenment influenced every aspect of human knowledge from art to literature, law to economics, science to technology including geography and cartography.

Western scientists relied only on ascertained facts and excluded every element not supported by direct experience: monstrous creatures, imaginary plants and animals, and unknown places all disappeared from the cartographic descriptions. The cartographer preferred to leave blank spaces for the unknown areas, or those only partially explored, to be completed on subsequent versions of the map.

Every unknown region of the world became a space to explore, to get to know, to colonize.

Among the peoples that most aroused the Europeans' curiosity and knowledge are the Chinese, possibly because they appeared closed and impenetrable. A veritable "Chinoiserie" fashion is born. All that originates from the Celestial Kingdom, or that which is reminded of it, is pleasing, interesting, and admired. A taste for porcelain, spices and teas spreads. The profound wisdom, refinement and excellence recognised in the Chinese civilization questions the presumed supremacy of the European civilization.

THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

ENCOUNTERS AND CLASHES OF EMPIRES

When China awakes, the world will tremble

Napoleon Bonaparte, 1816

In the 19th century, China was a market outlet and source of raw materials and it wetted the appetites of the Westerners. England used force to export Indian opium in exchange for Chinese tea, and a coalition including the United States and France, forced the emperor to sign the Treaty of Nanking, the first of many that opened several ports to free trade. Thus began a period of subordination of the Middle Kingdom to Western colonialism, which also influenced the cartographic representations focusing only on the coastal regions and the commercial bases, while neglecting the inland details.

Cartography was one of the most efficient tools available to Western imperialism as it offered actual guidelines for territorial expansion. Maps were useful to the politician, the strategist, and the merchant or ship-owner for identifying the routes and establishing the steps towards the consolidation of the domain.

THE ORIENTAL CHARM

SOUVENIRS AND CHINOISERIE

The fascination that the Europeans had towards Oriental culture and art is shown through the travels and explorations of these faraway lands, and through the seeking and collecting of exotic objects.

In all of Europe, from the 18th century up until now, many collections of *Chinoiserie* were formed, as shown in this section that concludes this exhibit.

Objects of various nature, vases, printing matrixes, astronomical instruments, porcelain, and opium pipes, are united here simply by this taste for the Orient.

Fans, funerary tablets and bronzes from various time periods originating from the Madonne delle Grazie Convent in Arco collection, are the souvenirs and donations received by the Franciscan missionaries in China during the early decades of the 19th century.

There are symbols and signs of the Mandarins' power such as the valuable bronze and jade sceptre, the seals, and the metal tips of the headgear from the Qing Dynasty, originating from a private collection. The Mandarins, a title that was also bestowed on the European missionaries including Martino Martini, were high ranking imperial, civil or military officials. Prestige and authoritativeness were manifest through the clothing's quality and richness, decorated with embroidered symbols, precious stones, and fasteners with precise hierarchical significance.