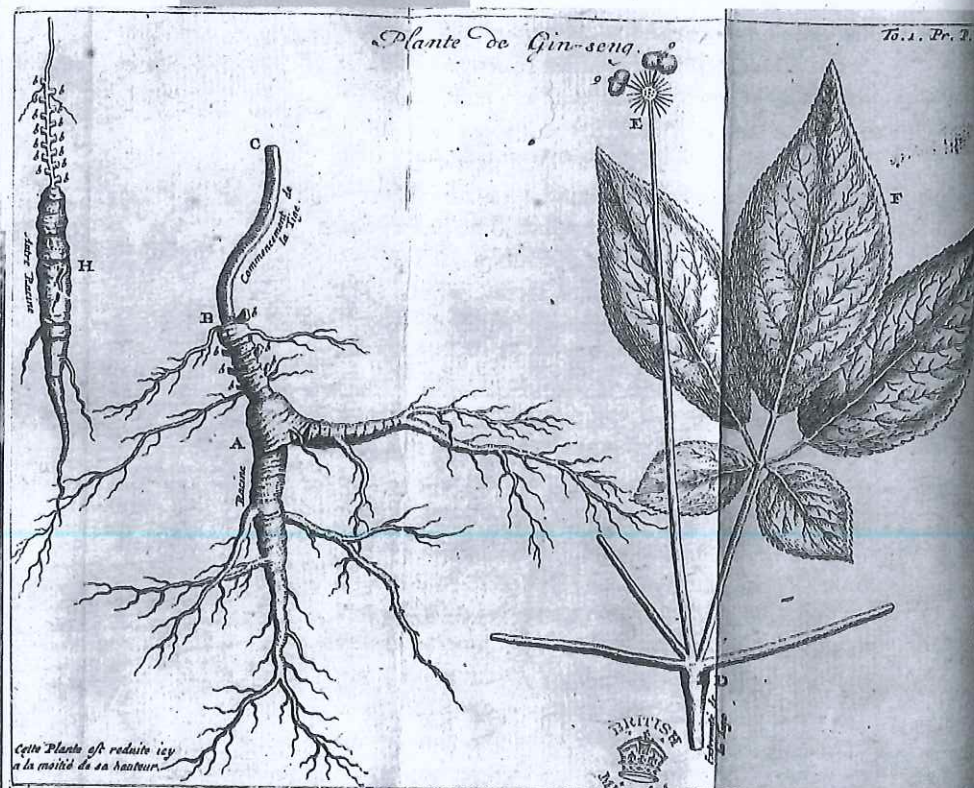




JESUIT CHINA

The Jesuit exploration of China from the end of the sixteenth century led to an enormous growth in information about China. Romantic tales about China and vague references to the Great Khan and Cathayans were overtaken by a mass of observed detail. This was translated into all the languages of Europe and had a considerable effect on seventeenth- and eighteenth-century intellectuals, diplomats and politicians.

The Society of Jesus was recognised by the Pope in 1540 and soon took a lead in missionary work beyond Europe, following Spanish and Portuguese expansion in both Latin America and Asia, in the latter case with bases in Goa and Macao. One of the earliest members of the Jesuit order, St Francis Xavier (1506-1552), spent many years in India, Southeast Asia and Japan, before dying near Macao from where he had hoped to embark upon a mission to

Opposite: The 'miracle plant' ginseng, described by the Jesuit father Jartoux in Peking in his 'Lettre touchant la plante de Ginseng' (1711), printed in *Recueil de Voyages*, Paris, 1718.

Father Matteo Ricci,
the Jesuit priest who
reached the Ming
court in 1601. From Du
Halde, *Description...de
l'Empire de la Chine
et de la Tartarie*, 1736.
(Frances Wood)



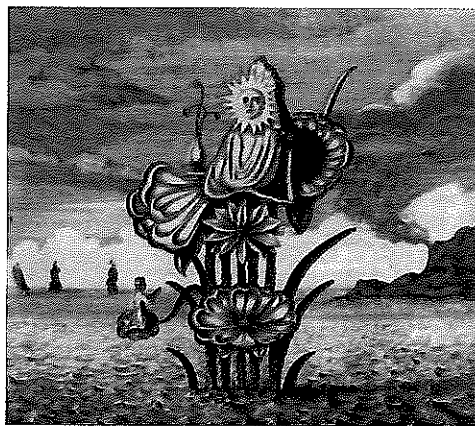
China. The main mission to China itself began with the arrival of Michele Ruggieri who, after impressing the local officials with a clock, was given permission to set up a mission station in Zhaoqing, Guangdong, where he was joined in the next year by Matteo Ricci. In 1601, Ricci entered the Ming court in Peking, and Jesuits were to serve in the Chinese court as tutors in mathematics, map makers, imperial astronomers, painters and architects for over 150 years. They published works in Chinese on Christianity and translations into Chinese of mathematical works by Euclid and Clavius, and also works in Latin that introduced Chinese philosophy to Europe, such as *Sapientia Sinica* (1662) and *Confucius Sinarum Philosophus* (1687).

The story of the Jesuits in China from the early seventeenth century to the mid-eighteenth century is one of great achievements, frequent setbacks, and inclusion and expulsion, the whole complicated by internal splits and external jealousies. However, because of instructions from Rome that the Jesuits report frequently on their experiences, a mass of significant information about China was produced from firsthand accounts.

Though there are detailed letters from the Jesuits covering their missionary work in China in archives in Rome and Lisbon in particular, and a bunch of letters dating to 1700 which were given to the British captain of an East India Company ship for delivery to Rome and Paris that he handed over instead to the British authorities (and are now held in the State Paper collection in the National Archive at Kew), it was the published accounts of China that had the greatest circulation and the greatest impact on Europe.

The first publication of significance was Athanasius Kircher's *China Illustrata* (1667), but this, like Mendoza's account, was compiled by a Jesuit in Rome on the basis of reports sent by colleagues in the field. Some of the earliest eyewitness accounts to appear were included in the *Lettres Edifiantes et Curieuses de Chine*, published between 1702 and 1776. These were, in the first instance, edited by Jean-Baptiste du Halde, whose own *Geographical Description of China* was published in 1736. The title of the volume of letters implies its content. It was essential that the Jesuits, whose conversion of the Chinese proceeded very slowly, should seem to be 'edifying' at the same time as conveying interesting information about a strange and distant land.

Though the Jesuits pioneered eyewitness accounts of China, the earliest publications were still based on second-hand sources. This bizarre depiction of a statue of the Bodhisattva Guanyin, based entirely upon written sources, was included in Athanasius Kircher's *China monumentis, qua sacra qua profanes, nec no variis naturae et artis spectaculis, aliarumque verum membrabilium argumentis illustrata*, Amsterdam, 1667. (Frances Wood)



One of the first Jesuit letters included was a description of Canton by Father Bouvet, written from the city in 1699. After recounting the trip upriver, past rice fields with tree-covered hills behind, it describes the city of Canton as being of the size of Paris but with fewer inhabitants. 'The roads are straight and paved with great flat stones' and the priests travelled easily in sedan chairs, overtaking carts. 'The houses are low and mostly fronted by shops... one sees few women and most of the people in the streets are poor men carrying loads, for the main method of moving goods for sale is on the shoulders of barefoot men... But in Canton there are beautiful open spaces and triumphal arches and many gates when you enter from the countryside or pass from the old town to the new... The residences of the mandarins are intriguing. You have to cross a great number of courtyards until you reach the place where they receive visitors and friends.'

Like the captain of the *Rook* in Amoy, writing about the grand processions of the emperors, Bouvet was struck by mandarin processions: 'When they go out, they are accompanied by

a majestic retinue. The Governor of the Two Provinces, for example, only ever goes out with at least 100 men. The procession is orderly with everyone knowing his place. Before him goes a troupe of men carrying special emblems and wearing special clothes; there is a great troupe of soldiers, usually on foot and the mandarin himself is in the centre of the procession, raised up on a large gilded chair carried on the shoulders of six or eight men. These processions take up the whole street and the local people line the sides of the streets, waiting respectfully until the procession has passed.' Further on in his long letter, Bouvet mentioned the town of Foshan (famous for its ceramics) where the population was swelled by five thousand boats, on each of which 'lived an entire family with their children and the children of their children.'

Using their expertise in the service of the emperors (with the long-term hope of conversion), the Jesuits introduced anti-malarial quinine to China. Their first patient was the Kangxi emperor (r. 1661-1722). The French missionary Father de Fontenoy wrote in 1703, 'The Emperor was ill when we arrived... for the last two years he had shown a great interest in European medicines... he was suffering from the beginnings of a severe fever.' It appeared that he was suffering from malaria. 'We brought a pound of quinine', then unknown in Peking, sent to them by a Jesuit missionary from Pondicherry and 'offered it as the most reliable remedy for intermittent fever that was known in Europe.' The Emperor's senior advisors were delighted; 'we taught them how to prepare it' but 'they also wanted to know where it came from, what was its effect, what could it cure?' before trying it out on three fever sufferers, and 'I don't know if God wished to demonstrate his



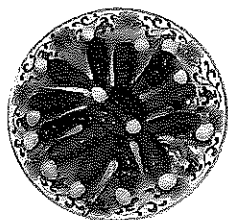
The Kangxi emperor in his study in the Forbidden City. Behind him soft-paper bound volumes in cloth-covered cases are arranged on bookshelves. (Palace Museum, Beijing)

powers on this occasion but the three sick men, who were kept under watch in the palace, all recovered after the first dose. The Emperor was immediately informed and would have taken the quinine straightaway had not the Crown Prince, worried about the illness of a beloved father, feared a bad reaction that had not yet been seen. He reproached the Emperor's advisors for their haste in informing the Emperor and they, to demonstrate that there was nothing to fear, offered to take the medicine themselves, to which the prince consented. Straightaway glasses of wine and quinine were brought, the prince prepared the mixture himself and the four men took it, in front of him, at six o'clock in the evening. They went to bed and slept peacefully, suffering no ill effect. The Emperor, who had a very bad night, called Prince Sosan at three o'clock in the morning and, having heard that he and the others had suffered no ill effects, immediately took the quinine without further deliberation. He expected a return of the fever the next afternoon but it did not come and he was fine for the rest of the day and night. There was great joy in the palace...' ⁱⁱ

Medical expertise was, however, not a matter of European superiority, for the Jesuits also learned the Chinese technique of vaccination against smallpox and about 'the miracle plant, ginseng'. Father Jartoux wrote in 1711 that 'the best doctors in China have written volumes about [ginseng], and they include it in almost all the remedies that they prepare for great men as it is too expensive for poor people. They say it is a sovereign remedy for the ravages of excessive exertion both bodily and mental... cures weakness of the lungs and pleurisy, stops vomiting, fortifies the stomach and revives the appetite...strengthens the vital spirit...is

efficacious against faintness and dizziness and prolongs life expectancy for the old.' Father Jartoux was impressed and tried it himself, finding that it improved his pulse and appetite and left him 'with much more energy and enthusiasm for work than I had had before.' Some days later, when he found himself so tired he could hardly move, he took it again, and 'I have used it again several times, always with the same success. I note that [apart from the root] the fresh leaves and the fibres that I chewed, produced the same effect.' He eventually found that he preferred a ginseng infusion to the best tea. ⁱⁱⁱ

The prevention of smallpox by blowing dried smallpox scabs up the nose (variolation) had been practised for centuries in China but was quite unknown in Europe until Father D'Entrecolles' letter of 1726 was published. It greatly affected the French philosopher Voltaire, who was incensed by the failure of the French authorities to take up mass protection against smallpox. D'Entrecolles wrote just after Lady Mary Montagu introduced the practice from Constantinople to England, but he was concerned to look at Chinese writings on the practice. He was impressed with the depth and breadth of observation by practitioners, as well as their familiarity with the usual progress of the disease and the fact that it took a much milder form after variolation. He speculated that 'we might find that the Chinese method of inducing smallpox in children [by variolation] is gentler and less dangerous than the English method which is made by incision [making a scratch in the skin between the thumb and first finger, and rubbing the dried scabs to the wound]. This introduces the infection directly into the blood...and it must be more dangerous...' ^{iv}



A dish of sea cucumbers with pigeon eggs. (China Pictorial)

Observations of China included a description of goldfish and of *baishen*, sea cucumbers or sea slugs, frequently served at banquets then as now. Father Lareauti wrote, 'By the sea in Fujian, I saw a fish called *baishen*. I thought at first it was just a roll of inanimate matter, but when the Chinese sailors cut it in half they all said it was alive. I threw it in a basin, and it swam about and lived quite a long time. The sailors said it had four eyes, six feet and was shaped like a human liver. But however hard I looked, I could only see two parts which it appeared to use to see because it became alarmed when I put my hand there. If by 'feet' they meant the means by which it moved, it had lots of little excrescences all over its body, like buttons. It has neither spine nor bones and dies if you squash it. It is easily preserved in a little salt. That way it is transported all over China and regarded as a delicacy. It may be a delicacy to the Chinese but it is not to us. Europeans cannot bear to look at it because of its deformity, and that may be why they find it too repugnant to eat.'

Father Lareauti also wrote a long letter about food in China: 'China is rich in grain, wheat, barley, millet, rye and rice, the latter being the staple food. Vegetables are so plentiful that they are given to animals to eat, and they can be harvested twice a year in most provinces, which demonstrates both the industry of the people and the fertility of the soil.'

'There are all sorts of fruits, including pears, apples, quince, lemons, limes, figs which are called bananas [sic], sugar cane, guava, grapes, pumpkins, cucumbers, nuts, plums, apricots and coconuts but one sees no olives or almonds [sic]. Figs, which were imported from Europe, have done well here. We know of the reputation of Chinese oranges in Europe. Here they are

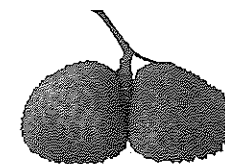


Vegetable market in Chengdu. (Frances Wood)

as common as apples in Normandy and for ten pence you can buy a cartload. Of the fruits that are common here but unknown in Europe, mangoes and litchees seem the best to me. The mango has a ravishing scent; the flesh is yellow and has such an acid juice that it stains are permanent. It is said that the stone is good for the blood. The litchee tastes like a Muscat grape and is the size of a plum...its skin is rough, though thin and the flesh is firm, the colour of a peeled grape. The stone is large and black and when the fruit is dried, it tastes like raisins. The Chinese keep them all year round and put them in tea where they add a very pleasant, slightly bitter, taste.

'Throughout China, you can find pomegranates, bananas, avocados and other fruits which are widely found in the "Indies", both east and west. Apart from fruit, "herbs" that we know are also grown, lettuce, spinach, cabbages and all sorts of root vegetables.

'Rice is the most common food for ordinary Chinese and they prefer it to bread. They spare nothing in their meals and abundance rules over cleanliness and delicacy. Foodstuffs are invariably cheap, unless a bad rice harvest puts up other prices.



Litchee

'Apart from pork, which is the favoured meat and the base of most meals, there are goats, chickens, geese, ducks, partridges, pheasant and a host of game unknown in Europe. In the markets you can also see horsemeat, donkey and dog. It is not that they do not have buffaloes and oxen but either superstition or the needs of agriculture stop them killing them for food.

This is roughly how they prepare their meals. They make a stock from pork, chicken, duck or pheasant and use this to cook the other meats. They vary these stews with a variety of spices and strong-tasting herbs. All meats are served, cut up in pieces, in porcelain bowls, and it is rare to see whole pieces of meat served, unless Europeans have been invited and their customs are imitated out of courtesy.

‘Amongst these stews which are so different from ours, there are a few which you might not dare to eat, yet which I occasionally enjoy. These include deer sinews and swallows’ nests. The deer sinews are sun-dried during summer and preserved with pepper. They are then softened in rice water and cooked in goat stock with seasonings. The birds’ nests come from Japan and are about the size of a hen’s nest, and what they are made of is uncertain though it looks like elder bark or spun pasta from Genoa or Milan. The taste would be bland were it not improved by spices, and it is the most favoured dish in China. They also make a dish which they call rice vermicelli, and these are dishes which, in my opinion, are very acceptable... Though the Chinese have sheep and goats, which they could milk, they have no idea of how to make butter and they have no idea of its taste and use...’ vi

Some light relief in the Jesuit letters is provided by, for example, Father François Bourgeois when he confessed that he found

Chinese difficult to learn. 'I can assure you that it has nothing in common with any known language. Each word has a single form and there is nothing that you might find to help you know the type or number of things one is talking about. As for verbs, there is nothing to tell you who it concerns, how and when things happen and when it is singular or plural. It is up to you, the listener, to work it out and guess. Add to this the fact that the words of the language can be reduced to about 300 but they are pronounced in so many ways that they can signify 80,000 different things expressed in the same number of characters. And that is not all. The arrangement of all these monosyllables



The Chinese script was a mystery to Westerners but a source of endless invention in China. Bird-shaped seal script forms in Manchu and Chinese of part of the Qianlong emperor's poem in praise of Shenyang, *Mukden-i fu bihe*, 1748.



does not seem to be governed by any general rule, to the point that, in order to understand the language, having learned all these words, you have to learn each phrase and the slightest mistake will mean that most Chinese cannot understand you.

'Let me come back to the words. I was told that 'shu' meant 'book'. I assumed that each time the word 'shu' reappeared, I could conclude that we were talking about books. Not at all, 'shu' could also mean a tree, so I was torn between book and tree. But that is not all, there is 'shu', great heat, 'shu' 'to tell a story', 'shu' 'dawn, 'shu' rain, 'shu' charity, 'shu' accustomed, 'shu' to lose a bet, etc and I'd never finish if I went through all the meanings of the same sound.

'What is more, one cannot help oneself by reading since the language of books is quite different from that of a conversation. And what will always be a pitfall for Europeans is the pronunciation which is impossibly difficult. First of all, each word can be pronounced with five different tones, yet there is not such a difference between each tone that the ear can easily distinguish it. These monosyllables pass by at such speed, and in order to make sure that they are not too easily understood, the Chinese make so many elisions that I don't know how much remains of two monosyllables. From a 'breathed' tone, you move straight to a level tone, then in another breath to a dropping tone, then we have to refer to the glottis, then the palate and almost always, the nose. I must have recited my sermon fifty times to my servant before delivering it in public. And it is said that of my Chinese parishioners that only three out of ten understand me. Fortunately, the Chinese are patient and always surprised that a poor

stranger can pronounce even two words in their language...' vii

One of the Jesuits' great contributions to the European picture of China was their description of the examination system which, in theory, created a *carrière ouverte aux talents*, a bureaucracy based upon merit. After studying the Confucian classics, any young man could in theory enter the imperial examinations and rise through the bureaucracy. In fact, these opportunities were rare, and although the first emperor of the Ming dynasty (1368-1644), who had himself risen from a background of grinding poverty, established free schools throughout the empire to allow poor boys to prepare for the exams, most candidates needed considerable family support. A Jesuit letter written from Canton described the Confucian Classics and the system of serial examinations, based upon



Scene in a Ming play, *The Green Peony*, in which suitors compete for a young woman's hand in a literary examination that echoes and reflects the importance of the imperial examinations.

the Classics, that selected candidates for the bureaucracy: 'The students are all shut up in the palace of the local mandarin...once inside, they cannot leave, nor converse between themselves until their essays are finished and they are guarded by Tartar soldiers who check them upon entry to make sure they do not have any books that might help them in their exam.'

The idea of a government staffed by well-read philosophers appealed enormously to eighteenth-century Europeans such as Voltaire (1694-1778), who read the Jesuit accounts of this apparently enlightened land. Voltaire was even more impressed when he came across a translation by Father Amiot of one of the Qianlong emperor's poems, 'In praise of Shenyang'. In his *Lettres Chinoises et Indiennes*, he describes reading the poem with a bookseller and the two of them being 'equally struck with astonishment.' How, Voltaire asked, 'can a man so burdened with such a vast territory, find the time to write a poem? How did he acquire such a good heart as to teach such lessons to 150 million people and such character of mind to write so many verses?...Here is a man of enormous power, greatly respected and extremely busy, who writes simply for the instruction and happiness of the human race...'

Voltaire's close reading of the Jesuit Du Halde's description of China (published in French in 1736) is clear from a passage expressing his preference for contemplating the sage 'maxims' of Confucius to describing 'that wall 500 miles long, built 250 years before Christ, since it is a work as useless as it is immense, and more unlucky than useful for it was unable to protect the empire', or 'the 600-mile Grand Canal linking the Yellow River and many other rivers', or 'the 100 arched marble

bridges' or 'the magnificence of the court'.

The Chinese legal system (as described by the Jesuits) impressed Voltaire: '150 million people, governed by 13,600 magistrates in separate courts, these courts subordinate to six superior courts, in their turn subject to a supreme court...What pleases me about all these Chinese courts of law is that none can execute even the vilest subject on the edge of the empire unless the case had been examined three times by the Grand Council presided over by the Emperor himself. If that was all I knew of Chinese law, I'd say that these are the most just and humane people in the world.'^{viii}

Despite his reliance upon the works of Jesuit missionaries in China, in his *Philosophical Dictionary* (1764), Voltaire remarks, 'We go to China in search of clay [porcelain] as if we had none of our own; cloth [silk] as though we had no cloth; a small herb to infuse in water as if we had no medicinal plants in our area. In return, we want to convert the Chinese...'^{ix}

ⁱ *Lettres Edifiantes et Curieuses de Chine par des missionnaires Jesuites 1702-1776*, Isabelle and Jean-Louis Vissière, Paris, Garnier-Flammarion, 1979, p. 62-3. The following extracts are all my translations.

ⁱⁱ *Lettres* 1979, p. 133-4.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Lettres* 1979, p. 176-7.

^{iv} *Lettres* 1979, p. 330-40.

^v *Lettres* 1979, p. 204-5.

^{vi} *Lettres* 1979, p. 197-9.

^{vii} *Lettres* 1979, p. 468-70.

^{viii} Voltaire, *Lettres Chinoises et Indiennes*, p. 2-3, 28-29, my translation.

^{ix} <http://www.voltaire-integral.com/18/chine/htm>, my translation.