China and the Discovery of America

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IT is now about 150 years since the Chinese first came in contact with Americans when the American ship Empress of China, sailing from Boston and rounding the Cape of Good Hope, cast anchor in the harbor of Canton, in the year 1784, under the reign of the great Emperor Chien Lung, who was a contemporary of George Washington. Thus Americans were late arrivals, in fact, the last of foreign peoples to enter into commercial and political relations with China. Europeans, first the Portuguese, then the Spaniards, Hollanders, British and French had preceded them by several centuries. It is no empty saying that from the first days of American-Chinese intercourse the two great countries have been linked by bonds of sympathy which have not existed and do not exist between China and any European power. These bonds of sympathy and friendship have been strengthened from year to year, as witnessed particularly by the ever increasing number of Chinese students and scholars annually flocking to our universities athirst for knowledge.

What, then, have American and Chinese minds in common? I think, a goodly number of very fine traits. First, the spirit of democracy, which has pervaded China for more than 2,000 years, ever since the First Emperor Chin Shi smashed the old feudal system. The principle of government for the benefit of the people certainly is American, but it is equally Chinese and goes back to the fourth century B. C. when Mêng-tse (Mencius), the most gifted of Confucius' disciples, proclaimed the doctrine, "The people are the most important element in a nation, and the sovereign is the least important of all." Second, the spirit of religious tolerance. I know of no more tolerant nation than the Chinese. Third, the lack of a caste system and lack of an hereditary nobility. China was always guided and governed by an aristocracy of intellect, not of birth; the old system of free competition by civil service examinations recruited the best talent from all ranks of society. Fourth, Americans and Chinese do not suffer from the obsession of that great evil, the race superiority complex, they are averse to armed force, they are friends of peace, and are animated by
a deep sense of justice and fair play toward all, regardless of race, color, or creed. Fifth, and this is the greatest asset that the two nations have in common, they have an unbounded, almost religiously fanatic, faith in the power of education and knowledge as the best guarantor of progress, as the best possible safeguard of the permanence of our social structure and institutions. With this capital of a common historical tradition and mentality—democracy, tolerance, equality, justice, and education—we are well prepared to stand the test and storms of the time.

I have just said that Americans came to China as late as 1784. But two hundred years earlier the Chinese received their first knowledge of the existence of America. The name “America” first appears in Chinese records at the end of the 16th century, in the official historical Annals of the Ming Dynasty. Let us consult the Ming Shi. In chap. 326, which deals with foreign countries, we are amazed to find a notice entitled I-ta-li-ya (Italy). “Italy is a country situated in the great western ocean. In times of old it had no intercourse with China. A man of this country, Li Ma-tou by name (Matteo Ricci), arrived at the capital in the period Wan-li (1573-1620, more exactly in 1601) and displayed a map of the world (wan kuo chuan tu, lit. a complete map of the ten thousand countries; a novel experience to the Chinese!), explaining that there are in the world five great continents. The first of these is called Asia with more than a hundred countries, of which China is the first. The second is Ou-lo-pa (Europe), the third Li-wei-ya (Libya, the old name for Africa). The fourth is A-mo-li-kia (America), vast in extent and divided into a northern and southern continent which, however, are connected with each other.”

This is the first record of America in Chinese literature. Ricci was an Italian Jesuit, the first missionary who came to China, a very learned and cultured man, well versed in mathematics and astronomy; he translated Euclid's Geometry into Chinese, and became very proficient at writing Chinese. Ricci's world map caused a sensation and made a profound impression on the Chinese scholars of his time. His map was subsequently printed in Chinese with Chinese prefaces and a number of good stories. A few copies of this map have survived, and reprints were recently published in England (Geographical Journal, 1917) and China.

The first messenger from America to China, however, arrived long before Ricci landed at Canton in 1582. This messenger was Indian corn or maize, the staple cereal of our American Indians, which spread to China between 1550 and 1570 and soon acquired a great economic importance. Our Indians were highly accomplished agriculturists and had cultivated for many centuries numerous useful plants peculiar to
America and unknown to the Old World. Most of these were introduced into China, many as early as the Wan-li period, such as the peanut, tobacco, the potato, the batata or sweet potato, the pineapple, guava, papaya, anona, chili pepper, tomato, and many others. All these American plants as ambassadors of good will migrated to China long before any American set his foot on Chinese soil.

While it took the Chinese several centuries to obtain a correct knowledge of the geography of America and Europe, European ignorance with reference to China was much more appalling. Curiously enough, it happened twice in history that China became known in the West under a double set of names and that it was not recognized that this duplicity of names referred to the same country. The Chinese never had a proper appellation to designate their own nation. Their favorite custom was to style themselves after a favorite dynasty, for instance, the men of Han or the men of Tang, in allusion to these great dynasties. China had a front porch and a back porch; the former facing the Pacific ocean, the latter connecting the country with Central and Western Asia. The Greeks had only a very vague knowledge of China and knew her under two different names: Serica and Thinai or Sinai. The name “Serica” is derived from a Greek word ser which denotes the silkworm and which probably is based on a Chinese word (this is too difficult a problem to discuss here). The Chinese were styled by the Greeks Seres, “the silk people,” silk being the product that achieved fame for China throughout the world. The other name “Sinai” reached the West from Southern China over the maritime route, and is connected with the Ch’in dynasty, the first powerful dynasty that unified and welded China into a great empire. Our word “China” is the direct offspring of the name of this dynasty. The term Chinese properly means “people of the Ch’in dynasty,” a perfectly honorable name. The Greeks never realized that Serica and Sinai were one and the same people, but believed that they represented two different countries.

During the middle ages China became known in Europe under a new name, Cathay or Kitai. This word is traceable to the Kitan, a Tungusic tribe from the Sungari River that conquered China and ruled as the Liao dynasty from A. D. 907 to 1125. The Mongols and Turks still call China Kitat; and the Russians, Kitai. In English, Cathay is now restricted to poets and highbrows. Marco Polo and many other travelers who visited China under the Mongol dynasty in the 13th century never speak of China, but only of Cathay, and describe Peking under the Mongol-Turkish name Cambaluc or Khanbalik, which means the capital of the Great Khan, the title of the Mongol sovereigns. Europe was puzzled and kept in suspense for
several centuries over the question as to whether China and Cathay were one and the same or two different countries. The common belief was that Cathay was a country far north of China and was so represented in many maps. A Portuguese Jesuit, Benedict Goës, who was stationed at Agra in India, undertook in 1603 a long and arduous journey from India overland to Khotan and from there through Turkestan to Kansu in northwest China, for the specific purpose of settling this problem definitely. Only by the middle of the 17th century did it dawn on Europe that China and Cathay, Peking and Cambaluc were one and the same.

Perhaps it will startle you when I now tell you that America was discovered through the medium of China. Historical events are determined by the law of cause and effect, and seemingly insignificant causes may result in effects of tremendous importance. Without the scanty knowledge that the ancient Greeks and mediaeval Europe possessed of faraway China, America would not have been discovered, or its discovery at any rate would have been long delayed.

In 1492 when Columbus set out on his first memorable voyage of discovery, he was seeking no new continent, but a shorter route to India and the Cathay of Marco Polo by sailing in a westerly direction from Europe. Columbus died with the conviction that the new countries which he had discovered were the eastern shores of Asia, the land of the Great Khan,—a belief which was alive for some twenty years even after his death. China played a prominent role in all of Columbus’ calculations. He was an ardent admirer and a deep student of Marco Polo who was his countryman, and whose glowing descriptions of the Far East left a lasting impression upon his mind. On his first voyage Columbus was accompanied by a Latin translation of Marco Polo’s travels which was constantly in his hands and in which he entered 45 notes and observations. This copy is still preserved in the Colombina Library of Seville in Spain. Columbus, when he discovered the Bahamas, Cuba and Hispaniola (now Haiti) in the West Indies, believed that he had reached the Cipangu of Marco Polo (identical with Chinese Ji-pen kuo, “land of the sunrise”), Japan; and when on his later voyages he discovered the mainland, the continent of America, he imagined that he was on the outskirts of China. China was a link in the providential chain which at last dragged the New World to light.

Again, in another subtle way, China played a significant role in the discovery of America. In the first century of our era there lived at Tyre in Syria a renowned Greek geographer, Marinus. He was a contemporary of the Han dynasty when the Chinese had active commercial relations with the Roman Orient and when Chinese silk by way
of Central Asia found a ready market in Syria and Egypt, in Greece and Rome. Marinus interviewed many traveling merchants who returned from the Far East by land or by sea, and gathered from their lips much valuable information regarding the geography of the distant countries of the East. The book he wrote is unfortunately lost, and only fragments of it are preserved in the work of Ptolemy. Marinus was one of the founders of mathematical geography and made many calculations expressed in longitudes and latitudes. The extent of the eastern hemisphere from the isle of Ferro in the Canary Islands on the west coast of Africa to the east coast of China he determined as 225 degrees—a serious error; for this distance is only 130 degrees. Marinus, accordingly, overestimated the size of the Asiatic continent. This miscalculation, however, was the most fruitful and far-reaching error ever committed by a scholar, for it gave Columbus the impetus to his daring plan. Convinced that Marinus' computation was correct, Columbus believed (and quite logically) that the ocean stretching west of Europe was quite narrow and that the distance from Europe to China was quite short, while in reality it was about twice as long as he figured. Here again it was the dawn of a geographical knowledge of China in the West which ultimately led to the discovery of America. We see that errors may lead to truth and that there is an inward coherency of all historical events. History is more romantic than fiction. It is a fascinating picture: China and Greece, Marco Polo and the Great Khan, Columbus and America, all closely interwoven, and finally the United States arising and, with us, Chinese friends whose ancestors indirectly helped to discover this country! (From address delivered before Chinese students at a reception tendered to them by the Friends of China of Chicago.)