

*China and Maritime Europe, 1500-1800:  
Trade, Settlement, Diplomacy, and Missions*

Edited by John E. Willis, Jr.  
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This book on China's relations with the Europeans who arrived there by sea, which is edited by John E. Wills, Jr., consists of four essays covering different aspects of these relations between 1500 and 1800. The authors are all prominent names in this field with extensive and recognized publications that need no introduction. More specifically, in addition to the editor, contributions come from Willard J. Peterson and the late John L. Cranmer-Byng and John W. Witek, S.J., to whom the work is dedicated. The trading, diplomatic, and religious relations addressed throughout the book are structured chronologically with the two first chapters spanning the late Ming period and the last two the Qing period until 1800.

The book begins with the essays "Maritime Europe and the Ming" by Wills, and "Learning from Heaven: The Introduction of Christianity and Other Western Ideas into Late Ming China" by Peterson. These are followed by "Catholic Missions and the Expansion of Christianity, 1644-1800" by Witek. The book closes with the paper by Wills and Cranmer-Byng entitled "Trade and Diplomacy with Maritime Europe, 1644-c. 1800." This is an interesting work that presents an overview of the

above-mentioned aspects and periods of Sino-European relations from a non-Eurocentric perspective. Although *The Cambridge History of China* was the starting point of the book and the essays were originally prepared for inclusion volumes 8 and 9, only the first two were ultimately published in volume 8 (Denis Twitchett and Frederick W. Mote, eds., *The Ming Dynasty, 1368-1644* [1998]). As Wills explains in the preface, the authors believe this publication makes the essays, which go back to the 1980s, more accessible. The authors sought to revise their original texts, adding references to recent scholarship and updating the bibliography.

The introduction to this book, written by Wills, presents a useful and fascinating contextualization not only of the complex and dynamic Asian maritime world at a time of change, but also of Ming China and Qing China and the various actors involved in these trading, diplomatic, and religious relations. Wills also defines what he considers to be a master concept for an understanding of these relations: “defensiveness.” He claims it is a much more satisfactory concept than the classical “tribute system,” since it can embrace the various facets of Chinese relations with maritime Europeans. By “defensiveness” he means the tendency toward defensive and restrictive policies on foreign contact that can be witnessed in the variety of regional developments and pragmatic commitments. Europeans from different nations (Portugal, Spain, Holland, England, and other countries) in varying roles (merchants, ambassadors, priests, seamen, and others) and with distinct objectives, intersected and interacted with Chinese from different origins and functions (maritime Chinese, officials, literati, eunuchs, interpreters, craftsmen, and even emperors). Wills underlines that this took place in an increasingly interconnected world in which there was an exponential increase not only of the silver in circulation, but also of tea, silk, and porcelain, not to mention opium, which was enjoying growing popularity towards the end of the period in question. The author notes that all the above played vigorous and effective parts in the shaping of this maritime Asia and the relations analyzed in the four essays.

As in the original text, which is followed closely, Wills' focus in the first chapter is on the relations between maritime Europe and Ming China from the early sixteenth century with the arrival of the Portuguese, who were the first maritime Europeans to reach the Chinese coast. The author's analysis shows how the Portuguese advanced and retreated on the coast of China and their attempts to develop diplomatic relations with the central government. He draws attention to the disastrous results of the initial "aggressiveness" without naval superiority. This gave way to the second phase of "commercial accommodation," which he classifies as a "brilliant success" inasmuch as it enabled the Portuguese to establish themselves in Macau. Not unlike Manila or Casteel Zeelandia, the birth of Macau was a result of the confluence between the European accommodations and concessions and the reciprocal trading and economic interests. Throughout the article, Wills presents the process through which other Europeans, Spanish, and Dutch, entered into trade with China, and also the entry of the missionaries. In this context of encounters between Chinese and Europeans, we note the key role the author attributes to the maritime Chinese, whom he labels experts in mediation across cultural and linguistic barriers. He emphasizes that the meeting between these two worlds of the Europeans and the Chinese as well as the development of "accommodations" between them was largely due to the maritime Chinese, both on the coasts of China and in the foreign ports. Wills is to be commended for the care taken in his updating of the bibliography to use Portuguese authors, such as Rui Loureiro, who have conducted important work in the field of Sino-Portuguese relations. Nevertheless, two central works in the current panorama of studies on these relations are missing: *Macau Poder e Saber. Séculos XVI e XVII*, by Luís Filipe Barreto, (Lisbon: Presença, 2006) and *Um Porto entre Dois impérios (Estudos sobre Macau e as relações luso-chinesas)* by Jorge Santos Alves (Macau: IPOR, 1999).

The second essay, written by Peterson, is also a new version of the text in *The Cambridge History* with only occasional alterations made to

the original. It addresses Christianity in Ming China together with other Western ideas, such as mathematics, astronomy and geography. The author shows that much of the knowledge presented in China expressed the Aristotelian scholasticism that prevailed in European universities' curricula at the time, and was already far from being the vanguard of European scientific knowledge. Peterson also describes the active participation of Chinese literati, both converts (for example, Xu Guangqi, Li Zhizao, Yang Tingyun, and Wang Zheng), and sympathizers (for example, Ye Xianggao), in the accommodation process of Christian doctrine and European science to Confucianism and to Chinese culture in general. These literati played a vital role in the strategic question of the composition of books. Sometimes this was done in partnership with missionaries; at other times they developed their own theses and arguments in books they wrote or even in many prefaces signed by them. Despite all the efforts to assimilate this teaching with the terminology and concepts of the Chinese classical texts, Peterson underlines the irony that it was always labeled as "Western Learning" (*Xixue*) or "Westerners' Learning from Heaven" (*Tianxue*). Similarly, however much the missionaries tried to become "men of China," they were unable to prevent the fact that their fascination in the eyes of the Chinese was to a great extent precisely because they were foreign and had come from distant and unknown lands, in other words, their exoticism.

Continuing in the religious domain, the third essay by John Witek addresses the Catholic missions and the expansion of Christianity in Qing China until around 1800. The author provides an interesting overview of the topic, constantly highlighting the Chinese dimension of the missions, and making extensive use of Chinese sources. Mention is also made of his concern about embarking on new lines of research, some of which have since been, or are currently, objects of study. For example, in relation to the Rites Controversy, he calls attention to the need to study the many extant Chinese sources and notes that a definitive appraisal of the matter is otherwise impossible. Yan Mo and his three

essays written in relation to the controversy are unquestionable proof of just how much this analysis has to offer. (Recently, Nicolas Standaert published a book focusing precisely on this, *Chinese Voices in the Rites Controversy* [Rome: BIH, 2012]).

But Witek sets other challenges for future research, such as the comprehensive study of books written in Chinese to explain doctrine and which he believes were of crucial importance to the spread of Christianity in China. Moreover, he notes the importance of understanding the influence the young Chinese, sent to France or Naples for training in the eighteenth century, exerted on their return to China. He also proposes a far-reaching and systematic study of the Manchu Christians and their impact. Little attention has been given to this subject despite the conversion of a number of Manchu princes and their households, as in the case of some of Sonu's sons towards the end of the Kangxi reign and that of his successor (Witek has published an article on this topic: "Manchu Christians at the Court of Peking in Early Eighteenth-Century China: A Preliminary Study," in *Succès et échecs de la rencontre Chine et Occident*, eds. Edward Malatesta and Yves Ranguin [San Francisco: Ricci Institute, 1993]). Witek concludes his essay by stressing that while Ricci and the missionaries who followed him in the Qing dynasty were aware of the need to persuade the Chinese that the West was civilized, they also strived to understand and appreciate the Chinese civilization. He contends that this appreciation of China is in stark contrast to the forced entry of Europeans in Canton at the time of the Opium War in the mid-nineteenth century—an event he claims the Chinese continue to reject, unlike the early entry of the missionaries, which has been the target of growing interest.

Finally, in the fourth chapter Wills and Cranmer-Byng return to the theme of trading and diplomatic relations and present a picture of the Qing Empire's involvement in world trade (until about 1800) with a growing number of European nations. This article is, to a large extent, a synopsis of the work by these two authors over their careers (in books

such as *An Embassy to China*, 1962 [Cranmer-Byng], or *Pepper, Guns, and Parleys*, 1974 [Wills], and *Embassies and Illusions*, 1984 [Wills]). It shows us how that trade came about, as well as the oscillations in the integration of the Europeans in the tribute system and the illusions associated with the embassies. The authors believe that the treatment of foreigners, the management of their embassies, and the changes in policies on missionaries and their converts should all be understood as a set of defensive policies which, though vaguely associated, were aimed at confronting the various challenges facing the dynasty: the ever-growing threat to public order along the coast from ships and sailors; the threat to the Emperor's ceremonial supremacy in the capital; and the threat of political and cultural subversion by the missionaries and their converts. As in the preface, the conclusion of this essay again underlines the key role played by the Chinese overseas merchants, notably among the "country traders."

The four chapters are complemented by a joint bibliography and an index, which both undoubtedly enrich this work. It is true that we cannot say the contents of this book are completely new as the essays go back to the 1980s. Nevertheless, this work provides us with a very helpful and interesting summary of the relations between China and the maritime Europeans from their first contacts until the turn of the nineteenth century and is an excellent starting point for those embarking on the study of early modern Sino-European relations or for a wider public interested in this topic.