

## **The three oldest books about China found at the National Bibliotheca in**

### **Valletta, Malta.**

written by

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On Wednesday the 2<sup>nd</sup> of September 2020 I researched Chinese texts and books about China at the National Bibliotheca in Valletta. I found that the three oldest books we have in our national collection date back to the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The National Library of Malta, often known simply as the Bibliotheca, is a reference library in Republic Square, Valletta. It was founded by Grand Master Emmanuel de Rohan-Polduc in 1776 from the collections of the Knight Louis Guérin de Tencin. The Bibliotheca has been a legal deposit library since 1925 and it, together with collections in the University of Malta, forms the largest collection of Melitensia on the island. The library also contains the archives of the Order of St. John, the Università of Mdina and the Università of Valletta. The collection is housed in a late 18<sup>th</sup> century neoclassical building in the city centre, close to the Grandmaster's Palace, designed by Polish-Italian architects Stefano Ittar and his son Sebastiano Ittar.

The three oldest books about China I found at the National Bibliotheca are not so rare, but still very prestigious for our national collection.

The **oldest book** dates back to the year 1723 and carries the title: '*Histoire de la Conquete de la Chine par les Tartares: Contenant plusieurs choses remarquables, touchant la religion, les moeurs, & les coùtumes de ces deux nations. Ecrite en espagnol & traduit en françois par le Sieur Colle*'. Written by **Juan Palafox y Mendoza**, it was published in **Amsterdam** by Chez Jean Frederic Bernard.

This book is an account of the Manchu conquest of Ming China based on reports sent to Mexico from Macao and the Philippines. The work also deals with Chinese customs, manners, religion and costumes. One chapter discusses Japanese relations with China, remarking that though the Japanese are very powerful, they have reason to fear the neighbouring Tartars. Palafox (1600 – 1659) was an influential Spanish Catholic priest,

Bishop of Puebla de Los Angeles, historian, writer and statesman, later nominated as Viceroy of New Spain.

Following the example of an earlier Spanish ecclesiastic scholar in Mexico, Juan González de Mendoza, Juan de Palafox y Mendoza compiled his book, '*Historia de la conquista de la China por el Tartaro*', Translated as: 'History of the Conquest of China by the Tartars', this talks about the conquest of Ming China by the Manchus. The work, written in Spanish, was first published in Paris in 1670, a French translation appeared the same year. An English translation, whose full title was: '*The History of the Conquest of China by the Tartars together with an Account of Several Remarkable things, Concerning the Religion, Manners, and Customs of Both Nation's, but especially the Latter*', appeared in London in 1676. Palafox's work, based on hearsay, was generally less informed than the, '*De Bello Tartarico Historia*', published in Antwerp in 1654. This was an eyewitness account by the Chinese speaking Jesuit Martino Martini (1614 – 1661) who also had the Chinese name, Wèi Kuāngguó (衛匡國). He was an Italian Jesuit missionary, cartographer and historian who studied ancient Chinese texts. Martini lived through the frightful occurrences which brought about the overthrow of the ancient Ming dynasty and his works have been repeatedly published and translated into different languages.

Palafox is also known for his formal complaints to Rome against the Jesuits. Pope Innocent X however, refused to approve his censures. All Palafox could obtain from him, on the 14<sup>th</sup> of May 1648, was a brief commanding the Jesuits to respect the Episcopal jurisdiction.

On the 20<sup>th</sup> of May 1655, Palafox and the Jesuits signed an accord, but disagreements continued. In the same year the Jesuits succeeded in securing his transfer to the back to Spain, to the Little See of Osma in Old Castile.

Palafox was influential and had jurisdiction as a bishop on certain Asian missions, directing their practices. Some of his influential anti-Jesuit writings deal with the Chinese Rites controversy. According to Costa Rican scholar **Ricardo Martínez Esquivel**, the main reason he declared the Jesuit's tolerance for traditional Chinese ancestor worship practices among converts to Christianity as heretic, was his "personal conflict" with the Jesuits.

Palafox's writings against the Jesuits were subsequently published in France and in the eighteenth century, his writings were used to strengthen the case against the Jesuit Order. This resulted in the expulsion of the Jesuits from Spain and Spanish territories in 1767.

The **second oldest book** found in the National Bibliotheca dates to the year 1760 and is titled: '*Mémoire Dans Lequel On Prouve Que Les Chinois Sont Une Colonie Égyptienne Lu Dans L'assemblée Publique De L'académie Royale Des Inscriptions & ... De M. L'abbé Barthélémy Sur Les Lettres..*'. This translates as: Memoir in which we prove that the Chinese are an Egyptian colony ... With a summary of the memoir of Father Barthélemy on the Phoenician letters. Written by **Joseph de Guignes**, it was published in **Paris**.

Today this book is part of French literature heritage and it reflects thoughts characteristic of the time, which nowadays would be hard to accept. Nevertheless the book reflects a history of past ideas in France and is likely to be of scientific and historical interest.

**Joseph de Guignes** (1721 – 1800) was a French orientalist, sinologist and Turkologist born at Pontoise in Paris. He succeeded Étienne Fourmont at the Royal Library as Secretary Interpreter of the eastern languages. His '*Mémoire historique sur l'origine des Huns et des Turcs*', published in 1748, earned him admission to the Royal Society of London in 1752. He became an Associate of the French Academy of Inscriptions in 1754. In 1757, he was appointed to the Chair of Syriac at the Collège de France. His five volume work, '*Histoire générale des Huns, des Mongoles, des Turcs et des autres Tartares occidentaux*', was written between 1756 and 1758.

Guignes originated the proposition that the Huns who attacked the Roman Empire were the same **Xiongnu** people mentioned in Chinese records. This view was popularised by his contemporary Edward Gibbon in '*Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*'. The idea has been strenuously debated by other scholars of Asian history, including Maenchen-Helfen, Henning, Bailey, and Vaissière.

The Xiongnu Chinese, (匈奴), were a tribal confederation of nomadic people who, according to ancient Chinese sources, inhabited the eastern Eurasian Steppe from the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC to the late 1<sup>st</sup> century AD. Chinese sources report that Modu Chanyu, the supreme leader after 209 BC, founded the Xiongnu Empire. The identity of the ethnic core of Xiongnu has been a subject of varied hypotheses, because only a few words, mainly titles and personal names, were preserved in Chinese sources. The name Xiongnu may be associated with that of the Huns or the Huna, although this is disputed.

The Xiongnu-Hun hypothesis originated with the 18<sup>th</sup> century French historian Joseph de Guignes. He noticed that ancient Chinese scholars had referred to members of tribes associated with the Xiongnu by names similar to 'Hun', albeit with varying Chinese characters. The modern French historian, Étienne de la Vaissière has shown that, in the Sogdian script used in the so-called 'Sogdian Ancient Letters', both the Xiongnu and Huns were referred to as ywn or xwn, indicating that the two were synonymous. Although the theory that the Xiongnu were precursors of the Huns is now accepted by many scholars, it has yet to become a consensus view. The identification with the Huns may be either incorrect or an oversimplification. This would appear to be the case also with a proto-Mongol people, the Rouran, who have sometimes been linked to the Avars of Central Europe.

Guignes maintained that the Chinese nation had originated in Egyptian colonization, an opinion to which, in spite of every refutation, he obstinately clung. He published a number of articles arguing that Egyptian hieroglyphs and Chinese characters were related, one deriving from the other. Although he was mistaken in that, he is recognized for proving

that cartouche rings in Egyptian texts contained royal names, a thesis he developed from a hint previously made by J. J. Barthélemy.

**Jean-Jacques Barthélemy** ( 1716 – 1795) was a French scholar who became the first person to decipher an extinct language. He deciphered the Palmyrene alphabet in 1754 and the Phoenician alphabet in 1758. Barthélemy, working with **Anne Claude de Caylus**, identified that non-hieroglyphic cursive alphabetical letters in Egyptian scripts seemed to derive graphically from hieroglyphs. This insight was published in English in, '*The Divine Legation of Moses*', by William Warburton in 1765.

The **third oldest book** found in the National Bibliotheca dates to the year 1770 and is titled: '*Éloge de la Ville de Moukden et de ses environs; poème composé par Kien-long, Empereur de la Chine & de la Tartarie, actuellement régnant. Accompagné de Notes curieuses sur la Géographie, sur l'Histoire naturelle de la Tartarie Orientale, & sur les anciens usages des Chinois; composées par les Editeurs Chinois & Tartares. On y a joint une Pièce de Vers sur le Thé, composé par le même Empereur*'. It was translated into French by P. Amiot and published in **Paris**.

On the 26<sup>th</sup> of August 1743, in the eighth year of his reign, the 32 year old Qianlong Emperor Aisin Gioro Hongli, left his palace in Peking, present day Beijing. For the first time he visited the homeland of his Manchu ancestors in the north-east provinces of China, otherwise known as Manchuria. The visit, which lasted 107 days, so impressed the Emperor that he felt moved to commemorate it by composing an ode in the traditional Chinese form known as Fu. ( 賦.)

The '**Ode to Mukden**', was published in Chinese and Manchu languages. The first edition in 1743, contains very detailed annotations by a group of scholar officials headed by the eminent statesman Ortai. These give references to the many allusions of Chinese classical literature with which the text is interlarded. The ode itself, comprises of 98 verses with 7 stanzas within these. This is exactly paralleled in the Chinese and Manchu versions, each preceded by a very long preface which takes the form of an elaborate praise. This describes the Manchu homeland in terms of landscape, flora, fauna, and spiritual significance.

The text falls into four sections:

- (1) An introduction, images 3 to 5 in the Chinese text and 129 to 132 in the Manchu text.
- (2) The preface, images 5 to 105 in Chinese text and 132 to 257 in Manchu text.
- (3) The ode proper, images 106 to 119 in Chinese text and 257 to 275 in Manchu text.
- (4) A post face by the editors, images 121 to 127 in Chinese text and 277 to 288 in Manchu

The ode was brought to the attention of European readers as early as 1770, when a rather bombastic and periphrastic translation by the French Jesuit missionary **Joseph-Marie Amiot**,

alias Amyot, was published in Paris. This was followed by translations into French in 1828 and Italian in 1884.

Joseph Marie Amiot was born at Toulon, southern France in 1718. He entered the Society of Jesus in 1737 and was sent as a missionary to China in 1750. Amiot was the spiritual leader of the French Mission in Peking. He soon won the confidence of the Qianlong Emperor, becoming the official translator of western languages for him. He was also known by a Chinese name, Qián Démíng, (錢德明), in China. Amiot was a correspondent of the French Académie des Sciences. He had influence in world politics, for example days before his death, he wrote to the British Lord, George Macartney, who had unsuccessfully tried to arrange trade agreements with China. He urged him to be patient explaining that, "this world is the reverse of our own". He spent the remainder of his life in Peking, dying there in 1793 aged 75 years.

These three books are a big part of the national heritage books in our National Bibliotheca in Malta. Their authors can be called 'heroes' as they contributed to create a bridge of understanding between the West and the East. Unfortunately the books are in a very bad condition awaiting restoration. I hope that they will undergo a process of restoration soon so that they can remain well conserved as part of our national cultural heritage for future generations.

I conclude this article by expressing my heartfelt thanksgivings to Librarian **Madam Maroma Camilleri** and her staff for all their assistance and to MCCC Director **Mr Yang Xiaolong** and his staff for their continuous support and encouragement.

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