

"ASIA EXTREMA" by Father Antonio de Gouveia, S.J.

Written over three centuries ago, this is an important book describing conditions in China from 1580 to 1640, with references to the work of the Jesuits in the country, not only that of Father Ricci but of the other priests of the Missions which the Portuguese maintained in China.

It provides a wealth of information about the period of the decline of the Mings, a government that was riddled with corruption, under the nefarious influence of the eunuchs, a period full of fateful movements and important occurrences.

There are references, for instance, to the Jews, Lady Cheng and the notorious Wei-chung-hsien, Lady Ko and her mischievous adherents, the attempts by Lady "Precious Pearl" to stem the tide of corruption and save the dynasty, of patriots like Yeh Wen-cheng, Yang Lien, Wah Cheng, Tso Kuang-tou, Hsu K'uang-chi, Li Chih-tsao, Chiu Tai-shou and others.

In many cases the reports were based on accounts by Jesuits in various places in China, not merely narratives of what was occurring but illuminated with important details, put together by a man who lived for many years in China, who knew the language and had friends among officials in many parts of the country.

A book of Chinese history, this is a valuable source and its publication, in due course, will be an important contribution to the history of China.

ASIA EXTREMA by Father Antonio de Gouvêa, S.J.

The first of the geographical divisions of the areas into which the Jesuits divided their missionary activities in the Far East was that known as the Province of Japan. Later, when Japan was closed to all Christian proselytizing, this province embraced the countries of Cochinchina, Annam and Tonkin, Cambodia, Laos, Siam and the island of Hainan. Meanwhile missionary work commenced in China, and it would seem that there were no very great expectations of what would follow, for this area was known as the Vice-Province of China. So it remained, regardless of the subsequent importance of the missions and the scope of their activities.

Progress was slow at first in China, for even after Father Mateo Ricci succeeded in setting up a mission in Peking it did not appear as if prospects were very good, for evangelical work did not progress and there were persecutions and many problems. Eventually, however, progress did begin and with the prestige which came with the work of Father Schall von Bell and Father Verbiest, owing to the interest taken by Emperor K'ang-hsi in the work of these priests, a degree of success followed, auguring well for the future. Many dozens of priests entered China, through Macao, and the great Jesuit College became an important factor in the success of Christian endeavour in China, and it enjoyed a well-merited good name.

Into the College flowed reports, letters and other documents from all over China, the Cartas Annuas sent to the Jesuit headquarters in Rome being compiled from the material received from the mission stations. The disputes, sometimes very acrimonious, provoked by members of rival religious orders, led to yet more written material being prepared. The great College became a rich repository of documents of the most interesting and important nature. Eventually, in the middle of the 18th century, the Vice-Provincial gave orders that transcripts should be made of all the material that had any bearing on matters in dispute or which could help to clarify the position taken by the Jesuits in their work and services. These transcripts were sent to the Jesuit Province in Lisbon, where they were stored for study before reports would be prepared for despatch to Rome.

After the earthquake of 1755 took place in Lisbon these transcripts from Macoa and other material of value in the Jesuit College in Rome were seized by Pombal to reconstitute the royal Library which had been engulfed by a tidal wave affecting sections of the city which included that in which the palace of the king stood.

The general public knew nothing of this material gathered by Pombal, and it was not until the end of the 19th century that Father Cros, writing about St. Francis ~~X~~avier, revealed that among the valuable stores of papers in the king's library at Ajuda, there were over 60 codices of documents of the most absorbing interest. James Murdoch was able to draw upon this source for material for his History of Japan, in the early years of the 20th Century. Only a very limited number of scholars, however, had access to this material for the next twenty years or so.

In recent years it has been found, through the work of Father Josef Franz Schutte, that besides these transcripts there are also in Europe a number of codices of the original documents from which the transcripts had been made at Macao in 1744 to 1748. It would seem that besides the great volume of material transcribed there were also other documents which were not copied, as some of the original papers now found would indicate. Many of the Macao originals were sent away from Macao to Manila before the orders from Pombal for the expulsion of the Jesuits reached Macao, and eventually some of these originals reached Europe, where a number may be seen in some of the archives, as the Real Academia de la Historia, Madrid, the Biblioteca Nacional in Madrid, besides the Biblioteca Nacional de Lisboa, and other libraries in Europe. Father Schutte continues searching for other original documents.

The Macao books and papers in the old College were destroyed in a fire which broke out in <sup>the</sup> old buildings in 1835, and it is believed that many of the originals were lost in this way, and of those that reached Manila in the 18th century only some have been identified so far, leading to the belief that some were not sent from Manila and were lost there in subsequent years.

However, that may be, the codices of transcripts made in Macao, known as the JESUITAS NA ASIA, in the Ajuda Palace in Lisbon are a source of valuable information about China and other places in the Far East and, with the Jesuit archives in Rome, continue to be the great repository of the Christian missions principally in the 16th, 17th and 18th centuries. It is known that many of the transcripts at Ajuda are of the most absorbing interest, and among these is a book in two volumes, entitled ASIA EXTREMA. Written over three centuries ago, this is an important book describing conditions in China from 1580 to 1640, covering not only the services of the founders of the Catholic Mission in China, that is the work of Father Michael Ruggieri and the more successful Father Mateo Ricci, about whom so much has already been published, but the other priests of the Mission which Portugal maintained in China.

It describes, with a wealth of detail, the growth and the vicissitudes of the Mission as well as all sorts of aspects of life and activity in China. Besides the work of the priests we are not allowed to forget that it was the period of the decline of the Mings, a government that was riddled with corruption,

under the nefarious influence of the eunuchs and other parasites in the Chinese Court, a period that was full of fateful movements and important occurrences.

There are interesting pages about the Nestorian Christians and Jews in China, and we read of the death and funeral of Emperor Wan Li, as well as that of his Empress, fully described with considerable detail.. The ominous figure of Wei Chung-hsien looms large in the scene, with references to the efforts made by patriots like Yeh Wen-cheng, Fang Tsung-che and Yan Lien, Wan Ching and Tso Kuang-tou, who tried vainly to stem the rot and correct the lives of the Imperial Court. The activities of scholars like Hsu K'uang-chi, Li Chih-tsao, Yang Tingyun, Ye Wen-chong, who became Christians and did what they could to help their country, are given in some detail, while the pernicious influence of Madame Cheng is mentioned.

Some reference is made to the short reign of T'ai Ch-ung, followed by the inept T'ien Chi, who allowed himself to be influenced by the ambitious and corrupt Madame Ko. The efforts of the young empress, known to posterity as "Precious Pearl" or "Goddess Chang," to save the throne, are mentioned.

Extensive accounts are given of the attempts by the Manchus to conquer China and of efforts by patriots to stem the tide. There are whole chapters referring to the requests by the priests in Peking to persuade the governing class in Peking to get cannon and bombardiers from Macao to train the Chinese soldiery in the use of European artillery. The cost of this and subsequent expeditionary forces from Macao was determined by Peking to be a charge on the merchants in Canton who were waxing rich on the foreign trade, but through bribery of the eunuchs in Peking by the Cantonese merchants, it was possible to get the order for the force to be withdrawn after they had succeeded in proceeding as far north as Ting Chau and Kai Feng. The plan to modernize China's army was thus, by corruption, ~~set aside~~ <sup>over-ruled</sup>, with disastrous results for the nation.

The warfare between the Manchus and the Chinese is described in some detail as well as some of the rebellions which broke out in the country at the time. All these were culled from reports written by priests in their mission stations that is, by impartial observers of the sad trend of events in the great upheaval of the country. It is the story of the struggle by Chinese patriots against the forces that were contributing to bring about the downfall of the Mings, of a dynasty and Court that was tottering to its fall.

Father Couveia's book is a store therefore of accounts written by men who were intelligent and well-trained, men who had brought to China the fruits of European scholarship with its wealth of lore and steadily growing scientific attainments, added to their whole-hearted devotion to their task as missionaries of the Gospel of Christ.

The author possessed a good knowledge of Chinese and he lived forty-one years in the country, rising from a humble novice in Macao to become the principal of the Jesuit Vice-Province of China. A great deal of his book deals with the Catholic mission, it is true, but it is interspersed with references to Chinese customs and usages, with explanations to illustrate the significance of these Chinese motives and trends.

This is a useful perspective from which to observe the course of history in China, for the Chinese dynastic histories, as we know, were in each case compiled by the new government, who coloured the accounts of the previous dynasty's history from the viewpoint of the new regime. The fact that Father Gouveia had friends among the Chinese all over the country is another important feature of the character of the book. When published in translation, with suitable annotations it will be an important contribution to the story of the period to which it refers.