Chapter 17

Tai Ming, by Fr. Martín de Rada, O.E.S.A.*

An Account of the State of Affairs in China, More Correctly Called Tai Ming.¹

The country we typically call China² was called the kingdom of Cathay³ by the Venetian Marco Polo,⁴ perhaps because such was its name in the Tatar language at the time, for when he went there, in approximately 1312, the Tatars were in power. The natives of these islands⁵ call China Sangley, and the Chinese

* Fr. Martín de Rada (1533–1578) was a Spanish Augustinian friar. As a reward for his assistance to Juan de Salcedo in the Spanish expedition against the Chinese pirate Lim Hong in 1574, Rada was chosen to head an expedition to Ming China in May 1575, the main goal of which was the opening of that country to evangelization, although the Governor-General at Manila, Guido de Lavezares, also instructed him to explore the possibility of Spain being granted a trading port in Xiamen Bay that would compete with Portuguese Macau. Accompanying Rada was his fellow Augustinian Fr. Jerónimo de Marín, and two military observers, Pedro Sarmiento and Miguel de Loarca; the latter left a valuable detailed account of the embassy; see Loarca, Relación, available in English translation in B&R, V, 29–181. The first part of Rada’s report of his embassy was incorporated into San Agustín, Conquistas, and is available in English translation in Boxer (Rada), 243–259. The second part, which is more properly a description of China, corresponds to the present section of the MS and was also translated into English by Boxer (Rada), 260–310.

¹ MS: Taybin; elsewhere Tabin, Tavin and Taivin, 大明, lit. ‘Great Ming.’ The forms appearing in the MS reflect the Hokkien pronunciation.

² See Map 8 for most of the locations mentioned in this section on China and later for some of its tributaries.

³ MS: Catay; elsewhere Cantay. After the collapse of the Tang Dynasty around the 9th century and the expansion of the Qi-Tan or Tatars into China, the Tatars employed the term Cathay for the territory they held and administered, which divided China into two parts (northern and southern), with greater direct control by the Tatars in the north and co-existence with the Sung Dynasty in the south for about two centuries. Consequently, for contemporary and later European travellers, there was confusion as to whether Cathay and China were distinct.

⁴ Venetian merchant, traveller and author (c. 1254–1324); see Yule, Marco Polo and Vogel, Marco Polo Was in China.

⁵ I.e., the Philippines.
merchants themselves call it Zhonghua. But its proper name in our day is Tai Ming, which is what it was called by the Emperor Hongwu, who forced the Tatars out of China, just as at different times in the past it had several names, such as Hanton, Tuntzon, Guan, Tong, Gu and Cathay.

Some of the things we shall be discussing here regarding this realm we were eyewitness to, while others have been culled from their own printed books and descriptions of their land, for they have a natural curiosity about themselves. Not only have they given us general and detailed descriptions of their own country, but they have also printed books about it in which are described all its provinces, cities, villages, and frontier posts and garrisons, plus all their details, and their families and taxpayers and taxes and revenues that the Emperor receives from each one of them. There came into my possession seven different books, printed in different years and written by different authors; and thus by comparing them I have been able to better arrive at the truth, although these people know little about orthography or geometry, let alone arithmetic. Their drawings are very crude, and even the distances and circumferences are so inaccurate that it is impossible to reconcile them in some places. Nevertheless, I shall follow what seemed to me most factual after comparing all of these with some of their rutters which came into my possession. As far as distances are concerned, I shall be abbreviating them considerably in some places from what is written in their books, for even after taking them one at a time, and then adding them together, their sum is highly inaccurate in their books. So what I shall be reporting here for the size of the land and distances will be much reduced from what is found in their books, but, by my estimation,

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6 **ms:** Tunsua; 中國華, lit. ‘Middle Flowery’ kingdom.

7 **ms:** Hombu. In the mid-14th century, Zhu Yuanzhang, 朱元璋 (1328–1398), rose to command of Han and other Chinese forces in a revolt that successfully defeated and ended the Yuan Dynasty. Those forces seized Khanbaliq (Beijing) in 1368; the Tatars or Mongols then retreated to the steppes of Central Asia. Zhu claimed the Mandate of Heaven and became the founding emperor of the Ming Dynasty (r. 1368–1398). His era name was Hongwu Di, 洪武帝, meaning lit. ‘Vastly Martial Emperor’. As was customary, he also had a temple name, Ming Taizu, 明太祖, lit. ‘Great Ancestor of the Ming’. He ruled from Nanjing, the original capital of Ming China.

8 Boxer (**Rada**), 261, is of the opinion that the names in this list are corrupted renderings from the Hokkien names of earlier Chinese dynasties; FiF has Han, Ton, Tzon, Guan, Tou and Gu. Boxer suggests that the first three dynasties referred to in the Paris MS (FiF) are the Han, the Tang and the Sung, but he does not offer suggestions for the remaining items. While it seems safe to equate the Guan and the Gu of the MS with the Yuan and Wu Dynasties, the interpretations of Tun and Tong remain unresolved.