ASIA
Johan Nieuhof’s report of a VOC embassy to Beijing, printed in Amsterdam in 1665, was one of the most influential works of its time on Western perceptions of China. It drew extensively on previous works by Jesuit authors, but Nieuhof was also convinced that the Jesuits at the imperial court had misrepresented the Dutch to the Emperor, and at the climax of his narrative he broke out into a diatribe against them. The passage was omitted from the piratical Antwerp reprint, which added fourteen new chapters under the heading ‘The Progress of the Christian Faith in China due to the Labours of the Fathers of the Society of Jesus’. A slightly less transparent Catholic response was one of the last plays written by Joost van den Vondel. In 1667 he published the closet drama zungchín or Downfall of the Chinese Government. For Vondel, too, this is little more than a hook on which to hang a paean of praise for the Jesuit missionaries that Nieuhof had maligned. Where there was, by the mid-seventeenth century, an extensive communication system within Europe, news from beyond the European area was channeled through specialized networks, mediated by ‘gatekeepers’ who saw to it that only such news was publicized as served the purpose of the global corporation they represented – whether it was a state, a trading company, or a missionary order. It is only rarely, as in the Catholic appropriations of Nieuhof’s work, that we see directly conflicting interpretations of overseas encounters.

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