

The Receiving of Greek Culture in East Asia

Furnari Rosa Isabella
Catania's University in Sicily- Italy

The objective of this paper is to show the sharing of myths between East and West. The Greek geographers from the sixth century B.C. had produced a series of reports about India and lands unknown to them. Authors such as Hecataeus of Miletus (c. 550 BC – c. 476 BC), Herodotus, (c. 484–425 BC); Megasthenes, (ca. 350 – 290 B.C.) and, especially, Ctesias of Cnidus who lived in the 5th century BC and of whom we analyzed "history of India", presumed that India, the islands, and in general the fabulous East were inhabited by fantastic creatures, for example: men with dogs' heads called Cynocephalies; men "without, head" called Acephalies or Blemmyes; The Panottii, a human race characterized by large ears that covered their entire bodies; The Monopods, or Sciapods, with a single, large foot extending from a leg centered in the middle of their body; The Cyclops, with a single eye in the middle of their forehead etc. But apart from geographers and historians, the most ancient Greek sources, such as Homer and Hesiod, dating back to the eighth century BC, hinted in their writings to the presence of these mythological figures in Africa and Asia.

We shall see then that, after the empire of Alexander the Great had born, these myths spread in China during the Han period and also reached Japan later on.

Even in prehistoric times, there were caravan routes that joined together the vast distances between China and Europe, a northern route across the Caspian Sea and the Black Sea and a southern route that crossed the plateau of Iran and Syria.

The very first step in beginning the Silk Road between the East and the West came with the expansion of the empire of Alexander the Great in Central Asia. In 329 a. C., in Tajikistan he founded the city of Alexandria Eschate or "Alexandria the Farthest", which later became an important staging point on the northern Silk Road. The Greeks remained in Central Asia for a long time. They have continued their expansion eastward in Chinese Turkestan, which led to the first contacts between China and the West around 200 BC.

Through these contacts is easy to imagine that some of the myths of Greek origin could have reached China transported by merchants who loved telling stories. Years later following the conquest of Asia by Alexander, in several Chinese documents, and, above all, in the Shan Hai Jin, (Classic of Mountains and Seas: a pseudo-scientific treatise that collects geographic and ethnographic news during the Han Dynasty - II century BC.) we can find monstrous populations allocated on the border with China of that time, significantly coinciding with those fantasized by the Greek authors.

In the Shan Hai Jin, (edition of Strassberg, Richard, 2002, University of California Press), in the figure with the number 233 it is possible to see the Blemmyes, called Xigtian 形天. In the number 242 it is possible to encounter the Monocles (the Shan Hai jin deals with monocles that are called (Yiumumin) 一目民 or (Guiguomin) 鬼国民); It 's also possible to see, in the figure number 246, the people who hold up their ears (Nie'ermin), the Panotties 聶耳民, and in the figure 278 the dog people (Quanrong) 犬戎, or Cynocephalies.

In the Roman period, in Europe, anyhow these myths were perpetuated by authors such as Pliny the Elder,

Stabo etc. Besides, Romans and Chinese had had reciprocal knowledge of the existence of the two empires already in the Han period, but probably even earlier, and had given rise to numerous businesses especially by sea through the coasts of India.

Later in Europe this imaginative geography reports, with the arrival of Christianity which were gathered in a work known as the Physiologus (third century AD) who had the merit of making known these myths to the people of the Middle Ages. In this book there are adapted myths to a Christian perspective. The Physiologus became the source for the various "bestiaries" or "book of beasts."

A bestiary, or Bestiarum Vocabulum is a guide book, full of descriptions of animals, plants and rocks that were very popular in the Middle Ages in illustrated volumes that described various animals and their stories usually followed by an explanation and a moral implications. This meant that every living thing has its own special reason to exist because it is part of God's creation; for example, the pelican, which was believed to tear the chest to bring their children to nourish with his own blood, was a living representation of Jesus.

European men of the Middle Ages, inheriting these Greek and Latin sources, kept imagining that these countries were inhabited by animals and fantastic men. The Things that distinguish these people from men living in Europe is mainly the area of origin. The monstrous races always live in distant lands, such as India, Ethiopia, Cathay, places with uncertain boundaries for medieval man, but whose name always evokes mystery.

These myths survived up to the modern age because of two specific factors:

A) The arrival in the West of the letter of Prester John.

B) These beliefs appeared as a reliable data in the reports of travelers in the Middle Ages.

The letter of Prester John (or Presbyter Johannes) arrived in the West in 1165 addressed to the Byzantine Emperor Emanuel Commeno, which he then sent to Pope Alexander III and Frederick II the "Redbeard". The sender described himself as "John, Priest, King of Kings and Sovereign of sovereigns". The letter described the kingdom of this priest located in the Far East. Among his subjects not counting only men, but also elves, dwarves, giants, Cyclopes, Centaurs, Minotaurs, dog-headed beings, Blemmyes, and so on. After asking for tributes to the Western rulers, he aimed to launch a crusade to free the sepulcher of Christ from his enemies. Neither the Emperor Emmanuel Commeno nor Frederick II replied, but the Pope, probably by pure charity (because Prester John declared himself a Christian and nonetheless a priest and always ready to collaborate in the crusade) replied by asking for more detailed information. It was an obvious fake (there were plenty of false in each category in that period) by some scribe with an intention of propaganda against Byzantium, but it did not matter of its origin or of its authenticity at its reception: the moment the Pope demands for credential he validates the authenticity of the letter.

In a very long period of time since the Tenth century when Venice acquired a leading role in the trade with the East, and later, through the Mongolian Pax (which favored

the passage of the Europeans on the Asian territory interrupted by the Eighth century because of the Muslim rule), until the Seventeenth century, not only was it not possible to refute the Greek myths about the Orient but they were confirmed due to the travel reports.

Among all the possible texts to examine we chose to analyze these: 1) Odoric of Pordenone Travels; 2) The Million of Marco Polo; 3) John Mandeville travels.

Odoric of Pordenone (1286 – 1331) was an late-medieval Italian traveler. He visited China and was the first European to reach Lhasa. The story, as all the medieval reports, was objective in some paragraphs, full of myths in others. He mentions pygmies; the dog-headed men; tree from whose fruit, when they are mature, come out lambs etc. We must also add that there are two versions of the same travel report: version A, more objective, and a B version full of fantasy, and also the report is not of Odoric but was written by William of Solagna who Odoric told his memoirs.

We may wonder why medieval men had this lack of objectivity. There are several hypotheses. One is that the existence of men of the monstrous and fabulous East had been established as a cultural knowledge for travelers and left them disappointed and surprised not to have met any. Therefore their location was moved in places that had not been visited by the narrator directly but these stories were reported from others that swore to have met them.

In the worst cases it was believed to see what had been inculcated in their mind since childhood. The traveler accepted to look at an unknown landscape with the information he had received about it, bringing out the unknown to something that was known and accepting in advance to be in a place certainly full of wonders that he identified in things or places for which he had not the tools or cognitive categories suitable for classification. For example, Marco Polo, by saying that the unicorn is not that kind of animal it is said, but : "a rough graceless beast with a big horn on his forehead." Apparently he saw a rhino, but thought he had seen a kind of Unicorn less beautiful than what people think.

The art historian Rudolf Wittkower makes an interesting observation in analyzing a famous illustration of the Million, retained at the Bibliothèque Nationale de Paris known as No. 2810, drawn in the early fifteenth century, which related to many miniatures that tended to interpret freely and even to correct the text to make it consistent with traditional beliefs. In the chapter in which Marco Polo talks about the inhabitants of Siberia, we only read that it is a very wild race. But the miniaturist shows three samples of these people: one Sciapod, a Blemmy, and a Cyclops. When he tells us about the population of the Andaman Islands (Indian Ocean), Marco Polo says just that these inhabitants have heads, eyes and teeth a bit similar to those of dogs. The illustrator represents them as dog-headed.

Among the travelers in conflict between making an objective account and say what is expected of the audience stands out John Mandeville (? -1372) born in St. Albans. The report of his travels had a very large fortune and helped to revive the curiosity of Europeans to the lands of the East. Anyway the author personally went up to the maximum in the Holy Land, while everything else is taken from different sources: As an evidence of the success of his writings during the Middle Ages, there are kept 300 copies of Mandeville's Travels (translated and transposed into several European languages) against 119 copies of Marco Polo's work.

The development of geographical knowledge led not so much to disprove the existence of the mentioned above races but their location, and if for a long time they had been allocated in India and China, later they were moved to places still poorly understood like Japan, the extreme north and the New World.

The Greek myths arrived in Japan, through China, in 1700, in particular through a book called Wang Qi (1607), known in Japan as the Sansai Zue (三才図会 "Pictorial" or "Illustrated Compendium of the Three Powers") a Chinese encyclopedia of the Ming times. Later, in the 1712, Terajima Ryōan wrote the Wakan Sansai Zue (和漢三才図会, literally "Illustrated Sino-Japanese Encyclopedia") a Japanese compendium published in the Edo period made of 105 volumes that describes and illustrates many activities of daily life, and also plants and animals, and constellations. In Wakan Sansai Zue, the presence of the Greek myths is quite obvious. It is impressive the image that not only depicts the pygmies but puts them side to cranes in their legendary struggle: In Greek Mythology, Pygmies were a tribe of dwarves. The Iliad by Homer (eighth century BC) tells us that they were involved in a constant war with cranes. Besides, Greek mythology describes the origin of the age-old battle, talking of a Pygmy Queen named Gerana who offended the goddess Hera with her boasts of superior beauty, and was transformed into a crane. Then in Japan, there's the final stage of myths: the end of this part of geographical exploration, the intensification of trade and the various technological progress in many aspects of life such as seafaring put an end to the Greek myth.

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