



ANZAAB *Aspects of Book Collecting*

Collecting European Books on China

Asia Bookroom

Background: European books on China include printed books and ephemera concerning China, its history, customs and culture—indeed, any aspect of this extraordinary and broad civilization would fall within this fascinating genre.

Definition: Alongside the work of Western authors, this field includes works by Chinese authors which have been published in a European language even if they are not specifically on the subject of China. Frequently these books reflect Chinese culture and attitudes and fit nicely alongside more formal accounts of China and her ways. While not strictly within the genre, some people (particularly collectors who have family connections with China) also include books on Overseas Chinese or the Chinese communities that, largely since the 19th century, have grown around the world.

Range: Books about China took educated Europe by storm in the 16th and 17th centuries. One of the earliest significant works is *Dell'istoria della China* by Juan González de Mendoza, published in 1586. The Jesuit contribution to European understanding of China is impossible to over estimate. An important early volume is *Christiana expeditione apud Sinas* (the journal of Matteo Ricci; completed after his death by fellow Jesuit Nicolas Trigault). This influential book was enormously popular and, between 1616 and 1648, was published in a number of editions in Latin, French, German, Spanish and Italian. Interestingly, it was not published in English until well into the 20th century, reflecting, one can only surmise, the anti-Catholic feeling of those in power in England at the time.

A fascinating insight into European culture and society can also be gained when collecting books on China. For instance, 19th century missionaries' accounts of China are often very judgemental and narrow by today's standards, reflecting, as they often do, Victorian Britain's black and white views of behaviour. Alongside these are extraordinary works completed by scholar missionaries like Robert Morrison. Morrison's monumental *Dictionary of the Chinese Language* still stands as one of the most important dictionaries ever published.

With care, an interesting collection can be built for a surprisingly small outlay. Cultural Revolution ephemera and books are, for example, still relatively undervalued. Other areas include the Opium Wars, Trade with China, and single title collections of translations of major Chinese works, for instance Confucius's *Analects*.

Availability: Most dealers have some books on China; others will have a large range. When inquiring after books on China you will frequently be directed to the travel section. However, it always pays to look beyond this. Gems can be discovered in any area—even, occasionally, in the European history and biography sections! Hunting books on China can give a real "thrill of the chase"—you never know where you will find them and the more you learn the more likely you are to uncover a fascinating book, the importance of which has gone unrecognised.

Price-range: From under \$100 to many thousands. Many important European books on China are still available for well under \$1000.

Footnote: An excellent reference is the recently published catalogue *China on Paper*. This exhibition was held at the Getty Museum in Los Angeles (December 2007—February 2008).