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# Imaginary Constructs: Early European Accounts of Chinese Architecture

Xiaoruo Cao<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract.** The expeditions of missionaries and explorers represent a critical juncture in Europe's early engagement with China, particularly through their detailed observations of Chinese architecture. Their narratives, once translated and disseminated across Europe, not only molded European stereotypes of China but also contributed motifs that influenced Chinoiserie architecture in the 18th century. This article focuses on architectural details found in four seminal and widely circulated European accounts of China from the 16th to 17th centuries: *The History of the Great and Mighty Kingdom of China and the Situation There* of by Fray Juan González de Mendoza; *The History of that Great and Renowned Monarchy of China Wherein All the Particular Provinces are Accurately Described* by Álvarez de Semedo; *An Embassy from the East-India Company of the United Provinces to the Grand Tartar Cham, Emperor of China* by Johan Nieuhof; and *China Illustrata* by Athanasius Kircher. By analyzing the formal descriptions, evaluative commentary, and accompanying illustrations, this study seeks to elucidate how Chinese architecture was first perceived, interpreted, and understood in the context of early modern Europe.

**Keywords:** Chinese Architecture; European Sinology; Jesuit Missionaries; Historical narratives; Cross-cultural understanding

## [es] Construcciones Imaginarias: Relatos Europeos Tempranos sobre la Arquitectura China

**Resumen.** Las expediciones de misioneros y exploradores representan un punto crítico en el primer contacto de Europa con China, especialmente a través de sus observaciones detalladas de la arquitectura china. Sus narrativas, una vez traducidas y difundidas por toda Europa, no solo moldearon los estereotipos europeos sobre China, sino que también aportaron motivos que influyeron en la arquitectura chinoiserie del siglo XVIII. Este artículo se centra en los detalles arquitectónicos encontrados en cuatro relatos europeos fundamentales y ampliamente difundidos sobre China, desde el siglo XVI hasta el XVII: *Historia del gran y poderoso reino de China y la situación del mismo* por Fray Juan González de Mendoza; *Historia de la gran y renombrada monarquía de China en la cual todas las provincias particulares están descritas con precisión* por Álvarez de Semedo; *Una embajada de la Compañía de las Indias Orientales de las Provincias Unidas al Gran Cham Tartar, Emperador de China* por Johan Nieuhof; y *China Ilustrada* por Athanasius Kircher. Mediante el análisis de las descripciones formales, los comentarios evaluativos y las ilustraciones acompañantes, este estudio busca esclarecer cómo la arquitectura china fue percibida, interpretada y comprendida inicialmente en el contexto de la Europa de la temprana modernidad.

**Palabras clave:** Arquitectura china; sinología europea; misioneros jesuitas; narrativas históricas; comprensión intercultural

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<sup>1</sup> Universidad Complutense de Madrid.

During the Age of Exploration, the allure of China as an unvanquished empire across the Pacific Europeans, whose admiration for its superior and venerable culture was further ignited by captivating accounts from missionaries and travelers.<sup>2</sup> European knowledge of China initially took shape from the narratives of early explorers like Marco Polo and Matteo Ricci, alongside the fragmented accounts of Portuguese and Spanish merchants and diplomats. It was not until the late 16th century to the mid-18th century that Jesuit missionaries undertook more in-depth studies of Chinese culture.<sup>3</sup> Their detailed introduction and commentary on the pagodas, temples, palaces, and residential buildings in China provide a glimpse into the early European fascination with Chinese architecture. Despite occasional misconceptions, these descriptions, tinted with wonder and awe, significantly fostered Western interest in oriental architecture and set the stage for scholarly research in the centuries that followed.

In 1580, King Philip II dispatched a diplomatic mission to China, including Juan González de Mendoza, a Spanish Augustinian monk, as one of its members. However, the political circumstances in the Philippines thwarted their journey, compelling Mendoza to return from Mexico.<sup>4</sup> In 1583, at the behest of Pope Gregory XIII, Mendoza undertook the task of authoring a comprehensive account of the Chinese Kingdom. It could be stated that he utilized nearly all available information from Portuguese and Jesuits, as well as resources from Spanish missionaries and administrators in the Philippines, including accounts from figures like João de Barros, Fr. Gaspar da Cruz, Martín de Rada, and Antonio Pigafetta.<sup>5</sup> This culminated in the creation of *The History of the Great and Mighty Kingdom of China and the Situation Thereof*, published in Rome in 1585. The book was highly esteemed and underwent numerous reprints and translations across Europe. It extensively covers China's natural landscapes, historical and cultural narratives, customs, religious beliefs, and socio-political structures, marking it as one of the most thorough European encyclopedias of China in the 16th century. American scholar D. F. Lach praised it as "the point of departure and the basis of comparison for all subsequent European works on China written before

the eighteenth century."<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge that Mendoza's book relied extensively on second-hand sources and his role as a Catholic missionary imparts an idealistic inclination to his depiction.<sup>7</sup>

Albeit sometimes embellished and fictional, Mendoza presents a rich portrayal of Chinese architecture, employing grandiose adjectives such as "wonderfull," "mightie," and "superbious" to summarize the structures and asserts that "throughout that kingdom, great men in the art of architecture, and the materials for building are the best in the world".<sup>8</sup> The most concentrated account of Chinese architecture in Mendoza's book is his description of the imperial complex in the city of Suntien (modern Forbidden City). He details four lavishly decorated palaces within the larger palace complex. Probably influenced by the travelogues by Marco Polo and his imagination, Mendoza described the building materials as being adorned with precious metals such as gold and silver.<sup>9</sup>

Mendoza offers an elaborate description of the Great Wall in China, which he portrays as "a very great wall, or enclosure, that exists within it, five hundred leagues in length,"<sup>10</sup> commissioned by king Tzintzon (Emperor Qin Shi Huang). By exploring its origin, function, construction materials, and historical legends surrounding this iconic structure, Mendoza greatly enriches European understanding of this monumental edifice in the 16th century. While primarily based on Martín de Rada's earlier writings, Mendoza sets the Wall's length at 500 leagues, diverging from Rada's longer estimate of 600 leagues.<sup>11</sup>

It is worth noticing that in his description, Mendoza frequently draws parallels between Chinese architectural elements and those of ancient Rome, reflecting both his admiration and the European perspective of his era towards non-Western cultures. For example, he references the Chinese *P'ai-lou* Gateways, or *paifang*

<sup>2</sup> RUBIÉS, *Prologue* to SOLA, 2018, 15-16.

<sup>3</sup> WU & ZENG 2000, 31-32.

<sup>4</sup> WU & ZENG, op. cit. (note 2), 26.

<sup>5</sup> SOLA, o. cit (note 1), pp.261-262.

<sup>6</sup> LACH 1977, 744.

<sup>7</sup> SOLA 2018, 23.

<sup>8</sup> GONZÁLEZ DE MENDOZA, 1585, 18.

<sup>9</sup> In his travelogue, Marco Polo describes the walls of the chambers and staircases of Kambalu (Dadu of Yuan, the winter capital of the Mongol-led Yuan dynasty, the central part of modern Beijing) as "all covered with gold and silver."

See POLO 1845, 104.

<sup>10</sup> GONZÁLEZ DE MENDOZA, o. cit (note 8), p 18.

<sup>11</sup> GONZÁLEZ DE MENDOZA, Juan: *The History of the Great and Mighty Kingdom of China and the Situation thereof* (H. Gaoji, Trans.), Chung Hwa Book Company, Beijing, [1585] 2013, 27.

—an open, symbolic gateway that adorned the entrance, possibly drawing influence from Indian design elements<sup>12</sup>—as “triumphall arkes,” likening them to Roman artistry and style.<sup>13</sup> Additionally, he characterizes the residences of provincial governors as being “commonly verie gallant and after the manner of Rome.”<sup>14</sup> Moreover, when describing a particular tower in the city of Fucheo, he extols it as “surmounts any building that hath beene amoungst the Romans: the one which is raised and founded vpon fortie pillars, and euerie pillar is of one stone”<sup>15</sup>

Following Mendoza’s publication, the most extensive and impactful European account of China came from the travelogue of Portuguese Jesuit Álvaro de Semedo. Assigned to Macau in 1608, Semedo reached Nanjing by 1613, where he began his missionary work three years later. After 22 years of travelling in China to advance Christianity, Semedo returned to Rome in 1636. On the journey back, he composed a book originally titled *Relationship of the spread of faith in the kingdom of China and other adjacent countries*. Semedo likely took the manuscript back to Portugal upon his arrival, and it was later translated and revised into Spanish, then published in Madrid in 1642 as *Imperio de la China*.<sup>16</sup> This seminal work is credited as an exemplification of early Sinology efforts to frame and understand China within European intellectual and cultural contexts using methodologies that would typify single-volume histories in the 19th and 20th centuries.<sup>17</sup>

Semedo not only provides a thorough description of Chinese architecture but also provides his own insights, focusing particularly on the styles prevalent in the Southern provinces. His narratives cover similar themes to Mendoza, including the Great Wall which he describes as a monumental structure stretching 900 miles.<sup>18</sup> However, Semedo also critiques its practical shortcoming, such as its narrow width, vulnerability to damage, and extensive destruction by enemies, which

have left it nearly unrecognizable.<sup>19</sup> Additionally, Semedo delivers a thorough overview of the imperial palaces in China, maintaining a more objective tone compared to Mendoza’s more mythical and enchanting portrayal.

Semedo highlights the expansive Nanjing palace (modern Ming Palace), noting its extensive circumference of approximately five miles, while he regards the smaller Beijing palace as superior in quality.<sup>20</sup> He elaborates the functional, structural, and decorative aspects of these edifices, especially on the marble arches, balusters, and columns adorned with curious carvings and reliefs which he considers “having many things in it after the manner of ours.”<sup>21</sup> However, Semedo dispels the European myths of palaces constructed from gold, silver, and gems, clarifying that these structures are actually built from wood, exquisitely coated in lacquer and adorned with elaborate painting and gilding.<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, he describes the layout of the surrounding Chinese gardens and their strategically placed gates as elements of a harmonious landscape, highlighting the construction of artificial mountains that enhance a natural aesthetic in both private and imperial contexts.<sup>23</sup>

As for residential buildings, Semedo characterizes them as pragmatically and neatly designed, embellished with high-quality varnish and fine paint.<sup>24</sup> He comments on their low-rise structure, which harmonizes the surrounding courtyards and natural landscapes.<sup>25</sup> Semedo devotes considerable attention to the construction techniques, noting the meticulous crafting of roofs, the robust use of wooden columns, and the strategic incorporation of brick and stone in building walls.

It is noticeable that Semedo demonstrates an interest in religious architecture. He references the Jesuit church in Nanjing, a distinctly European-styled church in Beijing, and a *Synagogue* constructed and decorated as a great Chapel in Kaifeng (*Cai Fum Fu*).<sup>26</sup> In detail, Semedo describes a meticulously constructed seven-story porcelain tower in Nanjing, embellished with idols, which he lauds as rival-

<sup>12</sup> *P'ai-lou* was usually erected to honor loyalty, filial piety, integrity, charitable deeds, and scholarly achievements during the feudal era in China.

See LIANG, Sicheng: *The history of Chinese architectural images*, SDX Joint Publishing Company, Hong Kong, 2011, 491.

<sup>13</sup> GONZÁLEZ DE MENDOZA, o cit. (note 8), 17-18.

<sup>14</sup> GONZÁLEZ DE MENDOZA, o cit. (note 8), 19.

<sup>15</sup> GONZÁLEZ DE MENDOZA, o cit. (note 8), 20.

<sup>16</sup> SARAIVA & JAMI, 2019, 36-38.

<sup>17</sup> KOSS & YAO, 93.

<sup>18</sup> SEMEDO [1642] 1998, 26.

<sup>19</sup> SEMEDO, o cit. (note 19), 26.

<sup>20</sup> SEMEDO [1642] 1655, 112.

<sup>21</sup> SEMEDO, o cit. (note 20), 112.

<sup>22</sup> SEMEDO, 1642, 151.

<sup>23</sup> WEISER, 2016, 57.

<sup>24</sup> SEMEDO, 1642, 8.

<sup>25</sup> SEMEDO, 1642, 8.

<sup>26</sup> SEMEDO, 1642, 24.

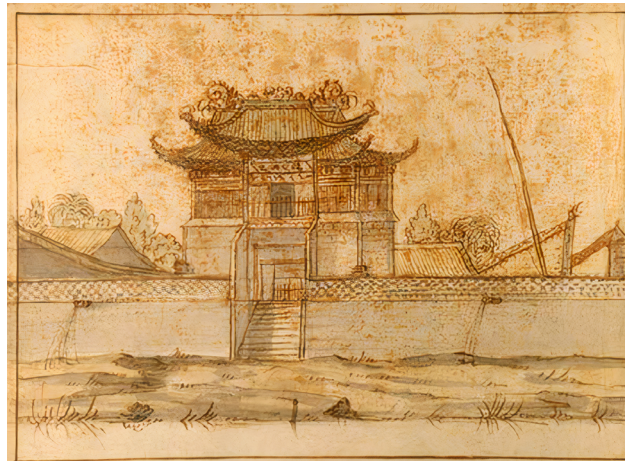


Fig. 1. Nieuhof's Drawing of Teywanmiao from the Paris manuscript, 1666

ing the venerable buildings of ancient Rome.<sup>27</sup> He also introduces a circular temple in Nanjing, appearing as if perched atop a hill with its structure supported by three ascending tiers of platforms.<sup>28</sup> Accessible by four pairs of white marble staircases on all sides, the temple's roofs are gilded and lustrous.<sup>29</sup> Particularly, Semedo praises the exceptional quality of the wood used in its construction, retaining their luster even after about two hundred years.<sup>30</sup>

Compared to Mendoza and Semedo, Johan Nieuhof's book found broader dissemination across Europe, particularly his illustrations of Chinese landscapes and architecture, which have since become essential references for later generations. Unlike the Jesuit missionaries, Nieuhof was employed as a steward by the Dutch East India Company during his expedition to China. He arrived in Guangzhou in 1656 and returned to the Netherlands in 1658 after a 20-month expedition.<sup>31</sup> Throughout his travels, Nieuhof meticulously documented local customs in Chinese towns and villages through notes and sketches. Upon return, Nieuhof entrusted these materials to his brother, Hendrik Nieuhof, although their whereabouts remain unknown.<sup>32</sup> The final Dutch edition, titled *An*

*embassy from the East-India company of the United Provinces, to the Grand Tartar Cham, emperor of China, delivered by their excellencies Peter de Goyer and Jacob de Keyzer, at his imperial city of Peking*, was first published in 1665 in Amsterdam. Featuring 150 copperplate illustrations, this volume profoundly shaped European perceptions of China.

Due to restricted disembarkation, Nieuhof's sketches primarily captured distant and faint views, rendering the architectural details of the cities nearly invisible. Nonetheless, editors and illustrators undertook significant efforts to enhance details, aiming to engage more audiences. Throughout the reprinting process, translators from various countries also tailored Nieuhof's account to better resonate with the prevailing interests of local readerships.<sup>33</sup> As a result, the final copperplate engravings more closely resembled the intricate cityscape paintings popular in 17th-century Netherlands. During this process of adjustment, certain inaccuracies were introduced, such as the addition of spires that mimic church towers on the horizon.<sup>34</sup>

The modifications are evident in the portrayal of the Temple of Heavenly Kings (*TEYWANMIAO*). In Nieuhof's original manuscript (fig 2), the temple's roof depicts larger and more dramatically upturned, more faithfully reflecting traditional Chinese architectural styles. The *Chiwen* on the ridge, an ornamental motif symbolizing guardianship, is depicted in abstract, curvy, and circular shapes. In contrast, the 1668 Dutch version (fig.3) shows the roof with reduced propor-

<sup>27</sup> SEMEDO, 1642, 24.

<sup>28</sup> SEMEDO, 1642, 24.

<sup>29</sup> SEMEDO, o cit. (note 18), 133.

<sup>30</sup> SEMEDO, o cit. (note 18), 133.

<sup>31</sup> BLUSSÉ & ZHUANG 1989, 39.

<sup>32</sup> The Paris manuscript was the main reference of the initial Dutch publication and was believed to be collaboratively crafted by Nieuhof and unidentified draftsmen, although Nieuhof was not involved in the manuscript's final production stages. See SUN, 2013, 112-130.

<sup>33</sup> SUN, 2013, 288; ODELL, 2001, 225.

<sup>34</sup> CHEN 2023, 139.



Fig. 2. Engraving of Teywanmiao from the 1668 Latin edition



Fig. 3. Nieuhof's drawing of the Bao'en temple and pagoda from the Paris manuscript, 1666

tions, giving the structure a more standardized appearance. The roof's decorations are more elaborate and detailed, with the addition of fantastical creatures. Additionally, the scene includes palm trees, enhancing the exotic allure, and the small figures in the foreground are added to accentuate the temple's grandeur. These changes clearly illustrate the editors' intentional emphasis on the fantastical forms and ornamental aspects of Chinese architecture, designed to captivate and intrigue the readers.

Given his extensive travels in the South, Nieuhof dedicated a focused section to *paifang*, which he referred to as Triumph Arches, echoing Mendoza's description. Nieuhof explores the function, design, and strategic placement of these structures, highlighting their role in celebrating national glory

and achievements.<sup>35</sup> The illustration deliberately exaggerates the height of the archway, magnifying the architectural grandeur. Notably, Nieuhof discusses the historical origins of the Western triumphal arches, including those erected in honor of Augustus, drawing parallels between the symbolic roles of victory represented by both the *paifang* and Roman triumphal arches.<sup>36</sup>

One of Nieuhof's key contributions to the European understanding of Chinese architecture through his travelogue is his comprehensive description of the Bao'en Temple pagoda in Nanjing. Constructed during the Ming Dynasty between 1412 and 1431, this pagoda soars to a

<sup>35</sup> NIEUHOF, J., HORN, G., GOYER, D., KEIZER, J. D., & NEDERLANDSCHE OOST-INDISCHE COMPAGNIE [1665].

<sup>36</sup> NIEUHOF, 1665, 93.

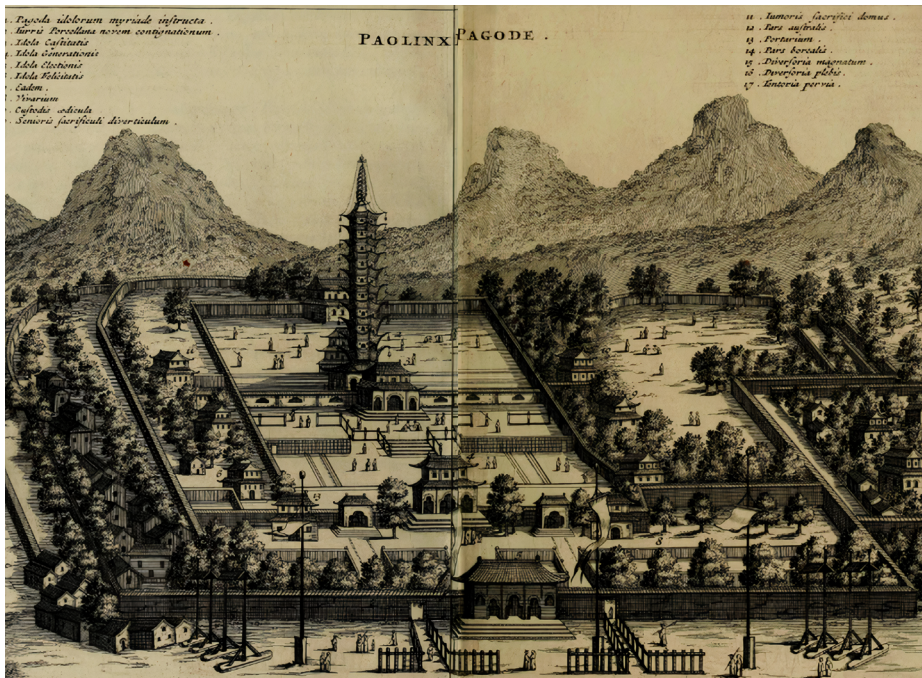


Fig. 4. Illustration of the Bao'en temple and pagoda from the 1668 Latin edition

height of 78.2 meters and features nine levels and octagonal sides. It is adorned with white and multicolored glazed tiles that give it a luminous, crystalline appearance. Each exterior brick is decorated with a Buddha figure wrapped in gold foil, casting a radiant glow in sunlight. Historians believe the pagoda was built to establish Emperor Yongle's legitimacy as the rightful heir and to signify repentance towards his biological mother.

Nieuhof provides a detailed description of the Porcelain Tower, emphasizing its decorations, historical legend, and the materials used in construction. While Nieuhof called it as a "porcelain tower," this term is misnomer as the material used is glazed pottery, not true porcelain.

In numerous paintings, the Bao'en Temple Pagoda is prominently featured against the backdrop of surrounding mountains and rivers, employing unusual perspectives to enhance the visual contrast, and sometimes even including a bird's-eye view from above. In Nieuhof's sketch and manuscript (fig. 3), the tower is depicted with nine floors. However, the 1668 Dutch version sometimes depicts it with ten floors (fig. 4), likely an editorial modification intended to exaggerate the tower's height. In *Chinesische Pagoden* (1931), German architect Ernst Boerschmann referenced Nieuhof's print, positioning that the representation of the porcelain tower in Europe—often depicted as a ten-story structure—has led

to some misrepresentations of other Chinoiserie architectures across the continent.<sup>37</sup>

Nieuhof ventured into the Qing Dynasty's imperial city to curtsy to the emperor and rigorously chronicled its architectural splendor and exquisite decorations. He includes a basic layout employing the Western method of central perspective. Due to his restricted mobility, Nieuhof conceives a centrally symmetrical layout, fabricating an east-west horizontal space to mirror the Greek Cross structure typical of Western design.<sup>38</sup> In the 1721 book *Entwurf einer historischen Architektur* by Johann Bernhard Fischer von Erlach, Johann adapted Nieuhof depiction of the Imperial City as a foundation, incorporating elements such as pagoda, tower, and the Great Wall.<sup>39</sup> This adaptation catered to European readers' conventional imagination of China, reinforcing stereotypical imagery.<sup>40</sup>

In his analysis of Chinese residential architecture, Nieuhof highlights the stark contrasts between Chinese and European architectural styles. He observes that, unlike European designs which often emphasize ephemeral splendor, Chinese prioritize practical durability.<sup>41</sup> He notes that while European buildings may marvel at the fa-

<sup>37</sup> MIN 2023, 100.

<sup>38</sup> JIANG 2024, 98.

<sup>39</sup> FISCHER VON ERLACH 1721.

<sup>40</sup> JIANG, o cit. (note 40), 98.

<sup>41</sup> NIEUHOF, 1665, 28.

cade, Chinese structures prioritize enduring utility, typically employing wooden columns to simplify maintenance and repairs.<sup>42</sup> This assertion on the practicality is a novel observation in European travelogues of the time.



Fig. 5. Kircher's illustration of Chinese pagoda, 1667

In 1667, two years after Nieuhof's book was first published, German Jesuit scholar Atanasio Kircher released another account of China which significantly shaped the European Chinoiserie style of the 18th century.<sup>43</sup> According to French sinologist René Étiemble, "its influence was later reflected in engravings and people's interest in China issues. Before long, China issues quickly became a fashion."<sup>44</sup> Similar to Nieuhof, Kircher aimed to present an "authentic" portrayal of the country, yet his approach was more ethnographic, offering descriptions and interpretations of Chinese culture based on investigation and empirical insights.<sup>45</sup> Despite never visiting China himself, Kircher's position at the Roman Academy gave him access to numerous reports from missionaries, which he integrated with his own knowledge and imagination.<sup>46</sup> He extensively drew upon the

works of Semedo, Matteo Ricci, Martino Martini, and others like Johann Adam Schall von Bell, Johann Grueber, and Michał Boym.<sup>47</sup> His book, originally titled *China Monumentis qua Sacris qua profanis, Nec non variis Naturae & Artis Spectaculis, Aliarumque rerum memorabilium Argumentis illustrata* (commonly referred to as *China Illustrata* in Amsterdam), was first published in Amsterdam 1667. Scholars argue that the success of *China Illustrata* was less about its factual accuracy and specificity and more about the richness of its illustrations, which were compiled from a variety of resources.<sup>48</sup>

In "Part Five: About Chinese Architecture and Other Mechanical Arts", Kircher provides a thorough examination of Chinese architectural forms, including temples, bridges, city walls, and other structures. He delves into the architectural styles found in the provinces of Fujian, Guizhou, Shaanxi, and Yunnan noting a preference for functionality over aesthetic appeal within the Great Wall<sup>49</sup>—an insight echoed by Nieuhof. Kircher contrasts the inward-facing design of Chinese buildings, devoid of external windows and resembling European monasteries, against the outward magnificence typical of European urban centers.<sup>50</sup> This comparison, however, overlooks the cultural significance of privacy and social organization inherent in Chinese courtyard designs. Additionally, Kircher observes that the horizontal extension of one-story buildings across Chinese cities lends them a sprawling appearance.<sup>51</sup> He humorously suggests that if cities like Rome or Paris were designed similarly, they would rank among the world's largest.<sup>52</sup>

Besides residential buildings, Kircher provides an exhaustive account of the dwellings of Chinese officials, so expansive that they merit termed "palaces."<sup>53</sup> He explores the layout, function, and materials used in these palaces. Despite their splendor, Kircher highlights a critical vulnerability: their predominantly wooden construction makes them highly vulnerable to fire.<sup>54</sup> This point stands in contrast with the favorable attitude

<sup>42</sup> NIEUHOF, 1665, 28.

<sup>43</sup> MORENA 2022, 53.

<sup>44</sup> ETIEMBLE 2008, 305.

<sup>45</sup> CHEN, o cit. (note 35), 139.

<sup>46</sup> CHEN, o cit. (note 35), 140

<sup>47</sup> KIRCHER 2010, 4.

<sup>48</sup> CHEN, o cit. (note 35), 141.

<sup>49</sup> KIRCHER, 1667, 216. This variation may stem from the Central Plains' influence inside the Wall, where Han Chinese characteristics dominate, while beyond the Wall, the architectural diversity is shaped by ethnic groups.

<sup>50</sup> KIRCHER, 1667, 216.

<sup>51</sup> KIRCHER, 1667, 216.

<sup>52</sup> KIRCHER, 1667, 216.

<sup>53</sup> KIRCHER, 1667, 216.

<sup>54</sup> KIRCHER, 1667, 216.

towards wooden structures of Nieuwhof. What further sets Kircher apart from his predecessors is his attention to the interior aesthetics and use of lacquer decorations of Chinese residences and palaces. He emphasizes their extensive use of finely crafted Chinese lacquer in various colors, which imparts a level of beauty and sophistication that often surpasses that found in European homes.<sup>55</sup>

In his discussion of Chinese idolatry, Kircher draws parallels between the Chinese' veneration of pagodas and the Egyptians' reverence for pyramids. He asserts that the Chinese adopted the concept of tower-shaped buildings from the Egyptians, Persians, and others who revered stone tablets or pyramid-like structures.<sup>56</sup> This perspective is shaped by his adherence to Christian and Hermetic ideologies, which strongly influence his focus on Egyptian customs and practices.<sup>57</sup> Further evidence of Kircher's speculative approach to Chinese architecture is evident in his depiction of the Bao'en Temple Pagoda. The accompanying illustration (fig. 5) reveals his conception of Chinese pagodas was largely fantastical, characterized by inaccuracies in appearance and proportion that do not align with actual structures, with background buildings portraying a distinctly but inaccurately stylized Chinese aesthetic.

In conclusion, despite these 16th and 17th century European narratives encouraging the emulation of the political systems, their portrayal of architecture primarily served to cast China as a wealthy, formidable, and enigmatic empire. They demonstrate little real intent to adopt the Chinese architectural techniques or styles. This tendency can be observed in the dramatic focus on exotic forms, especially in the writings of those who have never been to China, in contrast to a rather cursory engagement with the underlying traditions and norms. For instance, early missionary accounts of ancient Chinese palaces tend to overlook the layout rules aligned with celestial phenomena or the construction methodology adhering to ritual etiquettes, opting instead to accentuate the massive scale and opulent materials. Even scholars well-versed in Chinese made brief mentions of the principles of harmony with nature in Chinese garden design.

When encountering unfamiliar architectural features such as *Paifang*, pagodas, and the central axis layout, these observers described them us-

ing familiar Western architectural references (Arc de Triomphe, Pyramid, Cross layouts, etc.). This method of interpretation not only illustrates the European practice of applying their own interpretive frameworks to the unfamiliar but also aims to facilitate understanding among their readership. Through these comparisons, it becomes evident that their grasp of Chinese architecture remains preliminary and partial. Without being researched or deduced the reasons why they appear different or similar to Europe, early Chinese architecture was not studied as a reflection of its current social and political milieu, but was rather more frequently regarded as a subject of aesthetic interest.

The impact of early European travelogues extended well beyond their original authors to include the editors, publishers, and translators who frequently reshaped these narratives to captivate European audiences and dominate the print market. These intermediaries often exaggerated the more bizarre and peculiar elements of Chinese architecture, thereby creating fantastical representations that appealed to European appetites for the unfamiliar and exotic. Combining with the deep-rooted stereopsis from ancient legends, these early European portrayed Chinese architecture not as a viable model for practical enhancement or introspection, but rather as a utopian ideal, an impressive superiority—crafted for the imagination and to quench curiosity with its grandeur, majesty, and striking exoticism.

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<sup>55</sup> KIRCHER, 1667, 219.

<sup>56</sup> KIRCHER, 1667, 135.

<sup>57</sup> POKORNY & WINTER 2024, 4.

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