

# La Cina di fine XVIII sec. vista da William Alexander

***di Gaspare Armato***

La Cina è stata da sempre un paese *misterioso*, poco conosciuto, meta di intraprendenti viaggiatori alla ricerca di spezie e prodotti da importare, un mercato sostanzialmente a via univoca, gelosa, potremmo azzardare, la Cina, delle proprie ancestrali memorie.

E quando il re inglese Giorgio III inviò una delegazione, 1793, l'occasione giovò a una serie di diplomatici, pittori, letterati, artisti in genere per prendere contatto e raccontare una realtà diversa dall'europea.

A questo punto entra in gioco il nostro personaggio.

Dopo aver completato i suoi studi alla *Royal Academy Schools* di Londra, William Alexander

(1767-1816) nel 1792, all'età di 25 anni, fu uno dei disegnatori che accompagnavano in Cina la *Macartney Embassy*. Periodo ben fruttifero quello trascorso nelle terre orientali che permisero a William immortalare il quotidiano cinese di fine Settecento, quello in cui regnava l'imperatore Qianlong (1711-1799) della dinastia Qing.

Nei due anni - ritornerà a Londra nel 1794 -, seguendo il conte George Macarteny (1737-1806), che in quel mentre cercava convincere il sovrano cinese ad aprirsi ai commerci con l'Occidente, operazione fallita, il nostro pittore ebbe bastante tempo per preparare ciò che poi sarà dato alle stampe nel 1805 come *The Costume of China*, un volume in cui si raccoglievano ben 48 preziose immagini che presentavano all'Europa dell'epoca la società di quelle terre esotiche, immagini seguite da un'accurata descrizione.

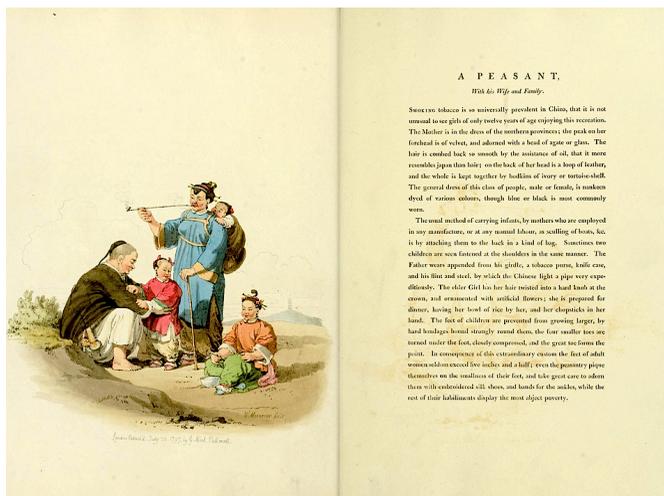
Prima di lasciare lo spazio ad alcune tratte dal libro di William Alexander, che ci danno una visione storica di un mondo ancora oggi a noi poco conosciuto, desidero segnalare l'interessante sito della *Fondazione Intorcetta* - Prospero Intorcetta fu il primo a tradurre in

latino le opere di Confucio - che segnala alcuni dei tanti gesuiti siciliani che viaggiarono vissero studiarono quella cultura.

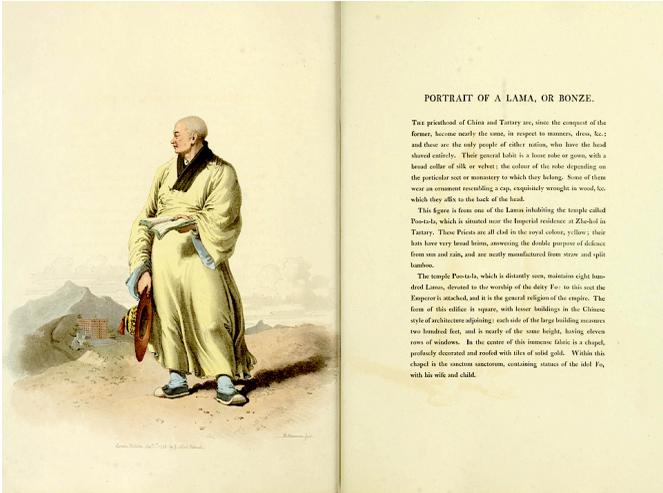
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Novembre 2015

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*Contadino con moglie e figli,  
Cina fine XVIII sec.*



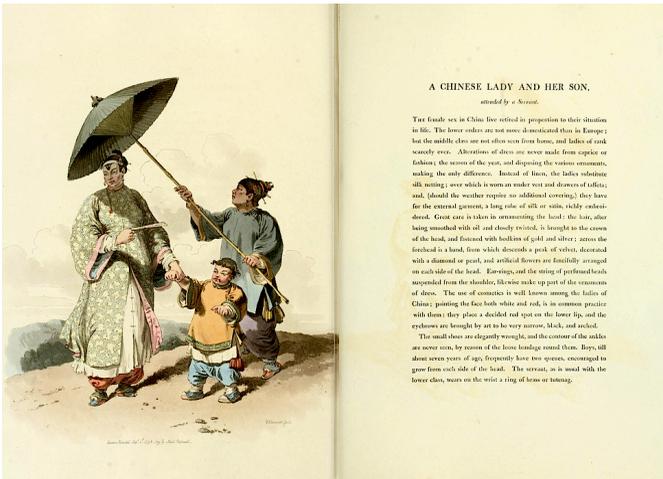
PORTRAIT OF A LAMA, OR BONZE.

The priesthood of China and Tartary are, since the conquest of the former, become nearly the same, in respect to manners, dress, &c.; and these are the only people of other nations who have the head shaved entirely. Their general habit is a loose robe or gown, with a broad collar of silk or velvet: the colour of the robe depending on the particular sect or monastery to which they belong. Some of them wear an ornament resembling a cap, expensively wrought in wood, &c. which they affix to the back of the head.

This figure is from one of the Lamas inhabiting the temple called Poo-tsch, which is situated near the Imperial residence at Zuechou in Tartary. These Poo-tsch are all clad in the royal colour, yellow; their hats have very broad brims, answering the double purpose of defence from sun and rain, and are neatly manufactured from straw and split bamboo.

The temple, Poo-tsch, which is situated near the Imperial residence at Zuechou in Tartary, devoted to the worship of the deity Fu, to this sect the Emperor is attached, and it is the general religion of the empire. The form of this edifice is square, with lower buildings in the Chinese style of architecture adjoining; each side of the large building measures two hundred feet, and is nearly of the same height, having eleven rows of windows. In the centre of this immense fabric is a chapel, profusely decorated and roofed with tiles of white gold. Within this chapel is the sacred sanctum, containing statues of the deity Fu, with his wife and child.

Ritratto di lama, o monaco,  
Cina fine XVIII sec.



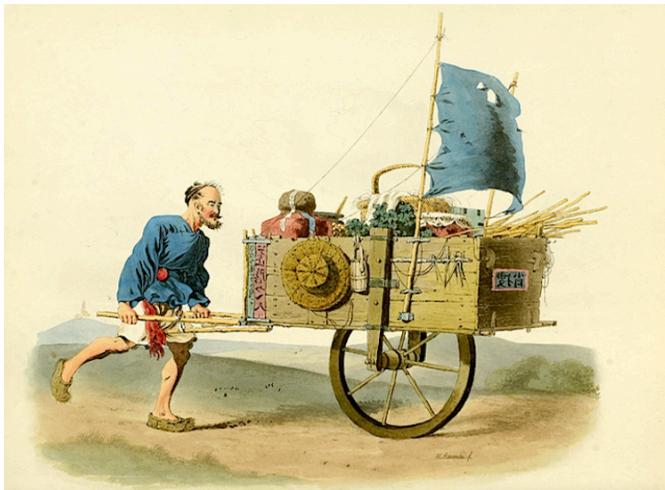
A CHINESE LADY AND HER SON,

attended by a Servant.

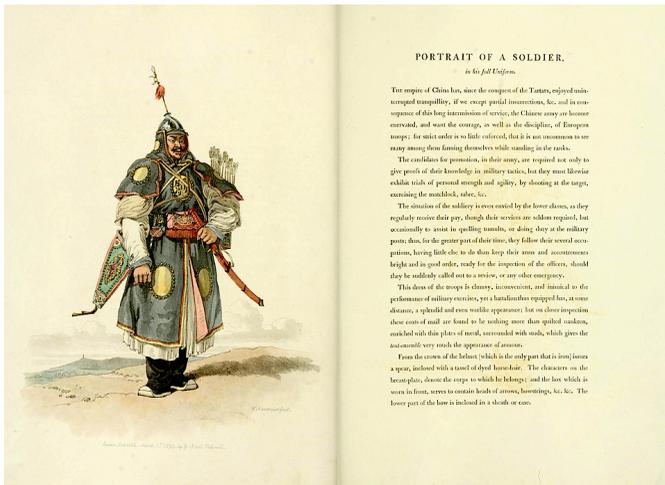
The female sex in China, like that in proportion to their situation in life. The lower orders are not more distinguished than in Europe; but the middle class are not often seen from home, and ladies of rank scarcely ever. Adornments of dress are never made from caprice or fashion; the seasons of the year, and disposing the various ornaments, making the only difference. Instead of linen, the ladies select silk, wearing cover which is worn in winter wet and shrouded of falling, and, should the weather require an additional covering, they have for the external garment, a long robe of silk or satin, richly embroidered. Great care is taken in ornamenting the head; this hair, after being smoothed with oil and closely retained, is brought to the crown of the head, and fastened with ballions of gold and silver; across the forehead is a band from which descends a pearl, or other diamond with a diamond or pearl, and artificial flowers are frequently arranged on each side of the head. Earrings, and the string of profaned beads suspended from the shoulder, likewise make up part of the ornaments of dress. The use of cosmetics is well known among the ladies of China; painting the face both white and red, is in common practice with them; they place a decided red spot on the lower lip, and the eyebrows are brought to art to be very narrow, black, and curled.

The small shoes are elegantly wrought, and the contour of the ankles are never seen, by means of the loose bandage round them. Boys, till about seven years of age, frequently have the eyebrows encouraged to grow from each side of the head. The servant, as is usual with the lower class, wears on the wrist a ring of brass or ironing.

Donna cinese con suo figlio, accompagnata  
da un servo, Cina fine XVIII sec.



*Facchino cinese,  
Cina fine XVIII sec.*



PORTRAIT OF A SOLDIER.  
*in his full Uniform.*

The empire of China has, since the conquest of the Tartars, enjoyed uninterupted tranquillity, if we except partial insurrections, &c. and in consequence of this long continuation of service, the Chinese army or houses are well trained, and most the courage, as well as the discipline, of European troops; for strict order is so little relaxed, that it is not uncommon to see many among them forming themselves while standing in the ranks.

The condition for promotion, in that army, are required to be only to give proofs of their knowledge in military tactics, but they must likewise exhibit trials of personal strength and agility, by shooting at the target, swimming the musketed, &c.

The situation of the military service exacted by the house chosen, as they regularly receive their pay, though their services are seldom required, but occasionally to assist in quelling tumults, or doing duty at the military posts; thus, for the greater part of their time, they follow their usual occupation, having little to do than keep their arms and accoutrements bright and in good order, ready for the inspection of the officers, should they be suddenly called out to a review, or any other emergency.

This sort of the troops is clumsy, unmanoeuvring, and inferior to the performance of military exercises, yet a hardihood engaged has, at some distance, a splendid and even warlike appearance; but on close inspection their count of mail are found to be nothing more than quilted raiment, covered with thin plates of metal, surrounded with wool, which gives the accustomed very much the appearance of armour.

From the crown of the helmet (which is the only part that is iron) issues a spear, enclosed with a level of thick brass plate. The arrows are in the bow-plate, those the corps to which he belongs; and the bow which is worn in front, serves to contain loads of arrows, bowstrings, &c. &c. The lower part of the lance is included in a sheath or case.

*Ritratto di soldato in uniforme,  
Cina fine XVIII sec.*