

# THE TRAVELS OF MENDES PINTO

Fernão Mendes Pinto

*Edited and Translated by*  
REBECCA D. CATZ

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spreads out into low-lying marshes where there are an enormous number of birds covering the entire area; and owing to the presence of so many birds, the whole kingdom of the *Chintaleuhos*, which took eight days to cross, was abandoned by the population forty-two years ago. Once you pass the bird swamps, you enter an entirely different region that is much more forbidding, with large mountain ranges, inhabited by many other animals far worse than the birds, such as elephants, yak,<sup>5</sup> lions, boar, buffalo, and other wild herds of cattle roaming around in such huge numbers, that it is impossible for a man to grow anything there to feed himself, and there is nothing that can be done about it. And in the middle of this country or kingdom, which is what it was formerly, there is a big lake the natives call *Cunebeté*, though others call it the Chiang Mai.<sup>6</sup> That lake empties into this river and three other rivers besides, that provide water for a great part of the land. The writers who have described it state that the lake measures sixty *jaws*<sup>7</sup> in circumference, with three leagues to a *jau*, and that all around it there are many mines of silver, copper, tin, and lead, which are in constant production and yield huge quantities of these metals which are then carried by merchants in elephant and yak caravans to the kingdoms of the *Sornau*, or Siam, *Passiloco*,<sup>8</sup> *Savady*,<sup>9</sup> Toungoo,<sup>10</sup> Prome,<sup>11</sup> *Calaminhan*,<sup>12</sup> and other provinces in the interior beyond this coast, that take two to three months to cross and are divided into seigniories and kingdoms, some inhabited by white people, some by light-brown people, and still others by men of a darker complexion; and they return laden with a lot of gold, diamonds, and rubies, which they receive in exchange for their goods."

When asked if these people possess any sort of arms, they said no, just charred wooden spears and krisses with blades two handspans long. They also said that it would take from two to two and a half months to get there by voyaging along that river, and that the reason it took so long was because the waters descended with tremendous force during the greater part of the year, but that the return voyage took only eight to ten days.

And apart from these questions, Antonio de Faria plied them with many more, and from their answers he learned many other interesting things about that country that are worthy of the attention of some high-minded individual capable of acting on them, for then perhaps we would derive far greater benefits from them, at less cost in blood and all that goes with it, than we do from all of India on which to this day we have expended so much of our energy and resources.

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### Night Raid off Hainan Island

The following Wednesday we left the Varela River, otherwise known as the *Tinagoreu*,<sup>1</sup> and from there the pilot thought it best to head for Pulo Champeiló,<sup>2</sup> which is an uninhabited island at the entrance to the Gulf of Cochinchina<sup>3</sup> at latitude fourteen degrees and a third to the north. On our arrival, we anchored in a sheltered cove, and after three days there, which we spent getting things ready and putting the

ordnance in condition for what we had in mind, we departed for the island of Hainan, where Antonio de Faria thought he might find the *Khoja* Hassim he was looking for.

After sighting the *Pulo Capás* hill, which is the first landmark at the tip of the island, he came in close enough to shore to be able to survey the rivers and harbors and see what their entrances were like, which is all he wanted to do that day. And at nightfall, with the approval of all the soldiers, before making any other move, he ordered them to transfer to the better of the two ships, since the *lorcha* in which he had set out from Patani was taking on too much water; and this was done without any further ado.

And after reaching a river we had seen towards the east at sundown, he issued orders to drop anchor about a league out to sea, because the big junk he was on drew a lot of water and he was afraid of the many shoals we had seen all day long. And he ordered Cristóvão Borralho and his fourteen soldiers to take the *lorcha* up the river to find out what those fires were that we saw up ahead; and he departed without a moment's delay.

When he had gone more than a league upstream, he came upon a fleet of forty huge, imposing junks, each of which had two to three crow's nests aloft; and fearing that they might be part of the mandarin's armada, about which we had heard some vague reports, he anchored a little to shoreward of them; and towards midnight, when the tide was beginning to come in, he weighed anchor very quietly and moved on further up the river to where he had seen the fires, most of which had been extinguished by this time, though two or three still appeared at intervals, guiding him along the way. As he continued up the river this way, he ran into an enormous number of ships both large and small, which some of the men estimated roughly at over two thousand sails. He made his way among them, cutting the water silently with the oars, until he came to the city, which turned out to be a good-sized town of over thirty thousand inhabitants, surrounded by a brick wall with towers and ramparts built into them, just like ours, with a barbican, and two moats running all around. Here, a party of five out of the fourteen soldiers on the *lorcha* went ashore, taking with them two Chinese sailors whose women had been left behind on the junk as hostages. They looked the whole town over from the outside and spent almost three hours there without their presence being detected, then they reembarked and departed under sail and oar without making the slightest sound or commotion, out of fear that, if they were to cause any disturbance there, none of them would escape alive. As they were coming out of the river, they saw what appeared to them to be a junk from the opposite coast that had anchored at the bar a short time before.

When they got back to Antonio de Faria they informed him about everything they had seen, from the huge fleet up the river to the junk they had found at the bar, which, as they repeated several times, probably belonged to that dog of a *Khoja* Hassim they were looking for. This news filled him with such excitement that he could not wait to get started, and without a moment's delay he weighed anchor and set sail, telling us all the while that he had a premonition about it, and that he was so sure that he had found him that he was willing to stake his life on it, and that if he turned out to be right, he could say without any hesitation that it would be well worth it to lay down his life for a chance to avenge himself on someone who had done him so much harm; and he swore, by the word of a decent man, that he was not saying so because of his twelve thousand *cruzados*, which he had forgotten all about, but because of the fourteen Portuguese who had been killed by that dog.

Alcochete. It is now twenty-seven years since they arrested me here along with Tomé Pires,<sup>5</sup> whom Lopo Soares<sup>6</sup> sent as ambassador to the Chinese king—a mission that later ended disastrously because of the misconduct of a Portuguese captain.”<sup>7</sup>

By this time I had fully recovered my wits, and I lifted him from the ground where he lay crying like a baby. Shedding as many tears as he did, I urged him to sit down beside me, which he reluctantly agreed to because he would have liked us to go to his house immediately. Then he resumed his tale of woe, telling me about all the hardships he had suffered throughout his life and everything else that had happened to him from the time he had left Portugal up to then. He also told me about the death of the ambassador Tomé Pires and all the other men whom Fernão Peres de Andrade had left with him in Canton to visit the king of China, a story that does not agree much with what our chroniclers write.<sup>8</sup>

After we had spent the rest of the day exchanging tales of our misfortune, we returned to the city. He showed me the house where he lived and begged me to go bring my other companions immediately. I went to call them straightway and found them all waiting for me in the humble little house in which we lived. When I told them about my encounter and everything else that had happened to me, they were all as astounded as one would expect them to be, and they all accompanied me at once to Vasco Calvo’s house, where we found him waiting for us in a great state of excitement, with the table set for dining. And once again, at this encounter, many a tear was shed all around to celebrate the arrival of my companions.

He took us to another part of the house to meet his wife and children, two boys and two girls. She also greeted us warmly and treated us as lovingly as if she had been the mother or sister of each one of us.

After the better part of the evening had passed we sat down to the table, where he himself brought each of us water to wash our hands, and throughout the entire meal there was not a single dry eye among us. When dinner was over, his wife very courteously got up from the table, and since she was in the habit every night of offering up a Christian prayer of thanks to God, which she did in secret, either out of fear of her heathen neighbors or her respected kinsmen who lived nearby, she took out a key that she kept hidden in her sleeve and with it she unlocked a little door to a small private chapel that contained a beautifully decorated altar with a silver cross and two candlesticks and a lamp, also made of silver. Then she and all four children kneeled down, raised their arms, and recited the following words in clearly enunciated Portuguese.

“O true God, we sinners kneel down before thy Cross like good Christians, to confess to the most holy Trinity, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost, three persons and one God. And thus we promise to live and die in thy most holy Catholic faith like good, true Christians, confessing and accepting as thy holy truth everything that is held and believed by the Holy Mother Church of Rome; and with all our souls, which were redeemed by thy precious blood, we pledge thee homage and swear to serve thee with all our lives, and to deliver them up to thee at the hour of death, as to our God and Lord, to whom we confess they belong, by creation and by redemption.”

After this they said the Pater Noster, the Ave Maria, the Credo, and the Salve Regina, which they recited and pronounced so well that the tears came rushing to our eyes, for it made us weep to see those innocent little children, living in such a far-off land with no knowledge of God, confessing to his faith with such holy words.

But since it was already past three in the morning by the time they finished, we

went back to our lodging, as amazed by what we had seen as one would expect, in view of the circumstances.

## II7

### The Tartar Invasion

We had been in captivity here for eight and a half months, suffering all the while from extreme hardship and deprivation for lack of any means of support, except for the few paltry alms we collected in the city, when shortly after midnight on a Wednesday, July 13, in the year 1544,<sup>1</sup> there arose such a tumult in the streets, with the pealing of bells and shouts and screams coming from all over the city, that it sounded as if the whole world were coming to an end. We all dashed over to Vasco Calvo's house to find out what was going on, and he told us, choking back the tears, that it had been definitely confirmed that the Tartar king was about to invade the city of Peking<sup>2</sup> with the largest army in the world ever assembled by any king since the days of Adam and Eve, and that it was reported that twenty-seven kings had joined forces with him, swelling his ranks, it was said, by 1,800,000 men, including 600,000 cavalrymen who had set out from the cities of *Lançame*, *Famstir*, and *Mecuy*, traveling overland with a train of eighty-thousand yak laden with all their food and supplies; also, that the 1,200,000 foot soldiers had come down the *Batampina* River in a fleet of sixteen-thousand ships composed of *laulés* and *jangás*, and that the king of China, not daring to offer any resistance to such a huge force, had fled unattended to Nanking, and that at that very moment, in the pine forest of *Manicatarão*, only a league and a half away, a *nauticor*<sup>3</sup> of the Tartar king was encamped with an army of seventy-thousand cavalrymen, with not a single foot soldier among them, ready to strike, and that in all likelihood he would be there within two hours. This news left us so beside ourselves that all we could do was stammer back and forth at each other without being capable of saying anything that made any sense. Finally, when we asked him what we should do or what steps we should take to save ourselves, he answered impatiently, "My dear brothers, I would say that right now the surest means of our salvation would be to find ourselves somewhere between *Lavra* and *Coruche*,<sup>4</sup> back home, beside a clump of bushes, where I used to go often, but since that cannot be, let us commend ourselves to the Lord our God to avail us, for I assure you that less than an hour ago I was ready to give a thousand silver *taels* to anyone who could lead me to safety with my wife and children, but it was too late because all the gates had already been shut and heavily guarded, and the walls were covered with an infinite number of troops that the *chaem* had placed along them, to say nothing of other captains posted in reserve in certain areas, to patrol and rush in with their support wherever necessary."

Following which, we nine companions spent what remained of that sad night in the throes of deep spiritual agony and affliction, without being able to decide upon what to do or which way to turn, just weeping and moaning out of fear and anxiety at the thought of what lay ahead for us.<sup>5</sup>

does indeed rise in the highlands of east Tibet, but that was not known to Pinto or his contemporaries.

9. *Quitirvão*: Pinto mentions this kingdom again in chapters 181 and 182 as bordering with Siam.

10. *Xincaléu*: Lagoa (“Peregrinação” 3:286) speculates that this town, which is also mentioned by Faria e Sousa, may be located in Tibet and suggests a possible identification with the town of Shigatse, located west-southwest of Lhasa. However, there is also the possibility that Faria e Sousa plagiarized Pinto, whom he staunchly defended against his detractors.

11. *diamonds*: Regarding these diamonds, see Orta 2:198–99, 210–11, notes.

## Chapter 40

1. *charachina*: From the Malay *chara*, meaning “mode or manner”; hence, in the manner of the Chinese.

2. *lorcha*: A modified sailing junk, the hull constructed in European fashion, but rigged in Chinese fashion.

3. *Santiago!*: An old Iberian war cry, invoking the help of Saint James.

4. *hoist . . . on the rack*: Torture, practiced by the Inquisition, that consisted of tying the victim with ropes to a pulley and raising and stretching the body on a rack till the bones cracked.

5. *Ning-po*: Former name of the city of Ning-Hsien, referred to by the Portuguese chroniclers in a corrupted form as Liampó, a city and treaty port, northeast Chekiang Province, east China, about ninety miles east-southeast of Hangchow on the south side of Hangchow Bay, and on a small stream about thirteen miles from its mouth. Visited by Portuguese traders as early as 1515.

6. *crossbar*: This consisted of placing a tourniquet around the head of the victim and twisting a bar or stick until the skull split and the gray matter burst out.

7. *manchua*: Portuguese corruption of the original Malayalam word *manji*, for a single-masted cargo boat used on the Malabar coast of India.

8. *teston*: *Testão* in Portuguese. Ancient coins minted for the first time in the reign of King Manuel I (1495–1521). There were gold testons valued at twelve hundred reals and silver testons valued at one hundred reals.

9. *fire rafts*: Crude wooden rafts, laden with combustibles, set adrift on the tide or current, in the direction of an enemy ship.

## Chapter 41

1. *Corpus Christi Eve*: Fell on May twenty-sixth that year, according to Brito Rebello 1:115.

2. *Varela*: There is a Cape Varela (or *Mui Nai*) on the coast of Cochinchina, but not a river by that name. *Tinacoreu* has not been identified.

3. *hoýá*: Or *oyá*, from the Siamese *húa*, meaning “chief, or captain.” It is also a title of nobility in Siam, equivalent to that of duke, according to Barros (Barros and Couto, déc. 3, bk. 2, chap. 5, 171).

4. *Gueos*: See chapter 1, note 3 above.

5. *yak*: Pinto uses the word *bada* here, a borrowing from the Malay *badaq*, which in the sixteenth century had the indefinite meaning of a “wild animal” or a “domesticated animal that goes wild.” In the seventeenth century the word *bada* (or *abada*) began to be applied to the rhinoceros. When speaking elsewhere of the *badas* that were used as beasts of burden, Pinto is undoubtedly referring to the yaks of Tartary, for which there was no word in Portuguese. Unfortunately, Pinto’s seventeenth-century translators rendered the word as “rhinoceros,” which added to his reputation as a liar. In this passage Pinto may be referring to the wild yak or a large