

Preface

In the spring of 2013 thirteen motivated bachelor students of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences got the opportunity to study early travel books within the framework of a MaRBLe-project and an Honours programme. The travel books were selected from the 'Jesuits Collection' in the University Library. This collection includes many lavishly illustrated travel books, most of which date from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In this project we focussed, rather pragmatically, on North-America, Japan and China.

The travel books bear witness of the broad interests and the highly international orientation of the Jesuits. The books do not only address Catholic missionary zeal, but deal also with trade missions and scientific expeditions. The international mindset of the Jesuits agrees well, it seems, with that of the international student population at Maastricht. Most of the students taking part in the project come from abroad and study Arts and Culture or European Studies.

The hybrid genre of Western travel writing is interesting because it potentially covers a multitude of subjects: (natural) history, religion, geography, economy, natural science, ethnography, anthropology and so on. The books are full of stories of encounters with the 'other,' thus touching on issues related to the interplay of 'other' *and* 'own' identities, of cultural differences *and* similarities. Travel descriptions do not only provide insight into other peoples and cultures, but also have much to say about the person who writes about them, notably his or her perspective, norms and values.

No wonder, that in this era of globalization, growing mobility and increasing cultural exchanges, the interest in travel books and travel accounts appears to be on the rise. Noticeable, the students show that an interest in the 'other' was and is a necessary condition for a respectful encounter with other cultures. The study of travel books was not only an

inspiring adventure for the students, but for us as supervisors as well. We broadened our mental maps thanks to these diverse travel stories, thanks to our talented students and thanks to a number of colleagues that was so kind to give workshops and guest lectures as part of the project: Professor Valentina Mazzucato (Maastricht University), Professor Nicolas Standaert S.J. (Katholieke Universiteit Leuven), and Dr. Michiel van Groesen (Universiteit van Amsterdam). A special word of thanks is also to our colleagues Pieter Caljé, the great stimulating force behind the MaRBLe programme. The project was organised in cooperation with the University Library. We in particular want to thank Maastricht University's Special Collections curator Odin Essers who took the students on a tour through the library's catacombs and its collection of 'travel treasures.' He also organised the digitalization of many fabulous illustrations.

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