

Document 4.6: A description of various Western countries and their people by Xie Qinggao, a Chinese sailor, between 1783 and 1797

Xie Qinggao (1765-1822) was a seaman who traveled throughout Western Europe. He wrote The Hai-Lu, a unique travelogue giving a Chinese perspective of the West. Until that point, most of what was known about Europe in China was that which had been told to the Chinese by European travelers. It is reported that Xie Qinggao was illiterate and went blind during the course of his travels. Toward the end of his life, he dictated his memories of the places he had seen to a local schoolboy.

Portugal... The people are white in color, and are fond of cleanliness. As to the dress, the men usually wear trousers and short upper clothes, both very much tight-fitting. On special occasions, another piece is worn over the shirt, short in the front and long in the back, just like the wings of a cicada. Women also wear short and tight-fitting upper-clothes, but instead of trousers they wear skirts, which are sometimes eight or nine folds deep. Among the poor this is made of cotton, among the rich, silk. When rich women go out they often wear a veil made of fine black silk. Both men and women wear leather shoes....

England... is located southwest [*sic*] of France and could be reached by sailing north from St. Helena for about two months. It is a sparsely settled island, separated from the mainland, with a large number of rich families. The dwelling houses have more than one story. Maritime commerce is one of the chief occupations of the English, and wherever there is a region in which profits could be reaped by trading, these people strive for them, with the result that their commercial vessels are to be seen on the seven seas. Commercial traders are to be found all over the country. Male inhabitants from the ages of fifteen to sixty are conscripted into the service of the king as soldiers. Moreover, a large foreign mercenary army is also maintained. Consequently, although the country is small, it has such a large military force that foreign nations are afraid of it....

Mieh-li-kan [America]¹ is a small isolated island in the middle of the ocean. It could be reached by sailing west for about ten days from England. Formerly it was part of England but now is an independent country, although the customs and practices of the two countries still remain alike. This land is called *Hua-qi*² by the Cantonese. Minerals found in the country include gold, silver, copper, iron, lead, and tin. Manufactured products include tin plate, glass, snuff, wine, woolen and cotton goods. Water transportation in this country is done by means of boats which have wheels on the side and a fire engine in the center. When a strong fire is generated, the wheels are set in motion thereby propelling the boat forward. The construction of such a boat is clever and ingenious, and other countries are following the example....

Source: *The Great Chinese Travelers: An Anthology*. Ed. Jeanette Mirsky. New York: Pantheon, 1964. 266-271. Reprinted in Kishlansky, Mark A., ed., *Sources of World History*, vol. 2. New York: HarperCollins, 1995. 126-128.

For additional excerpts from Xie's book, visit

<http://academic.brooklyn.cuny.edu/core9/phalsall/texts/hai-lu.html>

¹ It is not known whether Xie actually traveled to the United States or heard about the land and steamships from another seaman.

² *Hua-qi* means "Flowery Flag" and refers to the United States flag on its vessels.