Due to the great extent of this country north and south as well as east and west, it can be safely asserted that nowhere else in the world is found such a variety of plant and animal life within the confines of a single kingdom. The wide range of climatic conditions in China gives rise to great diversity of vegetable products, some of which are most readily grown in tropical countries, others in arctic, and others again in the temperate zones. The Chinese themselves, in their geographies, give us detailed accounts of the fertility of the various provinces and of the variety of their products. Generally speaking, it may be said with truth that all of these writers are correct when they say that everything which the people used for their well-being and sustenance, whether it be for food or clothing or even delicacies and superfluities, is abundantly produced within the borders of the kingdom and not imported from foreign climes. I would even venture to say that practically everything which is grown in Europe is likewise found in China. If not, then what is missing here is abundantly supplied by various other products unknown to Europeans. To begin with, the soil of China supplies its people with every species of grain—barley, millet, winter wheat, and similar grains. Rice, which is the staple article of Chinese diet, is produced here in far greater abundance than in Europe. Vegetables, especially beans, and the like, all of which are used not only as food for the people but also as fodder for cattle and beasts of burden, are grown in unlimited variety. The Chinese harvest two and sometimes three crops of such plants every year, owing not only to the fertility of the soil and the mildness of the climate but in great measure to the industry of the people. With the exception of olives and almonds, all the principal fruits known in Europe grow also in China.

Much the same can be said of the variety and quality of table vegetables and the cultivation of garden herbs, all of which the Chinese use in far greater quantities than is common among the people of Europe. In fact, there are many among the common folk who live entirely upon a vegetable diet through the whole course of their lives, either because they are forced to do so by reason of poverty or because they embrace this course of life for some religious motive.

This country is so thoroughly covered by an intersecting network of rivers and canals that it is possible to travel almost anywhere by water. Hence, an almost incredible number of boats of every variety pass hither and thither. Indeed there are so many of them that one of the writers of our day does not hesitate to affirm that there are as many people living on the water as there are dwellers on land. This may sound like an exaggeration and yet it all but expresses the truth, as it would seem, if one were to travel here only by water. In my opinion it might be said with greater truth and without fear of exaggeration, that there are as many boats in this kingdom as can be counted up in all the rest of the world.

This statement is true if we restrict our count to the number of boats sailing on fresh water. As to their ships that pass out into the sea, they are very few and not to be compared with ours either in number or in structure.

Two or three things are entirely unknown to Europeans of which I must give a brief account.
First, there is a certain bush from the leaves of which is decocted that celebrated drink, known to the Chinese, the Japanese, and to their neighbors as tea. Its use cannot be of long duration among the Chinese, as no ideography in their old books designates this particular drink and their writing characters are all ancient. Indeed it might be that this same plant can be found in our own fields. Here they gather its leaves in the springtime and place them in a shady place to dry, and from the dried leaves they brew a drink which they use at meals and which is served to friends when they come to visit. On such occasions it is served continually as long as they remain together engaged in conversation. This beverage is sipped rather than drunk and it is always taken hot. It is not unpleasant to the taste, being somewhat bitter, and it is usually considered to be wholesome even if taken frequently.

Finally we should say something about the saltpeter, which is quite plentiful but which is not used extensively in the preparation of gunpowder, because the Chinese are not expert in the use of guns and artillery and make but little use of these in warfare. Saltpeter, however, is used in lavish quantities in making fireworks for display at public games and on festival days. The Chinese take great pleasure in such exhibitions and make them the chief attraction of all their festivities. Their skill in the manufacture of fireworks is really extraordinary, and there is scarcely anything which they cannot cleverly imitate with them. They are especially adept in reproducing battles and in making rotating spheres of fire, fiery trees, fruit, and the like, and they seem to have no regard for expense where fireworks are concerned. When I was in Nankin I witnessed a pyrotechnic display for the celebration of the first month of the year, which is their great festival, and on this occasion I calculated that they consumed enough powder to carry on a sizable war for a number of years.

The art of printing was practiced in China at a date somewhat earlier than that assigned to the beginning of printing in Europe, which was about 1405. It is quite certain that the Chinese knew the art of printing at least five centuries ago, and some of them assert that printing was known to their people before the beginning of the Christian era, about 50 B.C.

Their method of making printed books is quite ingenious. The text is written in ink, with a brush made of very fine hair, on a sheet of paper which is inverted and pasted on a wooden tablet. When the paper has become thoroughly dry, its surface is scraped off quickly and with great skill, until nothing but a fine tissue bearing the characters remains on the wooden tablet. Then, with a steel graver, the workman cuts away the surface following the outlines of the characters until these alone stand out in low relief. From such a block a skilled printer can make copies with incredible speed, turning out as many as fifteen hundred copies in a single day. Chinese printers are so skilled in engraving these blocks, that no more time is consumed in making one of them than would be required by one of our printers in setting up a form of type and making the necessary corrections.


Discussion Questions

Determining Main Ideas
1. What information about Chinese culture during the Ming Dynasty—diet, modes of transportation, inventions, and so on—did Ricci include in this journal entry? List at least three facts.
2. Comparing In what ways did Ricci compare China to Europe?
3. Forming and Supporting Opinions Do you think Ricci’s observations of Ming China were accurate? Why or why not?