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Reimagining González de Mendoza's "Golden Serpent Kingship": Image and Ideology in Sixteenth-Century Sino-Western History

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Abstract

The translation of *long* 龍, a culturally loaded term in Chinese tradition, into Indo-European linguistic and cultural contexts has long posed a challenge for translators and scholars. In the sixteenth century, the Spanish Sinologist Juan González de Mendoza employed the term *serpiente dorada* (golden serpent) to signify the symbol of Chinese imperial power. While contemporary Chinese scholars have acknowledged early sinologists' use of "serpent" in place of "dragon" for the rendition of *long*, they tend to interpret this choice as a pragmatic compromise: selecting the lesser of two evils, based on the assumption that "serpent" was the less culturally charged of two terms. This view, however, overlooks the fact that both terms bore strong negative associations in medieval and early modern Europe. This article argues that the key distinction lies not in the degree of negativity, but in the specific anti-Christian meaning of 'dragon' in the sixteenth-century European cultural memory. Depicting the Chinese emperor with the symbol of the dragon would have evoked an image of a pagan, anti-Christian tyrant, consequently undermining the evangelizing intent of Mendoza's book, *The History of the Great and Mighty Kingdom of China and the Situation Thereof*. Instead, the choice of "serpent" served as a symbolic displacement aligned with the author's ideological and textual goals. At the same time, his didactic agenda was subtly embedded within a utopian vision of China, giving rise to what may be seen as a new cultural paradigm. When interpreted through the concrete political

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and economic dynamics of Sino-European interaction, this paradigm can be seen as a historical reflection of the early modern development of Sino-Western relations.

Keywords

golden serpent kingship – *The History of the Great and Mighty Kingdom of China and the Situation Thereof* – cultural symbol – *long* – Ming dynasty

1 *Serpiente dorada* – King of China: a Misaligned Set of Cultural Symbols

For centuries after its sixteenth-century debut, Juan González de Mendoza's (1545–1618) *Historia de las cosas más notables, ritos y costumbres del gran reyno de la China* (*Zhonghua da diguo shi* 中華大帝國史, The History of the Great and Mighty Kingdom of China and the Situation Thereof; hereafter *Historia*) exerted a profound cultural influence on European scholarship. Written in Spanish, the work was first published in Rome in 1585. However, due to the Italian printers' unfamiliarity with the Spanish language, this initial run was plagued by numerous typographical errors, much to the dissatisfaction of the author. It was not until 1586 that a revised Spanish edition was published in Madrid by Querino Gerardo.[1] This latter version is considered the definitive text approved by Mendoza, henceforth referred to as the "1586 Madrid edition" and serving as the base text for this study. Notably, this edition added new content, including four chapters on the arrival of the Spanish in Mexico and reports on missionary activities in Zhaoqing 肇慶, China, in 1583.[2]

The main body of the 1586 Madrid edition consists of two parts, each containing three volumes. The first part provides a detailed account of the Ming dynasty (1368–1644), covering its politics, economy, geography, history, culture, beliefs, rites, and customs. The second part is a compilation of travelogues from early Sinologists, primarily describing the natural and cultural landscapes of

1 Juan González de Mendoza, *Historia de las cosas más notables, ritos y costumbres, del gran reyno de la China, sabidas assi por los libros de los mesmos Chinas, como por relacion de religiosos y otras personas que han estado en el dicho reyno* (Madrid: Querino Gerardo, 1586).

2 Gao Bo 高博, "*Zhonghua da diguo shi* shouban shanben he zhongyiben yuanliu kaoshu"《中華大帝國史》首版、善本和中譯本源流考述, *Tushuguan zazhi* 圖書館雜誌, no. 2 (2019): 98–100.

China's Fujian and Guangdong provinces, as well as those of its neighboring countries and of Mexico.

While numerous other European missionaries authored reports on China both before and after Mendoza, none of their works achieved as widespread or lasting a cultural impact in Europe. For two centuries, from the Age of Discovery to the rise of the Enlightenment, the image of China shaped by Mendoza remained enduringly influential in Europe. In the nearly five centuries since its initial publication, the work has been continuously reprinted worldwide. Its most recent edition appeared in 2022, edited by Juan Gil, a member of the Royal Spanish Academy (Real Academia Española).[3]

What piqued this author's interest is Mendoza's translation of the word *long* 龍 (the Chinese dragon) into Spanish, during which process he constructed a misaligned cultural code. He opted to use *serpiente dorada* ("golden serpent," 金蛇) to translate the Chinese cultural symbol that is associated with the Chinese emperor, whom he referred to as "King of China." This symbolic pairing appears three times in the 1586 Madrid edition. The first instance describes a royal setting: "[Above the golden throne] hung a brocade canopy embroidered with the King's insignia, a motif of serpents woven from gold thread" (original Spanish: *en medio de las debajo de un dosel de brocado en que están bordadas las armas del Rey, que son unas serpientes tejidas con hilo de oro*).[4] The second example reads: "The provincial governor was seated in a gilded ivory chair, and there were brocade curtains embroidered with intertwined serpents, which were the King's coat of arms" (*este Oydor en una silla de marfil guarnecida de oro, y con cortinas de brocado, y en ellas las armas del Rey que son unas serpientes enlazadas*).[5] The third passage reiterates the imagery: "The governor was sitting on an extremely luxurious chair made of ivory and gold, beneath a splendid brocade canopy embroidered with coiled serpents, which were the royal insignia" (*Estaba sentado en una silla riquissima de oro y marfil debajo de un dosel de brocado, cuyo medio tenía bordadas las armas del Rey, que son unas serpientes enlazadas*).[6] In each instance, Mendoza uses the word *serpiente* to translate what is, in the Chinese context, most likely a *long*.

It is evident that Mendoza, operating within sixteenth-century Spanish, created a new metaphorical vehicle – the King of China (*Rey* in Spanish) – to the

3 Juan González de Mendoza, *Historia de las cosas más notables, ritos y costumbres, del gran reino de la China* (Madrid: Fundacion Jose Antonio de Castro, 2022).

4 Juan González de Mendoza, *Historia de las cosas más notables, ritos y costumbres, del gran reyno de la China, sabidas assi por los libros de los mesmos Chinas, como por relacion de religiosos y otras personas que han estado en el dicho Reyno*, 65.

5 Ibid., 165.

6 Ibid., 240.

literal signifier "serpent." In doing so, Mendoza assigned an expanded sematic system and produced a set of new associative meanings: *serpiente dorada* (golden serpent) – King of China. Now, for Europeans, serpents embroidered with gold thread became the coat of arms of the Chinese monarch. For this reason, I refer to this cross-cultural symbolic construction as the imagining of a "golden serpent kingship" – a vision of royal power as seen from the Other's perspective.

Crucially, this new symbol is built upon multi-dimensional misreadings of Chinese culture. Mendoza's seminal work was written in the 1580s, a time corresponding to the Wanli 萬曆 Emperor's reign (1573–1620) in the Ming era. In the Chinese cultural-linguistic context of that era, the *long*, not the serpent, was the exclusive symbol of imperial power. Additionally, the supreme ruler of the Ming dynasty was an "emperor" (*huangdi* 皇帝, Spanish: *emperador*), not a "king" (*guowang* 國王, Spanish: *rey*) as Mendoza recounted. This mismatched cross-cultural construction may thus be understood as a "super-sign," a term put forward by Chinese American scholar Lydia H. Liu in the field of translation studies. As she defines it:

> A super-sign is not a word but a hetero-cultural signifying chain that crisscrosses the semantic fields of two or more languages simultaneously and makes an impact on the meaning of recognizable verbal units, whether they be indigenous words, loanwords, or any other discrete verbal phenomena that linguists can identify within particular languages or among them.[7]

2 Reassessing Mendoza's Authorial Stance: beyond Respect and Contempt

While Mendoza refers to a serpent three times in *Historia* as the power symbol of the emperor, these passages are insufficient to determine his personal attitude toward Chinese culture. To clarify his position, it is necessary to move beyond the text and explore relevant extratextual sources. In a previous study, the present author examined the referents and metaphors of *dragón* (dragon) and *serpiente* (serpent) within the sixteenth-century Spanish linguistic and cultural context, using the first monolingual Spanish dictionary, Sebastián de Covarrubias's *Tesoro de la lengua castellana, o española* (*Kasidiliya yu huo*

7 Lydia H. Liu, *The Clash of Empires: The Invention of China in Modern World Making* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 13.

Xibanya yu baojian 卡斯蒂利亞語或西班牙語寶鑑, Treasure of the Castilian or Spanish Language) as a primary source. A brief review of that earlier research is warranted here.

Covarrubias's dictionary provides multiple layers of meaning for "dragon." First, "the dragon is a synonym for the devil (*demonio*), as recounted multiple times in Chapter 12 of The Book of Revelation, where Michael and his angels fought with the Dragon."[8] Second, "the dragon is also seen as a symbol of tyrants, monarchs, emperors, and pagan kings who have persecuted the Church and the people of God" (*los Tiranos, Monarcas, Emperadores, Reyes, Paganos, que ha perseguido la Yglesia, y el pueblo de Dios*).[9]

At the same time, the Spanish word *serpiente* carries connotations of cunning, deceit, and even demons. As Covarrubias's dictionary explains: "Of all the beasts God created, the serpent is the most cunning. The Lord God cursed the serpent, saying: 'Cursed are you above all livestock and above all beasts of the field; on your belly you shall go, and dust you shall eat all the days of your life.' The serpent is also a servant of the devil."[10]

Based on these observations, the author previously interpreted Mendoza's vision of "golden serpent kingship" as a sign of cross-cultural rewriting, arguing that it symbolically marked "China's positive entry into the European imagination in the sixteenth century" and reflected "a profound respect among European intellectuals for a superior, heterogeneous Chinese civilization."[11] However, with the deepening of research into *Historia*, the author has come to critically re-evaluate this earlier conclusion. Given that both the serpent and the dragon were synonymous with greed, cunning, and the devil in Mendoza's era, the negative cultural impact of the "serpent" on a sixteenth-century European reader would have been no less potent than that of the "dragon." This being the case, interpreting the image of "golden serpent kingship" as a sign of respect for Chinese culture seems tenuous.

This calls for a shift in perspective and a new line of inquiry: had the Ming dynasty's *long* traveled to the sixteenth-century Iberian Peninsula and been directly rendered as a European dragon, would European readers of that era have been able to establish a sense of cross-cultural commensurability

8 Sebastián de Covarrubias Orozco, *Tesoro de la lengua castellana o española* (Madrid: Luis Sanchez, 1611), 329.

9 Ibid., 329.

10 Ibid., 27.

11 Gao Bo 高博, "Jinshe wangquan yu Zhongguo xiangxiang: zai duochong lishi weidu zhong chongsu wanming" 金蛇王權與中國想象：在多重歷史維度中重塑晚明, *Shanghai jiaotong daxue xuebao* (*zhexue shehui kexue ban*) 上海交通大學學報（哲學社會科學版）, no. 7 (2023): 115.

between their dragon and the "power symbol of the Chinese emperor"? The answer is almost certainly no. According to the first monolingual Spanish dictionary, "dragon" as a metaphor or literary vehicle was unequivocally negative: it represented the pagan tyrant and the devil who opposed Christianity.

This interpretive framework opens up a new perspective for reassessing the cultural stance behind the "golden serpent kingship" imagination. Accordingly, this article proposes an alternative explanation for the legitimization process of this super-sign as an object of the Other's gaze: Mendoza's use of the serpent to represent the Chinese emperor's power symbol was not motivated by respect or disdain for Chinese culture. Rather, it was due to the potent anti-Christian connotations of the word "dragon" in the sixteenth-century Spanish context. Constructing an image of a pagan tyrant who resisted European culture would have contradicted the authorial and textual intent of *Historia*.

3 The Alignment between the Super-Sign and Textual Intent

Modern scholar Zhou Ning 周寧 of Xiamen University has conducted a series of studies on "Western images of China." He acknowledged the significant scholarly value of Mendoza's *Historia* and categorized the image of China shaped by Mendoza as a utopian form of exoticism. Zhou explained its social-generative mechanism as follows:

> In shaping such an image of China, modern Western culture identified with its own conscious and unconscious anxieties and aspirations. It not only posited an intrinsically superior "Other" civilization but also endowed it with core meanings of the modern Western self, including the ideals of pursuing knowledge and wealth, a spirit of free critical reason, the establishment of a harmonious social order through education, and even nascent concepts of democracy and progress.[12]

It should be noted that this view reflects the consensus among contemporary Chinese scholars regarding Mendoza's authorial stance.

However, through a close reading of the paratexts and main text of the 1586 Madrid edition of *Historia*, this paper proposes an alternative interpretation of Mendoza's cultural position. Contrary to the prevailing view among contemporary Chinese scholars that Mendoza constructed a purely utopian image

12 Zhou Ning 周寧, *Tianchao yaoyuan* 天朝遙遠, 1st volume (Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 2006), 70.

of China, or one primarily shaped by utopian ideals, this study argues that his portrayal of China is situated within a field of tension between utopia and ideology. Ultimately, the utopia is subsumed into ideology, with the latter serving as the primary vehicle for the author's intent. While Mendoza expresses strong admiration for Chinese material culture and institutions, he simultaneously embeds an ideologically charged portrayal of the Other. Through this nuanced and circuitous narrative structure, he issues a call for the assimilation of the Ming dynasty, i.e., the Christianization of China, to the book's implied audience: the Roman Catholic Pope and the Spanish ruling class. This, in essence, constitutes the true authorial and textual intent concealed within *Historia*.

Admittedly, in his 2023 article, the present author has already identified Mendoza's didactic authorial position. However, that analysis was confined to European historical trajectories and political discourse, overlooking both the process of capital globalization and the role of Sino-European interaction in shaping the text during the sixteenth century. Moreover, it did not parse the authorial and textual intentions, nor did it adequately explain the dialectical relationship between Mendoza's utopian and ideological visions of China.[13]

This article seeks to address these unresolved questions. Through close textual analysis, it redefines Mendoza's imagination of China, challenging the established consensus among contemporary scholars. Building upon this foundation, this paper also deconstructs the cultural logic underpinning Mendoza's constructed image and, by grounding its inquiry in the concrete political and economic experiences embedded within the historical context of Sino-European interactions during the sixteenth century, reconstructs the legitimation process through which this new cultural paradigm gained recognition in the eyes of the Other.

Let us first turn to the "Dedication to Fernando de Vega y Fonseca" in *Historia* in search of Mendoza's authorial intent. In it, Mendoza offers the following account:

> My Lord,
>
> In the year 1580, His Majesty commanded that I travel to the great kingdom of China with a great number of rare treasures as state gifts, for the purpose of expressing His Majesty's friendship and desire to establish amicable relations, and to request that the subjects of both our kingdoms be permitted to conduct trade via the Philippines. Your Lordship's

13 Gao Bo, "Jinshe wangquan yu Zhongguo xiangxiang: zai duochong lishi weidu zhong chongsu wanming," 116–18.

> predecessor, the illustrious Don Antonio de Padilla y Meneses, advised that I should record all that I saw and heard in China, so that upon my return I might give him a detailed report. I also believe that only by understanding the culture, customs, history, and geography of that country can we properly influence its people and convert them to our holy Catholic faith.[14]

This dedication is addressed to "My Lord," namely Fernando de Vega y Fonseca (1529–1591), who was at the time the President of the Royal and Supreme Council of the Indies.[15] Mendoza's time coincided with the zenith of European overseas expansion, and the Council of the Indies (*Consejo de las Indias*) was the supreme authority governing the administrative, judicial, and legislative matters of Spain's overseas territories in the sixteenth century.

From this dedication, we learn that Mendoza composed his influential work while serving as a special envoy appointed by King Philip II of Spain (Felipe II de España, 1527–1598) for a mission to the Ming empire. Although his planned journey in 1580 was ultimately aborted for reasons that remain unclear, and Mendoza never set foot in China in his lifetime, he nonetheless produced a work of lasting historical and cultural significance. The dedication further reveals that it was Don Antonio de Padilla y Meneses (d. 1580), then president of the Council, who instructed Mendoza to use the opportunity of his mission to gather information on China and compile a report. *Historia*, therefore, was not a spontaneous undertaking, but a serious, commissioned work of literature, solicited by the highest authority of Spain's colonial administration.

Finally, Mendoza states that the purpose of compiling this work was to provide the King of Spain with a comprehensive report on the state of China, because, in his words, "only by understanding the culture, customs, history, and geography of that kingdom can we properly influence its people and convert them to our holy Catholic faith."[16] Here, in the dedication itself, Mendoza explicitly articulates his authorial intent: the evangelization of China.

However, in the process of writing, textual intent often deviates from authorial intent. It is, therefore, necessary to clarify the former through a close reading of the text itself. Based on years of textual analysis and close study of the 1586 Madrid edition, the author has found that 24 chapters of the book are dedicated

14 Juan González de Mendoza, *Historia de las cosas más notables, ritos y costumbres, del gran reyno de la China, sabidas assi por los libros de los mesmos Chinas, como por relacion de religiosos y otras personas que han estado en el dicho reyno*, 11–13.

15 Ibid., 11.

16 Ibid., 11–13.

to the construction of, from the perspective of the Other, a prosperous, powerful, and harmonious material society in the late Ming era. Another 16 chapters portray the superiority of late Ming social institutions, with a particular focus on the imperial examination system, the alms-houses for the poor, and the supervision mechanisms for monitoring the bureaucracy. Conversely, a different set of 16 chapters depicts the Chinese people, again from the perspective of the Other, as spiritually ignorant and intellectually impoverished. In doing so, Mendoza constructed for European readers of the time a heterocultural image of a society that was "materially abundant but spiritually destitute."

Contemporary scholarship has largely focused on the utopian image of China that Mendoza crafted, namely, an idealized material society and institutional order, while overlooking his ideological imagination of the Ming dynasty, particularly through his depiction of the spiritual stultification of the Other. It is, therefore, crucial for this paper to focus on a close reading of this ideological portrayal of China.

When discussing the spiritual world of the Chinese, Mendoza writes:

> The Chinese are still trapped in a state of blind idolatry. Although they excel at governance and possess great artistry, we were astonished to find that many of their actions reveal their ignorance and irreverence toward God. This is understandable, for without the baptism of Christian truth, they have lost reverence and reason and are destined to remain in a state of eternal decline.[17]

Elsewhere, he notes:

> Concerning the origin of the world, the Chinese have for generations passed down an absurd belief. Even though they are among the most intelligent people in the world, without God's grace, they cannot correct their false understanding.[18]

And again:

> Although the Chinese possess moral philosophy, natural philosophy, and astrology, and these subjects may be publicly taught, they hold many

17 Ibid., 23.
18 Ibid., 32.

> misunderstandings concerning the origin of the world and the genesis of humankind.[19]

Through such rhetorical iterations, Mendoza fabricates for his readers a semi-civilized image of China: a society rich in material goods but spiritually benighted. At the linguistic level, this narrative accomplishes a discursive domestication of a heterogeneous civilization. Furthermore, Mendoza repeatedly invites his readers into a late Ming spiritual world that he imagines as being imbued with Christian miracles. Through exaggerated imagination, he constructs a cross-cultural commensurability between traditional Chinese culture and Christian culture, once again realizing a Christian universalist vision of the Other. For example, he repeatedly references the story of Saint Thomas having preached in China:

> The ethics and morals of the great kingdom of China are very similar to our own doctrine, which shows that the people there are naturally intelligent. From this, we are all the more certain that Saint Thomas the Apostle did indeed preach there, and that its people inherited and preserved his virtues.[20]

He also imagines a statue of Guanyin, a bodhisattva particularly revered by the Chinese, as the Virgin Mary:

> In the very center of the altar was a statue of a woman of perfect form, with a child clinging to her neck, and an oil lamp burning before it. He was greatly astonished and asked who this was, but no one present could say. It is clear that the Apostle Saint Thomas did indeed preach in this land, and that traces of God's existence were known and passed down among the people, which shows they have some knowledge of God.[21]

Through these exaggerated, and at times forced, cultural reinterpretations, Mendoza reinforces a Christian universalist fantasy of the Ming empire.

At this point in our close reading, we can recognize that both Mendoza's authorial and textual intentions converge on the aim of assimilating an alien civilization into a Christian framework. However, this ideological project is couched within a utopian vision of a foreign society. As previously noted,

19 Ibid., 30.
20 Ibid., 34–35.
21 Ibid., 22–23.

40 chapters of the book are devoted to shaping an idealized image of late Ming material and political society, while only 16 contribute to constructing the image of a stultified Other. This creates a subtle and circuitous narrative structure.

With this in mind, we can now return to our initial inquiry and reinterpret the process by which the "serpent – King of China" signifier was legitimized in the eyes of the Other. The "dragon," in the sixteenth-century European collective cultural memory, existed as an anti-Christian pagan tyrant. Constructing an image of a heterogeneous culture that explicitly resisted Christian values would have contradicted both the authorial and textual intentions of *Historia*. Therefore, Mendoza's choice to use the serpent rather than the dragon to represent the Ming emperor's power symbol was not an act of respect for Chinese culture, but rather a symbolic articulation of his own ideological and narrative aims.

4 Redefining Mendoza's China Imagination: an Upgraded Cultural Paradigm

Taking the Spanish *serpiente dorada* (golden serpent) as a point of departure, we have uncovered the alignment between this super-sign and Mendoza's authorial and textual intentions. This analysis compels a redefinition of his China imaginary: while fully affirming China's prosperity and power, he subtly grafted onto it an image of a spiritually stultified Other. Consequently, sixteenth-century European consciousness assimilated China as a civilization that was "materially abundant but spiritually deficient." This prompts a deeper reflection: this novel image of the Chinese Other can be understood as an upgraded cultural paradigm, a European response to the growing complexity of the global order, particularly in the face of a non-European civilization that was, in material wealth and institutional structure, arguably more advanced.

It is important to note that this "upgraded cultural paradigm" is defined in contrast to the cultural model employed by sixteenth-century Spanish colonizers in their encounters with indigenous populations in the Americas and the Philippines. From the moment Christopher Columbus (Cristóbal Colón, 1451–1506) arrived in the Americas, the Spanish began a centuries-long occupation of the Americas. Indigenous American cultures were regarded as backward and alien, and colonization proceeded through a combination of military conquest and evangelization. In the sixteenth century, the indigenous peoples of the Americas entered the European imagination as "savage Others." Columbus himself contributed to this portrayal in his travel journals, where

he described the natives as one-eyed men, people with dog-like faces, or cannibals who slit the throat and drank the blood of their victims, also noting that "they were unclothed."[22]

Although utopian visions of the Americas did exist in the early colonial period, such idealized portrayals were quickly marginalized in favor of narratives emphasizing barbarism. In dealing with this "barbarian Other," the Spanish primarily used force to advance the process of Christianization. The Dominican friar Bartolomé de las Casas (1474–1566), for instance, presented his *Brevísima relación de la destrucción de las Indias Occidentales* (*Xi Yindu huimie shulüe* 西印度毀滅述略; A Short Account of the Destruction of the Indies) to King Philip II in 1542, exposing the countless atrocities committed by the Spanish during the conquest and the devastating cultural destruction.[23]

If the cultural paradigm used by the Spanish colonizers in the Americas operated on the simple juxtaposition "civilization vs. barbarism," Mendoza inaugurated a new binary model in his portrayal of the Ming empire: "civilized vs. semi-civilized." The latter, in turn, manifests as two sets of cultural dichotomies: first, the prosperous, harmonious, and powerful Ming dynasty versus crisis-ridden early modern Spain; and second, a spiritually empty and backward pagan civilization versus a devout and advanced Christian civilization.

Let us examine this new cultural model closely. On the one hand, Mendoza exaggerates the wealth and power of the Ming dynasty, glossing over its darker aspects and even reimagining elements of its decline as utopian and desirable. This stands in sharp contrast to the disarray in Europe, where Spain, after squandering the riches it extracted from the Americas, soon found itself mired in economic turmoil and warfare. It was against this historical backdrop that Spain looked to the Ming empire, hoping to alleviate its crisis with external help. Mendoza undertook his mission to the Ming court under these dire circumstances, with the goals of establishing friendly trade relations and spreading the Gospel.

On the other hand, Mendoza fictionalized an image of the Chinese as spiritually ignorant and intellectually unenlightened. This served Europe's medieval self-conception, where Christianity was viewed as a rational means of escaping barbarism. Within this worldview, non-Christians were commonly perceived as targets for conversion, often characterized as either fools or savages.

22 Rafael Acosta de Arriba, *Diario de a bordo del primer viaje de Cristóbal Colón* (Madrid: Editorial Verbum, 2016), 79, 138.

23 Bartolomé de las Casas, *Brevísima relación de la destrucción de las Indias Occidentales* (Sevilla: Juan F. Hurtel, 1821).

Whether framed as civilization vs. barbarism or civilization vs. semi-civilization, both paradigms are manifestations of Eurocentrism. The difference lies in how the Other is represented: the American Other was barbarized, while the Chinese Other was stultified. Yet both invariably highlight the superiority of European culture. And for a considerable period of the Middle Ages, "European civilization was largely synonymous with Christian civilization."[24] Therefore, Mendoza's depiction of a semi-civilized China ultimately reinforces this Christian-centric worldview.

To further this reflection, as the German scholar Jan Assmann (1938–2024) pointed out, the social function of cultural models, whether oppositional or antagonistic, is to reinforce internal cohesion and group identity.[25] In this light, compared to the civilization vs. barbarism model, Mendoza's civilization vs. semi-civilization framework functions as an upgraded mode of social cohesion and identity formation. Situated between utopian idealization and ideological critique, Mendoza amplifies the "Otherness" of Chinese civilization to sharpen the boundary between "us" and "them," reinforcing the self-identity of his European readership. In doing so, he subtly issues an ideological interpellation that calls for the assimilation of the Other. The "upgrade" in this cultural paradigm is manifested in Mendoza's embedding of Christian universalism into a utopian vision of a foreign land. His narrative strategy immerses readers in an Edenic fantasy, thus softening the potential sense of coercion from a direct ideological imposition and increasing the text's receptivity among domestic readers.

5 A Poetic Re-presentation of the Historical Context of Sixteenth-Century Sino-Western Interaction

Let us now take our inquiry one step further: how did Mendoza's cultural paradigm of civilization versus semi-civilization gain acceptance among sixteenth-century European readers? As previously established, this image was reconstructed through the dialectical tension between utopian and ideological visions of China. Accordingly, the broader question can be divided into two sub-questions: how did Mendoza's utopian re-imagining of China,

24 Wang Xiaode 王曉德, "'Pulini zhongzu' guan jiqi dui Ouzhou ren renzhi Meizhou de yingxiang" "普利尼種族" 觀及其對歐洲人認知美洲的影響, *Lishi yanjiu* 歷史研究, no. 7 (2022): 169.

25 Jan Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization: Writing, Remembrance, and Political Imagination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 115–16.

and his ideological representation of it, each achieve legitimacy within the sixteenth-century European worldview?

As Wang Xiaoping 王曉平 of Xiamen University has observed, current scholarship on "Western images of China" often tends to treat discursive constructions as historical fact. This approach risks falling into the trap of subjective conceptual deduction, detached from concrete historical experience and political-economic analysis.[26] Building on this methodological critique as a theoretical point of departure, this paper situates Mendoza's narrative within the historical context of sixteenth-century Sino-Western interaction. It seeks to reconstruct the legitimation process of Mendoza's cultural model by anchoring it in the specific political and economic conditions of the time. To that end, it proposes an alternative interpretive framework: Mendoza's utopian image of China, articulated through literary form, offered a poetic reconfiguration of the world order and China's pre-eminent position within the process of global capital circulation in the sixteenth century. At the same time, his ideological portrayal of China reflected the historical dynamics of Christian expansion eastward and the shifting contours of Sino-Western relations.

To pursue this line of inquiry, we must return to the globalization processes of the sixteenth century. First, the Ming empire was an active participant in international trade. In addition to its traditional tributary exchanges with neighboring states, it engaged in long-distance trade with European powers such as Spain and Portugal, as well as with Asian nations like Japan and the Philippines, through its key trading hubs such as Fujian and Macau. China exported large quantities of silk textiles, spices, rare metals, tea, and porcelain, while importing small amounts of foreign goods.

During this period, the Portuguese, renowned for their seafaring and commercial skills, established Macau as a commercial base and controlled several trade routes, including Macau–Siam (now Thailand)–Malacca–Goa–Lisbon; Macau–Japan; Macau–Manila–Acapulco–Peru; and Macau–Southeast Asia.[27] On these routes, Portuguese merchants transported goods from India, along with silver from the Americas to Macau for trade. After selling their goods, they used the proceeds and silver obtained from the Americas to purchase Chinese products, which they then resold at high prices in Japan to reap substantial

26 Wang Xiaoping 王曉平, "Yi Zhongguo xingxiang wei fangfa de fangfalun wenti: ping Zhou Ning kua wenhua yanjiu xilie lunzhu" 以中國形象為方法的方法論問題—評周寧跨文化研究系列論著, *Wenyi yanjiu* 文藝研究, no. 10 (2012): 152.

27 Chen Yan 陳炎, "Aomengang zai jindai haishang sichou zhi lu zhong de teshu diwei he yingxiang" 澳門港在近代海上絲綢之路中的特殊地位和影響, in *Haishang sichou zhi lu yu Zhongwai wenhua jiaoliu* 海上絲綢之路與中外文化交流 (Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 1996), 190–95.

profits. These profits were then taken back to Goa to purchase more Indian goods, completing the cycle. While Portuguese merchants profited handsomely at each stage of this trade network, China also emerged as a major beneficiary. With the increasing export of Chinese goods, a steady flow of silver entered China. Over time, silver in this commercial network ceased to function as a mere transactional medium and gradually evolved into monetary capital, thereby catalyzing the incipient phase of capital globalization in the sixteenth century.

Not to be outpaced, the Spanish established the Manila Galleon trade route. Leveraging the Philippines' strategic position as a Spanish colony, Spain facilitated frequent trade with Chinese ports such as Fujian. Chinese merchant ships sailed to Manila, where the Spanish used silver acquired from the Americas to purchase China's most coveted goods: porcelain, silk, cotton, tea, and rare metals. These goods were subsequently shipped back to the Americas, with profits reinvested in further Chinese exports. This created a self-reinforcing cycle of monetized silver capital, exemplifying the nascent stage of capital globalization in the early modern world. Through consistent trade surpluses during this process, the Ming empire accumulated vast reserves of silver, effectively becoming a "silver empire." This was one of the defining features of China's international trade in the late Ming period.[28]

Economists have also taken note of this phenomenon. The renowned historian of the Chinese economy, Quan Hansheng 全漢昇 (1912–2001), once estimated China's capacity to absorb capital as a "silver empire," observing that "half, if not more, of the silver from the Americas flowed into China" during the sixteenth century's global trade boom.[29] Similarly, German scholar Andre Gunder Frank (1929–2005) estimated that "Ming China possessed between one-quarter and one-third of the world's silver supply, and this silver was capital in monetary form."[30] While such estimates may deviate in varying degrees from historical fact, they nonetheless reveal the dominant, and arguably central, position of the Ming empire in the early stages of capital globalization. In this light, Mendoza's utopian vision of late Ming China can be seen as a literary mirror of the global economic order of the time. His idealized portrayal of

28 Fan Shuzhi 樊樹志, *Wangming shi: 1573–1644* 晚明史：1573–1644, 2nd ed. (Shanghai: Fuda daxue chubanshe, 2016), 1: 57.

29 Quan Hansheng 全漢昇, "Ming Qing jian Meizhou baiyin de shuru Zhongguo" 明清間美洲白銀的輸入中國, in *Zhongguo jingji shi luncong* 中國經濟史論叢 (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Zhongwen daxue xinya shuyuan, xinya yanjiusuo, 1972), 1: 445–46.

30 Andre Gunder Frank, *ReOrient: Global Economy in the Asian Age* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1998), 125–30.

China served as an exaggerated re-presentation of the world order and China's pre-eminence within it.

At the same time, Mendoza's ideologically inflected portrayal of China also functioned as a historical reflection of the political realities he personally experienced. In his era, Spain was mired in a deep economic crisis; the corruption of the Church had become endemic, and long-simmering social tensions were reaching a boiling point. The enduring undercurrents of medieval humanism were now sweeping across Europe with unstoppable force. Against this backdrop, the Christian faith, after a millennium of dominance, faced an unprecedented crisis driven by the spontaneous interplay of economic, political, religious, and cultural factors. This gave rise to the sweeping movement of the Protestant Reformation across Europe. Crucially, this was not merely a spiritual awakening; rather, it was a political and social movement in which various interest groups across European states leveraged religion to challenge the authority of the Roman Catholic Church. In response, the Church launched a countermeasure known as the Counter-Reformation, one of whose key strategies was the vigorous promotion of eastward Catholic expansion. It was in this context that various new religious orders arose, notably the Society of Jesus (Jesuits), founded in 1534. In 1541, Jesuit missionary Francis Xavier (1506–1552) was dispatched to non-diocesan regions such as India, Japan, and China to spread the Gospel, for which he developed the so-called "accommodation strategy" tailored to the sociocultural conditions of Asian societies.[31]

Establishing new dioceses in the East had indeed become a shared mission for various religious orders in sixteenth-century Europe. Against this backdrop, Mendoza, an Augustinian friar with extensive knowledge of China, was appointed by King Philip II as a special envoy. One of the primary objectives of his mission was to promote the Gospel in the Ming dynasty. At the same time, at the suggestion of the president of the Council of the Indies, Mendoza used this opportunity to compile historical materials, which ultimately resulted in the publication of *Historia*. As noted earlier, this text was underpinned by a strong Christian universalist authorial intention.

At the same time, two competing diplomatic strategies toward China were being debated within the Spanish court: military conquest and peaceful coexistence. In 1576, for example, Francisco de Sande (1540–1602), the Spanish governor stationed in the Philippines, advised King Philip II to invade the Ming empire. He confidently claimed:

31 Zhang Kai 張鎧, *Pangdiwo yu Zhongguo* 龐迪我與中國 (Zhengzhou: Daxiang chubanshe), 87.

> With just two or three thousand men, we could conquer any province of China. Since we control the sea access and have a strong navy, conquering China would be easy. Once one province falls, the rest will follow.[32]

However, King Philip II did not act on this proposal. In 1577, he replied to Sande:

> Now is not the time to attempt the military conquest of China, despite your strong recommendation. For now, do all you can to maintain good relations with the Chinese. Do not associate with the pirates – they are enemies of China, and we must avoid provoking them. Carry out my instructions accordingly, and report any new, valuable information about China to me; I will issue further directives when appropriate.[33]

These correspondences reveal that King Philip II hesitated to act in the absence of reliable, comprehensive information about China. It was precisely within this historical context that *Historia* was composed. Mendoza, through a literary medium, re-animated a little-known chapter in the history of Sino-Spanish relations that had been buried in historical archives. His narrative, embedded within a subtly circuitous structure, articulated a peace-oriented diplomatic vision of Spain's approach to China. At the same time, the text's shared authorial and textual intent, grounded in Christian universalism, offers a window into the ideological undercurrents of Europe's eastward Catholic expansion in the sixteenth century.

6 Conclusion

In the 1586 Madrid edition, Mendoza three times used the image of the "serpent" to symbolize the power of the Chinese emperor, a phenomenon this paper has termed the Other's imagination of "golden serpent kingship." From this, we have identified a set of culturally misaligned signifiers: *serpiente dorada* – King of China. While some Chinese scholars have noted this misaligned cross-cultural symbol, little attention has been paid to the cultural

32 Francisco de Sande, *Carta a Felipe II del Gobernador de Filipinas, doctor Sande. Da cuenta de su llegada y accidentes de su viaje; de la falta que hay allí de todo, y habla de Religiosos, minas, de la China, Mindanao, Borneo, etc* (1576), Aud. de Filipinas, 6, Archivo General de Indias.

33 P. Torres y Lanzas, *Catálogo de los documentos relativos a las Islas Filipinas existentes en el Archivo de Indias de Sevilla. Tomo II* (Barcelona: Compañía General de Tabacos de Filipinas, 1926), XLIX.

positioning and process of social legitimization behind it. This paper has, therefore, taken this symbolic pairing as a point of departure to reconstruct the process by which this image became legitimized in the eyes of the Other.

In earlier research, the author had proposed that Mendoza's substitution of the serpent for the dragon was intended as a metaphor for European intellectuals' deep respect toward Chinese culture. However, deeper engagement with *Historia* reveals a fundamental flaw: within Mendoza's theological framework, both the serpent and the dragon bore connotations of greed, deception, and evil. It is difficult to sustain the argument that the "golden serpent kingship" served as a positive metaphor for China's favorable reception in Europe. This paper has thus offered an alternative interpretation: Mendoza employed the serpent not as a mark of cultural respect, but rather because the dragon in sixteenth-century Spanish Christian thought carried explicitly anti-Christian meanings. Constructing an image of a tyrannical, culturally resistant Other would have run counter to both the authorial and textual intentions of *Historia*, which sought instead to render China assimilable.

Admittedly, the author's earlier work had already recognized and discussed Mendoza's Christian universalist stance. However, it did so by focusing solely on Europe's internal historical and political dynamics, failing to contextualize his narrative within the historical context of Sino-Western interaction and the insipient phase of capital globalization in the sixteenth century. Moreover, prior analyses had not fully explained the dialectical relationship between Mendoza's ideological and utopian portrayals of China. Addressing these gaps, this paper has redefined Mendoza's construction of China and offered a deconstructive critique of the cultural structure underpinning it.

Through textual analysis, this paper has shown that Mendoza's portrayal of late Ming China is constructed through a tension between ideological discourse and utopian imagination. While devoting substantial narrative space to praising China's material wealth and political strength, Mendoza simultaneously inserted a more subdued image of a spiritually vacuous and intellectually stunted Other. In this nuanced and circuitous narrative structure, he presented to European readers a semi-civilized image of China. This gave rise to a new cultural paradigm, shaped through the lens of the Other, that manifested in a binary opposition: civilized Europe versus semi-civilized China. This, in essence, was a derivative form of Eurocentrism. It represented an upgraded model of social cohesion and identity formation that emerged in response to a materially and institutionally superior heterogeneous civilization. What made this cultural model distinctive was its ability to weave an assimilative identity code into an idealized, utopian image of a foreign land. Nonetheless, Mendoza's underlying ideological stance remained the driving force behind

his narrative, ultimately shaping the purpose of the text and placing ideological goals above the utopian imagination.

This new cultural paradigm both reflected and reinforced the intercultural dynamics of the sixteenth century. Through poetic language, Mendoza's narrative re-presented the global economic order emerging in the early stages of capital globalization, highlighting China's dominant position within it. At the same time, his work also mirrored the eastward expansion of Christianity and the evolving Sino-European interactions it set in motion, ultimately producing a historically situated, ideologically charged image of China, constructed and legitimized through the lens of the Other.

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