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The Evangelical Aim in the *History of the Great and Mighty Kingdom of China* by Juan González de Mendoza, a 16th Century European Work on China

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Abstract: For over five centuries, the *History of the Great and Mighty Kingdom of China*, written by Spanish missionary Juan González de Mendoza and published in 1585 in Rome, has captured the interest of the international academic community. However, scholarship has primarily focused on Mendoza's depiction of China as rich and powerful, potentially overlooking the evangelical purpose of his narrative and failing to explain the correlation between the positive Chinese image and the author's evangelical intention. This study aims to clarify the image of China presented by the Spanish author through a detailed textual analysis, concluding that Mendoza portrayed China as a rich and great nation that also had misguided beliefs and was open to evangelization. The Spanish author's identity as an Augustinian preacher and ambassador of King Philip II of Spain to the Ming dynasty of China, as well as the global and evangelistic social context in which he lived, significantly influenced his perceptions of China. Furthermore, his hybrid profile of China was accepted in Europe at the time and became a collective memory because it embodied the spiritual context shared by the European community in the 16th century. This spiritual purpose was achieved through the idealized imagination, which serves as an affective medium in the formation of collective memory.

Keywords: evangelization; China; Spain; Juan González de Mendoza; Jesuits



Citation: Gao, Bo. 2024. The Evangelical Aim in the *History of the Great and Mighty Kingdom of China* by Juan González de Mendoza, a 16th Century European Work on China. *Religions* 15: 517. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel15050517>

Academic Editor: Roy C. Amore

Received: 22 February 2024

Revised: 8 April 2024

Accepted: 19 April 2024

Published: 23 April 2024



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1. Introduction

This study focuses on the *History of the Great and Mighty Kingdom of China*, written by Spanish missionary Juan González de Mendoza toward the end of the 16th century, a significant period between classical and modern society, characterized by turbulence and change. After the Renaissance and the Protestant Reformation, as well as the Counter-Reformation, Europe gradually entered modern society. The European perspective on China during this transitional era deserves special attention. Of course, before Mendoza, several European missionaries and business people, such as Bernardino de Escalante (Vega and Vilá 2009) and Martín de Rada, had written accounts of China. For instance, Martín de Rada visited Fuzhou 福州 and stayed there for a month, where he observed the reality of the Ming dynasty. Although Mendoza never traveled to China and his book was compiled based on others' reports of China, including the writings of Martín de Rada, Mendoza's work has had a greater influence in Europe than that of Martín de Rada and Bernardino de Escalante. In this respect, the American historian D. F. Lach noted that "the authority of Mendoza's book was so great that it became the point of departure and the basis of comparison for all subsequent European works on China written before the eighteenth century" (Lach 1994, p. 744). As noted by Lach, the book was highly regarded and became a model for European writing about China in the 16th and 17th centuries.

Given the significant cultural impact of Mendoza's book, the present author has dedicated many years to the interpretation of its narrative. It was written in Spanish and first published in Rome in 1585 (González de Mendoza 1585); however, Mendoza was dissatisfied with this edition. It was not until 1586 that a revised Spanish edition was published

in Madrid, entitled *Historia de las cosas mas 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* (González de Mendoza 1586). This was considered the final Spanish edition by Mendoza. Therefore, the present study is based on this edition. The book comprises two parts, each with three volumes. The first section presents China's politics, economy, geography, history, culture, beliefs, rituals, and customs during the Ming dynasty. The second part is a recompilation of the early travel notes written by Europeans, which includes their insights into Chinese provinces such as Fujian 福建 and Guangdong 广东 and descriptions of China's neighboring countries, as well as Mexico.

The purpose of this study is to analyze how Mendoza used previous reports and narratives to achieve the purpose of his evangelical writing and redefine the image of China in his portrayal. Furthermore, it explores how his personal experience and social context contributed to the construction of this new image of China. Finally, it reconstructs the process of the socialization of the new image of China by Mendoza in 16th-century Europe from the perspective of collective memory.

2. The Image of China in Mendoza's Evangelical Rewriting

Although many scholars have analyzed Mendoza's work, the majority of research has focused on his positive attitude toward China. For example, as early as the 1990s, D. F. Lach examined Mendoza's references in his book *Asia in the Making of Europe* and concluded that "Generally, in his appraisal of the Chinese he was much more inclined to follow the reports by Cruz (which were partially based on Pereira) and Escalante, rather than the more critical report by Martín de Rada. Yet here he would frequently reject from Cruz those data or evaluations not entirely germane to his argument or not in harmony with his generally favorable view of China and its people" (Lach 1994, p. 792). Lach argues that Mendoza's writing constructed an idealized image of China. However, he also pointed to Mendoza's evangelical intentions in his writings on China:

It was a tract for the times that appeared in a charged atmosphere, with certain parties advocating the invasion of China by arms, in opposition to others who were working for a program of peaceful penetration. Although never entirely clear on this point, Mendoza was probably devoted to the cause of peace. If his book therefore exhibits a tendentious quality, this can be explained by his hope that he might through his narrative help to encourage missionary activity while discouraging those who thought it possible for only two or three thousand Spanish soldiers to wage war against his "Mightie Kindome". (Lach 1994, pp. 793–94)

Although Lach realized Mendoza's evangelical intention, he failed to explain clearly how this purpose was presented in his writings. How does this intention coexist with the idealized image of China in his book? In other words, why did Mendoza choose to achieve his evangelical purpose by praising rather than criticizing China? Moreover, how was Mendoza's image of China recognized by Europeans in the 16th century?

Mendoza's Spanish writing also attracted the interest of Chinese scholars after it was translated into Chinese for the first time in 1998 by He Gaoji 何高济. In the same year, Zhang Kai 张铠, one of the primary Chinese historians interested in the book, highlighted that, in general, Mendoza described China's factual panorama from a European perspective. In the 16th century, European countries formulated policies for trade with China. In other words, faced with a powerful empire with an established civilization and long history, rich products, a developed economy, a perfect state system, and strong national defense forces, Western countries regarded China as a trading partner rather than a direct target of attack (Zhang 1998, p. 86). Another Chinese scholar, Zhou Ning 周宁, also addressed Mendoza's book. Zhou divided the Western image of China into the categories of utopian and ideological and considered Mendoza's portrayal of China to be utopian (Zhou 2006, p. 55). Moreover, he argued that Mendoza succeeded in elevating the European admiration of China's wealth to the level of institutional and moral worship (Zhou 2006, p. 63).

However, it is problematic that firstly, Zhou did not provide a definition for the terms “utopian” and “ideology”. Secondly, his points of view are still limited to Mendoza’s idealized imagination, a unipolar structure, ignoring the fact that, in accordance with the original Spanish texts, Mendoza reconstructed the image of China in the context of the tension between idealization and evangelization. Therefore, based on the problem identified in previous studies, the present author seeks to determine what kind of image of China Mendoza created. Accordingly, the first problem to be solved in this study is the understanding of Mendoza’s concept of China. From a close reading of Mendoza’s original Spanish writing, the present author finds that, in 24 chapters, Mendoza describes a prosperous and powerful Chinese empire from the perspective of the Other and seeks to detail the adversities of the late Ming dynasty. He also outlines the Chinese political system in 25 chapters. Of these, 16 chapters deal with the advanced political system of the Ming dynasty. The remaining nine chapters describe the bureaucracy as greedy and cunning. In addition, the Spanish author describes Chinese people as spiritually deficient in 16 chapters, which scholars have ignored. In summary, Mendoza devotes 40 chapters to the reconstruction of an idealized image of China, 9 chapters to the description of a greedy and cunning bureaucracy, and 16 chapters to his understanding of Chinese people as spiritually illiterate (Gao 2023, p. 156).

Therefore, Mendoza not only creates an idealized Chinese empire from the perspective of the Other, but he also reconstructs a hybrid image of China through the tension between idealization and evangelization, which materializes as a rich and powerful heterogeneous culture but spiritually ignorant, upholding the wrong faith, and compatible with Christianity. As Mendoza’s idealized vision of China occupies most of his text, we often misunderstand his intentions and presume that the book is solely intended to praise China for its strength and prosperity.

Starting with Mendoza’s perspective on China, let us delve deeper into this reflection. How did he use earlier European accounts of China in his writing to construct a different image of China? Mendoza’s failure to cite references is a significant shortcoming of his book, even though it was written in the 16th century. Some of his references come from a group of Chinese books purchased by Martín de Rada in Fujian 福建, a coastal province in the southeast of China, where he stayed for approximately one month. Unfortunately, these books have been missing for centuries. In addition, Martín de Rada was one of the first members of the Order of Saint Augustine to evangelize the Philippines and one of the pioneering Christian missionaries who visited the Ming dynasty of the Chinese empire. Among these materials, the most important references for Mendoza were de Rada’s *Relación Verdadera de las cosas del Reyno de Taibin* (A True History of the Things of the Ming Dynasty) (De Rada 1575) and *Tractado emque se cõtam muito pol estéco as cous da China* (A Treatise in which Things of China Are Related) (Boxer 2010) by the Portuguese Dominican friar Gaspar da Cruz. In this regard, Lach, one of the pioneers in studying Mendoza’s European references and his attitude towards their editing, indicated that “while the accounts by Pereira and Cruz were highly laudatory of Chinese life in general, the tome of Rada’s later reports and those of his companions was much more critical” (Lach 1994, p. 749). As explained above, Mendoza maintains Pereira and Cruz’s position of praising China while abandoning Rada’s critical stance (Lach 1994, p. 749). Meanwhile, another Chinese historian in the field, Zhang Kai, also noticed Mendoza’s tendency to idealize, indicating that, although he generally presented China’s reality from a European perspective, he exaggerated China’s wealth and power and even presented some negative social phenomena as an admirable way of life (Zhang 1998, pp. 85–86).

However, studies on Mendoza’s work neglect to explain how Mendoza used references to reconstruct the spiritual world of the Chinese people, focusing only on the material society and institutional construction of the Ming dynasty of the Chinese empire. In other words, so far, we have not been able to determine how Mendoza used earlier accounts to portray the spiritual world of the Chinese people, who have been characterized by the Spanish writer as lacking spirituality, having misguided beliefs, and being easily

influenced by evangelization. In fact, these soteriological imaginations reflect Mendoza's authentic intentions. Thus, this problem is the focus of the present study.

Let us examine the spiritual world of the Chinese people as shaped by the Spanish author. First, he depicted the Chinese as people with misguided beliefs, according to a textual analysis. One of Mendoza's arguments is that the Chinese engage in devil worship, as stated in Chapter 2, Volume 2 in Part 1 of his book: "They likewise doo sacrifice vnto the diuell, not as though they were ignorant that he is euill, or condemned, but that he shoulde doo them no harme, neither on their bodies nor goods" ([González de Mendoza 1853](#), p. 41)¹. He also emphasizes that "in this sort doo they inuocate the diuell, and it is so ordinarie a thing throughout all the kingdome, that there is nothing more vsed nor knowne" ([González de Mendoza 1853](#), p. 49). Moreover, to prove that the Chinese often worship the devil, Mendoza writes again in Chapter 4, Volume 2 in Part 1 that, in 1580, Pedro de Alfaro of the order of Saint Francis in China visited the country and witnessed Chinese people praying to the devil to ward off disasters ([González de Mendoza 1853](#), p. 49). Furthermore, in Chapter 7, Volume 2 of Part 1, Mendoza once more indicates that, according to Chinese customs, fishermen worship the devil, praying for peace before going out to fish in the sea:

When that they will lanch any ship into the water after that it is made, then these religious men, all apparelled with rich roabes of silke, do go to make sacrifices vpon the poores of them, wheras they haue their oratories, and there they do offer painted papers of diuers figures, the which they doo cut in peeces before their idols, with certaine ceremonies and songes well consorted, and ringing of little belles, they do reuerence vnto the diuell. They paint him in the forecastle, for that he shall do no harm to the shippes. ([González de Mendoza 1853](#), pp. 58–59)

Finally, Chapter 18, Volume 3, in the second part of the book, once again mentions devil worship: "In many places, they worship the diuell, only for that he should do them no harm" ([González de Mendoza 1854](#), pp. 290–91).

It is important to clarify that Mendoza's description of Chinese fishermen worshipping the devil before going to sea is a misinterpretation of Chinese culture and does not reflect the reality. For centuries, the fishermen along the coast of China have maintained the tradition of worshipping gods such as Mazu 妈祖, Dragon King 海龙王, and Hero Guan 关帝 before setting sail, but they have never displayed the custom of worshipping the devil. In fact, there is no tradition of devil worship in the Chinese culture, despite the similarity between the Chinese word 鬼 (ghost) for devil. In Chinese, 鬼 (ghosts) are not equivalent to the devils of Western culture and are not inherently evil. Instead, ghosts are generally understood to be the souls of the deceased, and they may not necessarily be negative. Folk novels about ghosts were very popular during the Ming and Qing dynasties. Pu Songling's *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio* ([Pu 2006](#)) is a collection of stories featuring fox-fairies, ghosts, and other supernatural beings, in which both benevolent and malevolent ghosts were invented by the author. However, there is little tradition of ghost worship in China, and the worship of sea goddesses is more common among fishermen.

Mendoza's above depictions are taken from "Certain reports of China" by the Portuguese Dominican friar Gaspar da Cruz ([Boxer 2010](#)). Cruz's account of China, printed in Portugal in 1569 and 1570, was based on his personal experience in Guangzhou and on the testimony of Galeote Pereira in Fujian, two of China's coastal provinces. Gaspar da Cruz described the practice of worshipping the devil in his account of China: "They worship the devil also, they worship him because he shall do them no hurt" ([Boxer 2010](#), p. 215), and "When they will launch any new ship to the sea, their priests being called by them come into the ships to do their sacrifices with long flowing garments of silk. They set about the ship many flags of silk, and they make many reverences and offerings, and they say they do so because the devil will not hurt the ship" ([Boxer 2010](#), p. 216). Thus, according to Cruz, the Chinese people engage in devil worship, especially the fishermen, who often make sacrifices to the devil for peaceful sailing.

By comparing Mendoza and Cruz's descriptions of the Chinese practice of devil worship, we can observe that Mendoza exaggerated Cruz's account. Gaspar da Cruz just used a few sentences to describe how the Chinese worshipped the devil. In comparison, Mendoza expanded it into three paragraphs, as we have already indicated, in Chapter 2 of Volume 2 of Part 1, Chapter 7 of Volume 2 of Part 1, and Chapter 18 of Volume 3 in the second part of the book. Due to space limitations, we cannot cite additional examples in this study. However, in this example, we can already recognize that the Chinese spiritual world mentioned in Gaspar da Cruz's narrative, characterized by people with misguided beliefs, including devil-worshipping tendencies, was magnified and exaggerated in Mendoza's rewriting. For centuries, fishermen in different parts of China have maintained their own specific rituals to worship the sea god and pray for safety on their voyages. It is important to highlight that these rituals do not involve the worship of the devil, but, rather, the sea god. Therefore, both Mendoza and Gaspar da Cruz misinterpreted the meaning of the Chinese ritual, and Mendoza further exaggerated and emphasized Cruz's argument about the misguided beliefs of the Chinese people.

Second, Mendoza's exaggeration of others' accounts is also reflected in his conception of China as a nation compatible with Christianity and therefore ready for evangelization. For example, in his book, he repeats the story of Saint Thomas, who traveled to China to preach the Gospel: "By that aforesaid, it appeareth to be of a truth that the apostle S. Thomas did preach in China, and we may presume that all which wee haue seene dooth remaine printed in their hearts from his doctrine, and beareth a similitude of the truth and a conformity with the things of our catholike religion" (González de Mendoza 1853, p. 53). This quotation suggests that Mendoza believed that St. Thomas had already successfully preached in China and laid the groundwork for the conversion. It implies the possibility of missionary work in the Asian country, in response to the evangelical purpose of the Spanish author. For this reason, he also stated, in another chapter, "There is found amongst them, that is a sufficient indition, that have had in some time past, some particular notice of the evangelical law, as is plainly seene by certaine pictures which have beene found and seene amongst them, whereof we have made particular mention, the which they believe was knowen by the preaching of the Apostle S. Thomas, who passed through his kingdom when as he went unto the Indias" (González de Mendoza 1854, pp. 289–90). This quote shows, again, the traces of Christianity in the Chinese Culture due to St. Thomas's missionary work in China and thereby that the Chinese people were aware of Christian doctrine. Indeed, the story of Saint Thomas preaching in China was widely circulated in 16th-century Europe, although historians generally doubt the authenticity of the event.

Meanwhile, we also find some very similar narratives in Cruz's account, one of Mendoza's most important references:

I learned that an honourable Armenian had come thither on a pilgrimage from Armenia out of devotion to the Apostle, and he had deposed on oath (which was given him for greater certainty by the Portuguese who served as major-domos in the house of the Apostle) that the Armenians had written in their authentic scriptures that before the Apostle suffered martyrdom at Meleapor he had gone to China to preach the gospel, and after being there for certain days, seeing that he could not do any good there, he had returned to Moleapor, leaving in China three or four disciples whom he had made there, all of which were set down in the book of the house. (Boxer 2010, pp. 212–13)

Although Cruz and Mendoza both documented Saint Thomas's journey to China to preach, their perspectives were different. According to Cruz, the Chinese did not know God, and it was uncertain whether Thomas' disciples had preached successfully in China (Boxer 2010, pp. 212–13). This clarifies that Cruz did not have high expectations for the promotion of the Gospel in China. However, Mendoza diverged from Cruz's conservative attitude. Through exaggerated editing, he constructed a cross-cultural commensurability between the Chinese and Christian civilizations and laid the foundation for the evangelization of China. Thus, an analysis of these texts enables us to better understand Mendoza's

position in shaping the Chinese spiritual landscape. He misunderstood the spiritual world of the Chinese people and exaggerated the erroneous beliefs of the Chinese described in earlier missionary works, such as the practice of worshipping evil before sailing. He also fabricated the similarities between Chinese and Christian culture to create an image of China as receptive to the gospel. All these writings imply an evangelical imperative for Christian readers to travel to China for missionary work, in the face of a vast pagan land waiting to be redeemed.

However, it is worth noting that Mendoza's innovation does not lie in his amplified soteriological imagination of China, which was already present to some extent in European accounts of this Asian country before the publication of his book. Rather, it lies in the way in which he achieves the evangelical purpose of his narratives. Instead of forcibly introducing the evangelistic conception of the Chinese empire, he not only exaggerates it but also implants it into the idealized imagination that occupies most of the texts. Consequently, the book achieves its evangelical intention by relying on this euphemistic and circuitous narrative structure.

3. The Legitimacy of Mendoza's Evangelical Purpose for Writing

Mendoza had never been to China, and some of his ideas about China did not correspond with the Chinese reality. Nevertheless, his writings are legitimate if interpreted in the social context in which he lived. Mendoza's personal experience and the macro- and micro-contexts in which he lived helped to shape the spiritual purpose for his writing about China and make his account reasonable.

He was born in Torrecilla, Cameros de La Rioja, Spain, in 1545. At the age of 17 years, he moved to Mexico, which was a Spanish colony during the 16th century. He contacted the Augustinians and joined the convent of Saint Augustine of Mexico in 1565. He dedicated himself to his theological studies and spent most of his time at the Michoacán convent, which was a popular stopping place for missionaries, travelers, and explorers traveling to or from Asia. During this time, various Christian orders, such as the Augustinians and Jesuits, competed for the opportunity to evangelize Asia. Due to his location, Mendoza was able to gather a wealth of information about China (González de Mendoza 2022, pp. 161–62). It is clear from personal experience that he grew up in a deeply Catholic environment, which contributed to his strong evangelical zeal.

Moreover, Mendoza lived during the Protestant Reformation, a period marked by religious, political, and social change, led by Protestants seeking to challenge the Roman Catholic Church. On 31 October 1517, Martin Luther, the German Professor of Holy Scriptures at the University of Wittenberg walked confidently to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, nailed up his Ninety-five Theses and, with a swing of his hammer, began what was known later as the Protestant Reformation. This document complained about the indulgences, and contains Luther's rebuttal of the authority, doctrines, and practices of the Roman Catholic Church. The Protestant Reformation, sparked by Martin Luther, caused turmoil in Europe and led to religious and political chaos that lasted for over a century. As a result, the power of the papacy and the Roman Empire declined, and Medieval Christendom ceased to exist. In response to the Reformation and to strengthen the authority, the Roman Catholic Church initiated a Counter-Reformation. Its aim was to reclaim souls from heretics, convert them, and re-establish its position as the center of the apostolic Church and the foundation of orthodoxy (Hsia 2010, p. 9). As part of the Counter-Reformation, the new pope, Pope Gregory XIII, in alliance with King Philip II of Spain, aimed to reform the Church and combat Protestantism in an effort to reclaim lost souls. It is worth noting that Mendoza's book was published in Rome exactly under the patronage of Pope Gregory XIII in 1585. The Pope's patronage of Mendoza's book demonstrates his support of the Spanish missionary's evangelical stance towards China.

Additionally, Mendoza's evangelical intention in his writing on China also reflected the historical context in which he lived. As another part of the Counter-Reformation, the preaching of the Gospel in non-Christian countries in the East was promoted at that time.

Consequently, various orders were established, including the Society of Jesus, the most dynamic religious order of the 16th century among others, with its members called Jesuits, which was founded in 1540 by the Spanish Ignacio Loyola. The founder and his followers saw themselves as evangelists. In fact, the Jesuits played a significant role in the Counter-Reformation by providing dynamic and energetic support to the papacy during a time of crisis. In particular, in the 16th century, the Jesuits were a highly global organization, and their numbers grew rapidly, from 1500 in 1556 to 3500 in 1565, and 5164 in 1579, with a focus on promoting order and orthodoxy in non-Christian territories (Hsia 2010, p. 11). The Roman College, the headquarters of Jesuit education, served as the central base for Jesuit communication worldwide, receiving letters and reports from Jesuits all over the world. These uplifting letters inspired people to dream of long journeys to reach foreign lands, and overcome obstacles in the pursuit of spiritual salvation in non-Christian territories.

Therefore, different from the past, a new movement emerged within the Catholic world in the Early Modern Period. Spiritual leaders prioritized the sacred purpose of salvation of the soul over the pursuit of power, fame, and wealth, as indicated R. Po-Chia Hsia in *A Jesuit in the Forbidden City*: “The motto of the Jesuits summed up best this new spirit: *ad majorem Dei Gloriam*, to the greater glory of God” (Hsia 2010, p. 21). This means that during that time, Christianity was primarily focused on refuting heresy, saving souls, and restoring orthodoxy, and its influence expanded beyond the fragmented Christian world to encompass the wider global community. In this situation, Mendoza prepared a visit to the Ming Dynasty on behalf of King Philip II of Spain in the 1580s. Although the trip was eventually cancelled when he arrived in Mexico from Spain, given the historical context of the time, it could be seen as part of the Counter-Reformation, in the coalition between Spain and the Roman Catholic Empire, as mentioned above. For this reason, the strong evangelical intention towards the Chinese Empire in Mendoza’s book, written on the occasion of his aborted visit to the Asian country, reflects the new movement sparked by the Counter-Reformation of the time in which he lived.

In addition, another event also struck Mendoza and had an impact on his writing position on China. In 1541, Francisco Javier, a Jesuit and one of Ignatius Loyola’s closest friends and founding companions of the Society of Jesus, was appointed to evangelize several Asian countries, including India, Japan, and China. He proposed the “policy of adaptation” in response to these non-Christian Asian countries (Zhang 2018, pp. 8–10). Javier’s success in missionary work in Asia and his “adaptation policy” had a significant impact on Mendoza. This strengthened Mendoza’s confidence in preaching in China and also influenced his writing purpose for soteriology, as he stated in his book:

The faith of Christ is very well planted in some of these islands, by the good diligence and trauell of the fathers and Iesuites, but in particular by that which was doone by Master Francisco Xavier, one of the tenne companions of the father Ignacio de Loyola, a founder of the saide religion: hee trauelled with great zeale in the conuerting of the saide Islands, and that which was a great helpe vnto the same was his holy doctrine and apostolike life, as vnto this day the Iapones doo confesse, attributing vnto him (next vnto God) the goodnesse that hath come vnto them by receiuing the baptisme, whome the fathers of that companie haue followed in all pointes, such as remained after his death, as also such as haue gone thither since that time. (González de Mendoza 1854, p. 299)

The “islands” mentioned above refer to the Japanese islands. Mendoza greatly appreciated and admired the successful evangelization of the Jesuit Francisco Javier in Japan, an Asian country that was very different from European civilization. According to Mendoza, the Japanese were “naturally known to be inclined unto warres, robberies, and doing evill” (González de Mendoza 1854, p. 299). Meanwhile, Mendoza’s book portrays the Chinese people as kind, docile, peaceful, and reasonable individuals. Thereby, the success of missionary work in Japan was a great inspiration to Mendoza’s confidence in preaching in China.

Furthermore, the societal moment in which Mendoza resided had a significant impact in terms of shaping his evangelical imagination of China. In the period when Mendoza lived, the Catholic Church in China was under the Portuguese royal padroado, although this did not pose the same difficulties for foreign missionaries as in Spanish America. However, in the 1570s, the Spanish authority accredited in the Philippines proposed to the Spanish King Philip II to invade China (de Sande 1576). This message was immediately transmitted to Portugal, threatening its influence in Asia (Clossey 2008, p. 154). In 1585, Gregory XIII, in *Ex pastorali officio* (28 January 1585), gave the Society of Jesuits the exclusive right to evangelize Japan and China, under the padroado of Portugal (Dauril 1996, p. 267). However, Spain's ambitions in China led to a change in the Portuguese crown's policy towards Jesuits of any nation. The previous open policy was no longer extended to them. Lisbon was reluctant to accept a Spanish missionary presence in China at such a sensitive moment. Consequently, only a few Spanish missionaries sailed for Asia during most of the Philippine period (1580–1640) (Clossey 2008, p. 154). It is worth noting that the Spanish King Philip II was proclaimed King of Portugal in 1580. As the new ruler of Portugal, he had a vested interest in gaining the support of the Portuguese monarchy. In 1585, the Roman Catholic Church granted Portugal the exclusive authority to evangelize China. Mendoza's work coincidentally appeared in the same year. Interpreting this context, Mendoza's book, with its strong evangelical purpose in China, could be considered a response to the Portuguese monopoly on mission work in China, with an implication of asserting Spain's right to the missionary work in China.

In addition, Mendoza's identity as a Spanish ambassador during the Ming dynasty contributed to the construction of the book's evangelizing intent. Given that Mexico was an important transition point between Asia and Europe in the 16th century, Mendoza took advantage of its geographical location to become acquainted with China at an early age. This experience earned him the strong recommendation of Don Antonio de Padilla y Meneses, former president of the Royal and Supreme Council of the Indies. In addition, this was the highest official organization for administrative, judicial, and legislative affairs in the Spanish colonies. The arrival of Cristobal Columbus in America in 1492 promoted the European expansion in the continent. Following this, Spain was occupied with the overseas expansion. As a result, many Latin American countries and the Philippines became Spanish overseas colonies. Faced with its increasingly expanding territory and complex overseas affairs, Spain realized the need to prepare a specialized agency to manage its colonial affairs and ordered the construction of an agency in 1511. In 1580, King Philip II appointed Mendoza as one of the ambassadors of the Spanish Mission, instructing him to travel to China to visit the Wanli 万历 Emperor of the Ming dynasty. Unfortunately, the trip was aborted. He already arrived in Mexico from Spain with the intention of traveling to China via the Philippines, but for reasons he would not like to mention in his book, he eventually had to return from Mexico to Spain. One of the main purposes of the delegation was to request permission to spread the Gospel in China. He wrote the following in the "Dedication to Fernando de Vega y Fonseca", the President of the Royal and Supreme Council of the Indies:

In 1580, His Majesty ordered me to bring a large number of rare treasures as a state presented to the King of China to express His Majesty's friendship. He also wanted permission from both countries to conduct commercial activities in the Philippines. Your predecessor, the well-known Antonio de Padilla Menezes, suggested that I record all my experiences in China so that I can report to him in detail when I return. I also believe that only by understanding the country's cultural customs, history, and geography can we influence the people of the country in the right way and convert them into the Catholic faith. (González de Mendoza 1586, pp. 11–12)²

In fact, during the 16th century, the Spanish kingdom pursued a peaceful coexistence with China, advocating for a policy of promoting the Gospel and trading with China, although there were some advocating for the conquest of China. In this context, Mendoza's

evangelical rewriting position aligned with the Spanish authority's attitude towards China. In the 16th century, two diplomatic strategies with regard to China were popular within Spain: military attack or peaceful coexistence. For example, Francisco de Sande, the Spanish governor stationed in the Philippines, suggested in 1576 that King Philip II of Spain send troops to attack the Ming dynasty. He pointed out that "It would be possible to take control of a province with just two or three thousand men, and gain control of ports and a superior navy by sea. This would make the conquest very easy" (de Sande 1576)³. However, Philip II did not decide on this proposal. In 1577, he replied to Sander that "Regarding the conquest of China, which may seem desirable, it is currently not advisable to attempt it. Instead, it is better to seek friendly relations with the Chinese. It is important to avoid yielding or accompanying the corsairs who are enemies of the Chinese, as this could give them an excuse for indignation towards us" (Torres y Lanzas 1926, p. 49)⁴. The letter reveals that Philip II was hesitant to make decisions about China due to the limited information available about the Ming dynasty. Mendoza's book was written in such a historical context. With an exaggerated evangelical perspective on China, he represented in a poetic manner the relationship between the Ming dynasty and Spain in the 16th century.

Therefore, considering the macro-context in which Mendoza lived, it can be argued that the evangelical purpose of Mendoza's writing represented the eastward expansion of Christianity and the development of Sino-Western relations experienced by the Spanish author in the 16th century. However, his narrative contains a significant amount of exaggerated information that may obscure its true purpose.

Finally, from the perspective of micro-power, Mendoza's writing was also influenced by his patron's ideology, as the Pope funded the book's publication. Therefore, it is logical that Roman Catholic ideology was involved in constructing the narrative. In the "Dedication" of Mendoza's book, Mendoza explains the relationship between the Pope and his text: "I came to this Court and met the Pope Gregory XIII. At his command, I gave him an account of China that I related to. He received it with pleasure and ordered me to edit and publish them to awaken the greater desire of the Spanish for saving so many misguided souls" (González de Mendoza 1586, p. 13)⁵. In conclusion, although there is a certain discrepancy between Mendoza's writing on China and Chinese history, the image of China that he presents was valid in terms of the European perspective of the 16th century, considering Mendoza's personal experience and the macro- and micro-environments in which he lived.

4. The Socialization of Mendoza's Chinese Imagination in 16th-Century Europe

We note that some Chinese scholars have analyzed the socialization process of the image of China presented by Mendoza in Europe, and they were largely inspired by Michel Foucault's theoretical structure of discourse and power, as well as the critical theory of post-colonialism. For instance, Zhou Ning, a Chinese literary critic, explains in his book, *Western Images of China*, that China was considered an Eastern model, an idealized and exotic image, during the Renaissance in the 16th century, which was used to identify the values of the Eastern Other that could be exploited to achieve self-transcendence (Zhou 2006, p. 346). He also notes that the idealized image of China in 16th-century Europe reflects both self-awareness and the unconscious worries and desires of this period, as well as the core values of Western modernity. These values include the pursuit of knowledge and wealth, the rational spirit of freedom and criticism, and the establishment of a harmonious social order through education and even primitive democracy (Zhou 2006, p. 70).

While these theories offer valuable insights, it is important to be aware of their limitations as well. Zhou Ning's interpretation is incomplete as it mainly focuses on discourse mechanisms and overlooks the significance of specific historical experiences. Additionally, it neglects the interactive relationship between China and Europe. Thus, based on the problem considered, the last part of this study aims to reconstruct the legitimation process of Mendoza's Chinese imagination from a new perspective. This is also a deliberate effort to address the lack of theoretical depth in the interpretation of the Western images of China.

At the beginning of the 20th century, the French scholar Maurice Halbwachs proposed the concept of collective memory, which led to a surge in research in this field in international academic circles. Previously, the study of memory had been largely confined to the fields of psychology and psychoanalysis, ignoring its social nature. However, the concept of “collective memory” was not clearly defined in his writings, as he did not consider it as a given but, rather, a “socially constructed notion” (Halbwachs 1992, p. 22). Nevertheless, we can identify the characteristics that differentiate collective memory from individual memory and their inter-relationships based on his books. Firstly, collective memory is based on individuals as group members who remember, as he specifies in *The Collective Memory*, “While the collective memory endures and draws strength from its base in a coherent body of people, it is individuals as group members who remember” (Halbwachs 1992, p. 48). Although it is individuals who remember, rather than the collective, these individuals are situated within a particular collective context, and they recall or reconstruct the past based on this specific context. For example, Chinese National Day evokes emotional memories for most Chinese people, while the United States’ Independence Day has similar significance for most Americans. These days constitute collective memory for particular social groups. In fact, Halbwachs’ contribution to memory research lies in his shift from a psychological to a sociological perspective, focused on the social nature of memory, as he states that “Collective memory requires the support of a group delimited in space and time” (Halbwachs 1992, p. 84). Based on his writings, we can see that collective memory is a reconstruction of the past based on the present, and it is shared, inherited, and reconstructed within members of a society. Moreover, it often requires a physical medium that holds spiritual significance for the group. This medium can take the form of a statue, monument, place, or image, as well as a symbol or other spiritually significant object (Halbwachs 1992, p. 204).

An examination of the publication history of Mendoza’s Chinese writing reveals that the image of China presented in his book as a literary canon can also be seen as a collective memory, shared by 16th-century Europeans about the Asian country. Mendoza’s personal perceptions of China were constantly recalled, reconstructed, and shared by Europeans through the medium of text. The 16th century, in particular, witnessed more publications of the book than any other time. For example, in slightly over a decade, from its initial publication in 1585 until the end of the 16th century, Mendoza’s Spanish account was translated into seven languages: Latin, Italian, French, English, German, Portuguese, and Dutch. In total, 44 editions were published throughout Europe.

However, not all works on China have attained such extensive recognition in Europe. Mendoza’s most important references in writing about China were Martín de Rada, Gaspar da Cruz, Galeote Pereira, and Bernardino de Escalante (Boxer 2010). However, none of their texts were as influential as that of Mendoza in the 16th century, and some of them are even unknown to us. Moreover, compared to Mendoza’s book, Nicolas Trigault’s *Regni Chinensis Description* was reprinted 11 times in the ten years between 1615 and 1625. In the 20 years between 1654 and 1674, Martino Martino’s *De Belli Tartarico* was reprinted only 21 times (Zhang 1998, p. 86). This shows that Mendoza’s book was even more popular than the accounts of China written by missionaries who personally traveled to China after him. In addition, González de Mendoza’s influence has endured beyond the 16th century, as it has been continuously reprinted from the 17th century to the present day. The latest version, edited by Spanish historian Juan Gil, was published in Madrid in 2022, the capital of Spain (González de Mendoza 2022). These facts indicate that Mendoza’s portrayal of China as the literary canon became a kind of collective memory shared by the European community in the 16th century. Therefore, the final part of this study aims to reconstruct the process of its socialization in 16th-century Europe, from the perspective of collective memory.

Collective memory normally develops in two ways: top-down and bottom-up. The top-down approach involves those in power within a society, who decide what its members should remember or forget. Of course, this memory is in line with the dominant ide-

ology in delimited space and time. The bottom-up approach, on the other hand, involves individuals within a social group choosing to remember certain things, either consciously or unconsciously, rather than being compelled to do so. These two pathways are often at work simultaneously in the process of collective memory formation. As noted above, Mendoza's book was published under the patronage of Pope Gregory XIII ([González de Mendoza 1586](#), p. 13), during a time at which Christianity was dominant in Europe, and the Roman Catholic Church exercised considerable authority. Therefore, Mendoza's writing on China gained significant credibility through the patronage of the Pope. From this perspective, the ruling class's power contributed to the spread of Mendoza's image of China in 16th-century Europe. However, the creation of the Europeans' collective memory of China was not only driven by power; European readers living in the 16th century eventually chose to accept this image of China, a process that required an affective medium that is often overlooked by contemporary scholars. In other words, the affective medium generates collective memory by means of empathy or affective identity.

In the 20th century, Jan Assmann continued the discussion of collective memory by proposing cultural memory theory, which focuses on a collective's long-term memory of culture in the form of writing. According to Assmann, writing plays a decisive role in the process of cultural memory, as it opens up memories spanning many thousands of years ([Assmann 2006](#), p. 28). Unlike Halbwachs' concept of collective memory, cultural memory is always transmitted by a dedicated bearer and extends beyond the common experiences of everyday life. It is maintained by specific social institutions through various means, such as words, images, monuments, museums, festivals, and rituals ([Assmann 2006](#), p. 39). Examples of cultural memory include myths, the founding histories of nations and countries, and canons. These serve to shape and regulate the continuity of relevant institutions or groups. More recent scholarship, such as Paul Connerton's book *How Society Remembers* ([Connerton 1989](#)), has extended the study of collective memory to the human body as a site of storage and reproduction. Pierre Nora has made significant contributions in the study of the role of sites in collective memory, writing that "A lieu de mémoire is any significant entity, whether material or nonmaterial in nature, which by dint of human will or the work of time has become a symbolic element of the memorial heritage of any community (in this case, the French community)" ([Nora 1996](#), p. 17).

The various concepts of memory proposed above all emphasize its social nature. Therefore, this study refers to this field as social memory research. However, it is noted that, from Halbwachs to Jan Assmann, Paul Connerton, and Pierre Nora, all these scholars underestimate the role of affective media in the creation of social memory. Nevertheless, an important way in which a kind of social memory is formed is through emotional identification or empathy. This is essentially a process of obtaining poetic self-knowledge. This means that a heterogeneous cultural image is acknowledged and recalled through a sense of poetic self-awareness, rather than relying solely on the imposed authority. Based on this, this study proposes an alternative approach to reconstruct the socialization of Mendoza's image of China in 16th-century Europe from collective memory. On the one hand, the image of China as presented by Mendoza has an evangelical core, which Halbwachs calls the spiritual symbol in the collective memory. On the other hand, Mendoza's evangelical purpose was achieved through an idealized imagination rather than coercion. This kind of exaggerated imagination serves as an affective medium that provides access to poetic self-awareness. This provides a way to explain why Mendoza chose to express his evangelical purpose by idealizing the Chinese image rather than uglifying it.

Let us interpret this new perspective in more detail. Firstly, the epochal code contained in Mendoza's Chinese writing was crucial in ensuring that a heterogeneous image entered the collective memory of Christian readers at the time. As we have analyzed in the previous section, the Spanish author presented an evangelical understanding of China through the editing of earlier accounts of the Asian country, in which his evangelical purpose precisely represented the historical characteristics of Europe in the sixteenth century, as experienced by him. Additionally, the Society of Jesus is a religious order of the Catholic

Church, founded in 1534 by the Spanish cleric Ignacio de Loyola, whose members are called Jesuits. Mendoza lived during a time at which enthusiasm for the Jesuits' missionary work in the East was peaking. It is worth noting that the Jesuit mission was a global soteriological enterprise (Clossey 2008, p. 327) and was, at the time, "simultaneously both extremely global and extremely salvific" (Clossey 2008, p. 256), as Clossey explains in his book, *Salvation and Globalization in the Early Jesuit Missions*. This suggests a new perspective for the reconceptualization of early modern Catholicism. In this historical context, let us examine again the events of 1585 more closely. This was the year of the publication of Mendoza's book in Rome, which also witnessed the arrival of the Japanese Christian mission, the first mission from an Asian country to Europe. They arrived in Rome and met Pope Gregory XIII, who granted them honorary citizenship. The success of the evangelists in Japan further stimulated the enthusiasm for missionary work in the Orient (Zhang 1998, p. 89). Evidently, the book awakened Christian readers' memories of China and responded to the needs of the time to travel to China to spread the Gospel for spiritual salvation, with his exaggerated evangelical image of China.

However, not all 16th-century Europeans believed that a vast and distant pagan land such as China could be converted. As mentioned above, Gaspar da Cruz, one of Mendoza's main sources, disagreed. Therefore, although Mendoza's book was published under the patronage of the Pope, which gave it great authority, in the end, it was Christian readers who chose to accept and remember this new image of China, rather than being forced to do so. This study argues for the development of poetic self-consciousness: Mendoza's idealized image of China served as an affective medium to achieve the Spanish author's purpose. In other words, the texts aimed to create an image of a prosperous, rich, civilized, and gentle China for Christian readers. This image was intended to induce the readers' desire to travel to the pagan land and to redeem it, thus generating an emotional identity. In fact, these kinds of descriptions and travel reports were used as the primary propaganda tool to attract missionaries at this time. For example, Trigault used the diaries of Mateo Ricci, the founder of the Jesuit mission in China, as recruitment tools during his travels in Europe (Clossey 2008, p. 115). Although Ricci's book was published in 1615 and Mendoza's book was published in 1585, both of them argue that the Chinese traditional culture was compatible with Christianity and they were all in favor of missionary works in China. Finally, the texts achieved their evangelical purpose by relying on this emotional medium, allowing readers to consciously accept this new image of China.

Of course, Mendoza's idealized imagination, as an affective medium to achieve his soteriological purpose, was also rooted in the cultural traditions shared by Europe at the time. This tradition can be traced back to the Bible, which describes the Garden of Eden in the East. This is widely believed to have been located in Mesopotamia, the site of the ancient Babylonian kingdom (Barton 1921, p. 92). Over time, the biblical story of the Garden of Eden has undergone many variations. Countless explorers traveled to the East in search of the legendary Garden of Eden, and the Orient gradually became an idealized place for Christians. Of course, the East, the Orient, or the West are not natural phenomenon, but concepts created by humans and therefore are subject to historical change. Moreover, early missionary travel accounts, such as *William of Rubruck's Journey to the Eastern Parts of the World* (Dawson 1980, pp. 89–223), published in the 13th century, 300 years before Mendoza's book, also portrayed the Orient as a rich and prosperous place. The Mongol Empire was considered by the Europeans to be oriental land at that time, as the concept of the East and Orient was in a state of evolution. The changing concept of the Orient or the East has not, however, diminished the tradition of European admiration for it, which has remained an ideal image throughout the European cultural tradition.

In terms of sociohistorical context, the rich and prosperous China portrayed in late medieval travelogues reflected the needs of Europeans at a time when Europe was suffering from famine, war, and the threat of death. Moreover, from an ethnographic perspective, as Phillips (2014) states, "the relationship between 'self' and 'other' was a complex and open-ended negotiation in the Middle Ages" (Phillips 2014, pp. 59, 81). This suggests a greater

cultural tolerance towards distant and non-Christian regions such as China. Furthermore, in addition to cultural tolerance, as Khanmohamadi analyses in *In light of another's word*, there is also openness, reflected in 'William Rubruck's willingness to see as others see at the court of Baatu, and the intersubjectivity of his description of his interview at that court' (Khanmohamadi 2014, p. 59). It is therefore evidence of a willingness and openness in the late Middle Ages to externalize their own subjectivity to observe the Eastern "other".

In addition, Mendoza's idealized imagination of China is not pure fiction but, rather, a poetic representation of the history that the author lived through. In the late 16th century, the Ming dynasty was known as the Kingdom of Silver, which was the model for Mendoza's writing. According to Quan Hansheng, a scholar of Chinese economic history, at least half of the American silver was sent to China (Quan 1972, p. 445). Another scholar, Gunder Frank, also analyzed China's silver circulation figures based on the Ming dynasty's international transactions and concluded that China acquired between one quarter and one third of the world's silver, which was used as capital in the form of money (Gunder Frank 1998, p. 125). These data reveal the advantageous and even central position of the Ming dynasty in the early period of capital globalization at the end of the 16th century. Therefore, the idealized portrayal of China is not only interpreted through discourse mechanisms, as most scholars argue on the basis of Michel Foucault's power and discourse theory, but also represents a poetic reflection of the world economic and trade order, as well as Sino-Western relations in the 16th century.

Furthermore, the creation of collective memory also requires physical media. In this respect, the development of books and printing technology in the sixteenth century facilitated the spread of Mendoza's writing on China in Europe. This provided Christian readers with a medium through which to read and identify with his portrayal of China. In addition, communication between Europe and China was very limited at the time, so only a handful of Europeans were able to visit China. Mendoza's book therefore provided a unique opportunity for Europeans to gain an insight into China.

Finally, although Mendoza never visited China, his soteriological and idealized imagination of China satisfied the spiritual demands of Christian readers in the 16th century and was in line with the European dominant ideology of the time. This contributed to the formation of a new collective memory of China in 16th-century Europe, replacing the image of China profiled by earlier missionaries, whose writings on China primarily focused on the prosperity and wealth of the material society and ignored the spiritual world of the Chinese people. However, spiritual salvation was an important feature of early modern Europe.

5. Conclusions

Juan González de Mendoza's book, the *History of the Great and Mighty Kingdom of China*, has only been partly understood for many years. Scholars have argued that Mendoza created an image of China characterized by power and prosperity. However, this argument is based on Mendoza's utopian vision of China and ignores its evangelical aspects. Therefore, the first question addressed in this study was the redefinition of Mendoza's portrayal of China. The study concludes that Mendoza portrayed a rich, powerful, and prosperous Chinese empire, characterized people by misguided beliefs and compatibility with Christianity, rather than a purely idealized image of China. Although some scholars have noted the soteriological purpose of Mendoza's rewriting, they have not yet explained how he used earlier accounts of China to achieve his evangelistic goal or how he combined this goal with an idealized image of China. Furthermore, how was Mendoza's writing about China shaped by his prior knowledge and personal experiences, as well as by the macro and micro environments of the time in which he lived? Finally, how was this new image of China adopted by the European public and incorporated into the collective memory of 16th-century Europe? These unanswered questions were also the focus of this study.

In fact, the idealized imagination of China was already present in earlier European writings. Mendoza expanded these ideas and created a link between the Christian and

Chinese cultures to persuade Christian readers that China was a pagan land to be evangelized and that it was feasible to spread the Gospel there. Firstly, the Spanish author's experiences and social background played an important role in influencing his writing position. During his youth, he converted to Christianity in Mexico and completed theology courses before joining the Augustinian order. His time in Mexico provided him with valuable knowledge of China, which led to his appointment as Spain's ambassador to China. During his visit, one of the objectives was to request permission to preach in China. This occurred during a period of the eastward expansion of missionary work, when Catholicism was both global and evangelistic. Additionally, this evangelistic purpose was in line with Spain's policy towards China at the time, which sought a peaceful alternative to military conquest, supported, among others, by the Spanish authorities in the Philippines. Furthermore, Mendoza's book confidently asserts Spain's right to evangelize China as a response to the Portuguese monopoly on missionary work in the Asian country, emphasizing the importance of Spain's role in spreading the Gospel.

Given the socialization of Mendoza's image of China from the perspective of collective memory, firstly, the patronage of the Pope gave Mendoza's book great authority. However, the generation of collective memory is a self-conscious and poetic process. The Christian readers chose to accept it, rather than being forced to do so. In comparison to earlier European accounts of China, Mendoza's reconstruction has a notable evangelical core. This core represents the global and evangelical features of 16th-century Europe, satisfying the spiritual needs of the time. Meanwhile, Mendoza achieves his spiritual purpose through an affective medium, materializing as the idealized image of China. This kind of utopian profiles evoked empathy and inspired his Christian readers to travel to China for evangelical purposes. As previously explained, travel accounts of China were usually used as propaganda tools to recruit missionaries in Mendoza's time. Thereby, the affective medium constitutes a way to explain the reason why Mendoza chosen to achieve his evangelical purpose by praising, rather than criticizing, China. Moreover, in the 16th century, the limited transportation between China and Europe made Mendoza's Chinese writings more credible. Finally, the generation of collective memory also requires a physical medium, and the development of printing during this period increased the popularity of Mendoza's books (Lamal et al. 2021, p.11).

Funding: This research was funded by the National Philosophy and Social Science Foundation of China 中国国家社科基金一般项目, and the grant number is [19BWW012].

Data Availability Statement: No new data were created or analyzed in this study. Data sharing is not applicable to this article.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflicts of interest.

Notes

- ¹ The quote originates from the History of the Great and Mighty Kingdom of China and the Situation Thereof, edited by Sir George T. Staunton and published in 1853 in London. It was edited based on the first English translation of Mendoza's Spanish writing, published in London in 1588, translated by Robert Parke. The first English version was translated from the Spanish edition published in Madrid in 1586, the final revision accepted by Mendoza (Gao 2020, pp. 146–50). The English quoted here is 16th century English, so its spelling differs from that of modern English.
- ² This is the present author's translation from Mendoza's Spanish edition, published in Madrid in 1586.
- ³ In this article, the translations without sources cited were produced by the present author. The original Spanish texts are as follows: Puédese con dos o tres mill hombres tomar la prouincia que más contentare, y tener puertos y armada superior por la mar, y esto será muy fácil, y en siendo señores de vna prouincia es hecha toda la conquista.
- ⁴ The original Spanish texts are as follows: En quanto a conquistar la China que os parece se debería hacer desde luego, acá a parecido que por aora no conviene se trate dello, sino que se procure con los chinos buena amistad; y que no os agais, ni acompañeis con los corsarios enemigos de los dichos chinos, ny deis ocasion, para que tengan justa causa de indignación con los nuestros.
- ⁵ This is the present author's translation from Mendoza's Spanish edition, published in Madrid in 1586.

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