

The Ming Dynasty's Social System through the Lens of 16th-Century European Missionaries: A Historical and Ethnographic Approach

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Abstract: This paper focuses on Mendoza's book *History of the Great and Mighty Kingdom of China*, a seminal work of the sixteenth century. Through a detailed analysis of Mendoza's writing, the study reveals his reconstruction of several key social systems of the Ming dynasty, including the supervisory system, the judicial system, the social welfare system, and the imperial examination system. The paper also examines how Mendoza used Gaspar da Cruz's reports to reconstruct China's social systems. The underlying intentions of Mendoza's rewriting are also explored, as well as the factors that contributed to the construction of these systems from the perspective of the Other. The ultimate aim is to reveal the process and characteristics of European perceptions of Chinese social system within the intercultural context of the period. This approach provides a more comprehensive understanding of the cultural exchanges and cognitive formations between East and West during the sixteenth century.

1. Introduction

The 16th century ushered in a new era marked by the Age of Exploration, which facilitated significant cultural exchange between East and West. European missionaries, acting as cultural ambassadors, left numerous records about China, with Juan Gonz ález de Mendoza's book *History of the Great and Mighty Kingdom of China* receiving particular attention in Europe and serving as a central source for 16th-century Europeans seeking to understand China.^[1] Juan Gonz ález de Mendoza, a member of the Augustinian Order in Spain, presented a comprehensive and detailed account of China, covering both material and spiritual aspects. This depiction represented a significant departure from the prevailing European focus on artefacts. In particular, Mendoza's work provides a thorough and detailed description of the social system of the Ming dynasty, including aspects such as the imperial examination system, the social relief system and the supervision system.

The article has three aims. Firstly, through a close textual analysis of Mendoza's work, it aims to redefine the Chinese social system he constructed. Secondly, given that Mendoza never visited China and that his writings were compiled from the reports of his predecessors, this paper attempts to examine how he rewrote the previous literature. Finally, it analyses the causes of the Ming dynasty's social system as constructed by Mendoza from the perspective of the Other. It is worth noting that

many scholars have noticed the social system of the Ming dynasty described by Mendoza. However, they have largely overlooked how Mendoza used the historical materials of his predecessors to construct this image of China, the nature of his rewriting approach, and the underlying factors that influenced his methodology. This paper aims to fill this gap in existing studies.

2. Juan González de Mendoza and his writing on China

Juan González de Mendoza (1545–1618) was a distinguished Spanish Augustinian friar, and his life and work perfectly embodied the intellectual and religious enthusiasm of the late Renaissance. Born in 1545, Mendoza was profoundly influenced by the global aspirations of the Spanish Empire as well as the missionary passion of the Catholic Church. Although he had never set foot in China personally, his painstaking research and compilation of the accounts provided by missionaries and travellers enabled him to emerge as a crucial chronicler of China in the 16th century. His masterpiece, *The Great and Mighty Kingdom of China*, which was published in 1585 in Rome, swiftly turned into a foundational work that played a significant role in moulding European perceptions of China.

Mendoza's work provides a comprehensive portrayal of China during the late Ming Dynasty, divided into two parts, each comprising three volumes. The first part offers a detailed overview of China's national conditions, addressing physical geography in volume 1, Chinese beliefs and supernatural phenomena in volume 2, and Chinese morality and politics in volume 3. The second part, which is also comprised of three volumes, provides a detailed account of the observations of the Spanish missionaries in China from 1577 to 1581 and their observations of the Chinese in the Philippines. The book details the political structure of the Ming Dynasty, highlighting its sophisticated bureaucratic system and the emperor's important role in governance. Additionally, Mendoza provides a detailed description of China's economic prosperity, particularly in agriculture, manufacturing and trade, which he contrasts with the contemporary European economy.

The significance of Mendoza's work lies in its role as a foundational connection between European and Chinese cultures. Being one of the earliest elaborate descriptions of China composed in a European language, it exerted a profound impact on European comprehension of Chinese civilisation. Mendoza's portrayal of China as a prosperous and highly structured empire aroused admiration and curiosity among European scholars and policymakers alike.

From an academic perspective, *The Great and Mighty Kingdom of China* is of significant value. It provides a unique perspective on the Ming dynasty as perceived by a 16th-century European observer. Mendoza's work is regarded as a valuable source of information concerning the social, political and economic systems of the Ming dynasty, and the insights it presents have been corroborated by subsequent historical research. Mendoza's detailed portrayals of Chinese institutions, including the civil service examination system and the administrative hierarchy, have exerted a profound influence on contemporary understandings of Ming governance.

Moreover, Mendoza's work exhibits a dual nature, functioning as both an archival document and a medium for evangelization. Mendoza's objective was to portray China as a society amenable to Christian conversion, whilst simultaneously acknowledging its sophisticated civilisation^[2].

3. Mendoza's Idealised Depiction of the Official Selection System in the Ming Dynasty

Mendoza's analysis of the official selection mechanism of the Ming Dynasty is of particular interest. For instance, in the chapter fourteen of volume three of the first part of his book, Mendoza highlighted that the imperial examination system functioned as a social institution for the selection of officials from the commoner class. It is evident that all cabinet ministers, governors, and provincial

governors obtained the title of "lord" through the imperial examination, while most of the grand generals, city magistrates, local judges, and treasurers were bestowed by the emperor. A close reading of Mendoza's original text is warranted to fully comprehend the nuances of this social institution:

Although al be called Loytias, I meane those that come to it by letters or learning, and others by the warres, and others by a gift of the king, yet they differ the one from the other in estimation. For that those of the royall counsell, viceroyes, gouernors, and visitors, are made Loytias by disputation in learning; and the generall captaines, maiors, bailifes, and testators, are a gift of the kinges in recompence of some good service that they have done^[3]. ^①

Mendoza's perspective on the social structure of the Ming dynasty reveals the existence of avenues for upward mobility within the social strata. The primary mechanisms for individuals of the civilian class to access the bureaucratic echelon were participation in the imperial examinations and the acquisition of imperial favour.

Furthermore, Mendoza also noted that although those who acquired titles via these two routes both enjoyed the honour associated with nobility, those who obtained titles through imperial favours did not command the same level of prestige as those who earned the title of lord by taking part in the imperial examinations^[3]. It is noteworthy that Mendoza's emphasis on and endorsement of this formal selection system, to a certain extent, reflected the modernity inherent in his ideological perspective. This value, which advocated for the notion of attaining social advancement through individual effort, stood in direct opposition to the concept of noble inheritance that had dominated during the Middle Ages. As Mendoza himself acknowledged:

They (the Chinese) have amongst them some good thinges, and woorthie to be imitated and folowed, of the which I will here set downe two, which are thinges of great purpose to my judgement. The one is, that vnto none they do give the office to gouerne, by no manner of wayes nor meanes, although they be suborned by friendship, but onely by his owne merites and suffcient abilitie. The seconde, that none can be viceroy, gouernours, nor judge of a prouince or citie, in the which hee is naturall borne, the which they say is done to take away the occasion of dooing any injustice, beeing carried away or led by parentes or friendshippe^[4].

Furthermore, the present author has also observed that the missionaries prior to Mendoza did not focus specifically on China's systems. Among those who did demonstrate some interest in them, none expressed as much affirmation for the social systems of a different culture as Mendoza did. This is particularly noteworthy when viewed within the historical context of 16th-century Europe, where Christianity held a dominant position, suggesting that adopting such a tolerant stance towards a foreign culture was no easy feat.

The reports on China by the Portuguese missionary Gaspar da Cruz constituted a significant source of reference for Mendoza when he composed his book *History of the Great and Mighty Kingdom of China*. However, a close reading of Cruz's writings reveals a striking absence of expressions of admiration or praise for the official selection system of the Ming dynasty. While Mendoza sought to portray the late Ming dynasty in an idealised light, eschewing depictions of its corrupt aspects, Cruz did not deliberately downplay the declining aspects of that period. Cruz's observations on the subject are noteworthy: "The offices are distributed by the King with the counsel of the eunuchs"^[5]. Furthermore, Cruz also noted that the eunuchs, as the recipients of these offices, were frequently offered substantial bribes by the Louthias to secure their advancement^[5]. However, Mendoza's discussion in the chapter fourteen of volume three of the first part of his book makes no mention of eunuchs' interference in court affairs, their manipulation of official appointments, or the prevalent bribery of eunuchs by officials. This further illustrates Mendoza's idealised reconstruction of the

^① The text quotes 19th century English. The spelling is different from modern English.

image of China profiled by his predecessors.

4. Mendoza's Idealised Representation of the Chinese Legal System

Mendoza also appreciated the judicial fairness of the Ming dynasty. For example, the part I, volume III, chapter XII of his book *the History of the Great Mighty Kingdom of China*, records that the Ming court exercised extreme caution when reviewing executions. Judges endeavoured to identify legal justifications for exonerating condemned prisoners until the final moment before execution, and only proceeded with the execution if exoneration was unfeasible^[3]. However, Cruz's account of the Chinese legal system was different. For example, the chapter 20 of his narrative contains the following passage:

It chanceth sometimes that some Louthias for a great bribe, or for great friendship, let some prisoner loose and put another in his place, for there never wanteth one naughty pack that will put himself in danger of stripes or death for interest, or they bring him in by deceit, deceiving him with words, and making the matter light unto him, and giving him some interest, they name him as the prisoner they will let loose, that the faults and punishments of the guilty may fall upon the innocent. And when sometimes in this sort they cannot let the guilty person loose, they labour to bribe all the officers to give him for dead among those that die in the prisons^[5].

As demonstrated in the aforementioned literature, while both Mendoza and Cruz were interested in the Ming dynasty's judicial system, their stances on Chinese culture in writing were strikingly divergent. Cruz's work unreservedly exposed the glaring deficiencies in the Ming dynasty's judicial system, including the corruption and malpractice caused by the emperor's overreliance on eunuchs. In contrast, Mendoza's focus does not centre on such historical materials. Instead, Mendoza affirms the integrity of the Ming dynasty's judicial system and the fairness of its officials, and even presents the Ming Empire as a model for Europe to emulate. While Mendoza was undoubtedly aware of the corruption within the Ming dynasty's judicial system, he discreetly reframed the corruption that Cruz described as the norm as an isolated case, thereby downplaying the aspect of the Ming dynasty's political decline.

5. Mendoza's idealized Writings on China's Humanized Welfare System

Mendoza's analysis also encompassed the welfare system implemented by the government for the economically disadvantaged. For this purpose, in the chapter 20 of volume III of part one of his book, Mendoza described the difficult situation of women at the bottom of the social ladder. As he stated, most prostitutes were women from the lower classes, slave girls or those who had been trafficked by their own mothers since childhood. These girls were condemned to a life of slavery and suffer cruel treatment at the hands of their masters. Unfortunately, such behaviour was tolerated by the public. Poor widows were even allowed to sell their children to live as slaves. There were many merchant houses involved in human trafficking. They would purchase girls, raise them with great care, teach them skills such as silk work, playing musical instruments, dancing and other tempting skills. When these girls reached adulthood, they were sold to brothels where they were forced to live a life of servitude as prostitutes^[3].

The preceding text appears to disclose the unfortunate lives of the women in such establishments. However, this is not the primary focus of Mendoza's account as the reader progresses through the text. Furthermore, Mendoza's account reveals that the emperor dispatched special officials to oversee their income, thus ensuring their subsistence in their senior years. By employing this narrative structure,

Mendoza effectively downplays the plight of lower-class women, thereby emphasising the superiority of the social welfare system in the Ming dynasty. As Mendoza himself stated:

Whatsoever profite dooth remaine unto these women when they have payed their maister, they give unto the judge their superiour, who doth keepe it faithfully and carefully, and giveth a good account thereof everie yeare unto the visitors. And afterwarde when these women waxe olde, it is repaid unto them againe by order of the said judge. But it is bestowed in such sort, that they shall not lacke, neither have urgent necessitie. But if it so fall out that they should lacke, they will give them a stipend to maintaine them, onely for to dresse and trimme the blinde women, or else they will put them into the kinges hospitall, a place ordeyned for such as cannot helpe themselves^[3].

In summary, Mendoza detailed a financial and welfare system for certain women, including those in specific occupations such as prostitution in the Ming welfare system. In this system, their remaining earnings were managed and provisions were made to support them in old age to meet their basic living needs.

Furthermore, Mendoza also documented the circumstances of orphans in chapter 20 of the third volume, within the first part of his book. The forfeiture of parental custody due to the challenges associated with subsisting is an inherently calamitous occurrence. Nevertheless, Mendoza once again embellished the wretched lives of the underprivileged through cultural accommodation. Specifically, Mendoza noted that the boys who were sold to the households of masters could not only acquire a handicraft skill but also that, upon reaching adulthood, the masters were obliged to purchase houses for them, assist them in getting married, help them establish their own families, and find employment. Moreover, if the masters failed to fulfil these obligations, the apprentices were even entitled to lodge a complaint in a court of law^[3]. As demonstrated in the aforementioned texts, from the perspective of the Other, the Ming Dynasty seemingly exhibited a commitment to the welfare of children, which could be characterised as humanistic. It is important to note that this commitment was not merely a personal philanthropic endeavour, but rather had evolved into a societal institution.

Furthermore, Mendoza's detailed exposition encompasses the specific procedures of welfare assistance. This social welfare system was not present in European society at that time. In 16th-century Europe, the practice of charity was predominantly undertaken by private individuals or the Church and had not yet evolved into a social institution. As he stated by Mendoza, in the Ming Empire, it was not just poor children who received welfare; vulnerable adults could also benefit from the system. A case in point is the Royal Hospital, which was specifically established to care for the homeless^[3]. According to Mendoza, this state-run welfare institution functioned as a refuge for the homeless. Moreover, individuals admitted to the Royal Hospital were provided with all necessities and the opportunity to earn a living by raising livestock. The institution was subject to regular inspection by imperial envoys, and any negligence in the execution of duties was met with severe consequences^[3].

It is imperative to emphasise that Mendoza's seminal works on China were fundamentally derived from a systematic synthesis of earlier missionary accounts. In order to achieve a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of this subject matter, a thorough comparative analysis with the China reports of Gaspar da Cruz is indispensable. Gaspar da Cruz was a pioneering Portuguese missionary whose works constituted Mendoza's primary source material. This methodological approach enhances our comprehension of Mendoza's interpretative framework and provides valuable insights into the evolution of Western perceptions of China during this pivotal historical period.

For instance, the chapter 15 of Cruz's seminal work, originally published in Portuguese under the title *Tractado em que se contam muito por estenso as cousas da China, com suas particularidades, e assim do reino de Ormuz*, published in Evora, Portugal in 1569, provides a detailed account of

Chinese society. The English translation of the title is, *Treatise in which the things of China are related at great length, with their particularities, as likewise of the kingdom of Ormuz, underscores its significance as a comprehensive early European study of China*. This work is commonly referred to in abbreviated form as the *Treatise of Fr. Gaspar da Cruz*. In this chapter, Cruz offered a poignant depiction of the plight of lower-class women in China, emphasising their extreme subjugation. He stated that: "In this country of China, there is no greater servitude than that of these wenches. And let no man say or affirm any other thing, for about the examining of it I laboured somewhat in Cantam, because some Portugals would affirm it otherwise"^[5]. This observation not only highlights Cruz's first-hand engagement with the subject but also reflects his efforts to counter prevailing misconceptions among his contemporaries.

Furthermore, Cruz provided a detailed description of the unfortunate life experienced by women belonging to the lower class. He vividly described their plight in the following terms:

The common women are in no wise permitted to dwell within the walls. And in the suburbs without they have their proper streets where they dwell, out of which they may not live,—something which goes against the grain with us. All the common women are slaves, being brought up for this purpose from their childhood; they buy them of their mothers, and teach them to play the viols and other instruments of music and to sing. And those that can best do this, because they gain most, are worth more. Those which cannot do that, are worth less. The masters either deflower them or sell them. And when they are to be set in the street of the common women, they are written by an officer of the King in a book, and the master is bound to come every year with a certain fee to this officer; they are bound to answer their master with so much every month. When they are old, they make them seem young girls with painting and rouge. And after they are not for that trade, they are altogether free, without any obligation to the master or anybody, and then they feed upon that which they have gotten^[5].

A comparative analysis of these texts reveals strikingly divergent portrayals of Chinese women in the late Ming period. Cruz's account presents a stark depiction of female enslavement, emphasising the harsh realities faced by lower-class women. Conversely, Mendoza's narrative portrays underclass women as deriving contentment from the security provided by the Ming Empire's social welfare system. This fundamental difference in perspective is particularly evident in Cruz's unflinching and direct approach to describing the plight of Chinese women, which notably lacks any reference to or acknowledgment of the social welfare mechanisms that feature prominently in Mendoza's account. This omission may be indicative of a deliberate focus on individual suffering or a potential lacuna in Cruz's understanding of Ming social structures.

Mendoza's construction of an idealised Chinese society through cultural rewriting reflects a distinct Other's perspective; however, this representation was not completely fabricated, but rather rooted in specific historical realities of late Ming China. A case in point is Mendoza's detailed account of the Royal Hospital system, which indeed corresponds to the institutional prototype of 'foster homes' (yangji yuan) established under the reign of Zhu Yuanzhang, the first Emperor and founder of the Ming dynasty^[6]. However, Mendoza's depiction is more than mere historical documentation; it presents a vision of the Ming welfare system that is both idealised and significantly more expansive in scope, efficiency, and moral superiority than the reality. This tendency towards idealisation is indicative not only of the European fascination with Chinese governance during the early modern period, but also serves as a rhetorical device for critiquing contemporary European social structures through the lens of an imagined Oriental utopia.

6. Through the Missionary Lens: Varied Perceptions of China's Social System in the 16th Century

A comparative analysis of Mendoza's and Cruz's accounts of Ming China's social institutions reveals significant divergences in their narrative approaches. Mendoza's work is characterised by a deliberate process of idealisation, whereby unfavourable portrayals are systematically excised, while the perceived superiority of Chinese social structures is emphasised. This sanitised portrayal is in marked contrast to the more balanced and multifaceted account presented by Cruz, which, although it served as one of Mendoza's primary sources, maintained greater objectivity in its treatment of Chinese society.

The missionary imperative fundamentally shaped both accounts. As Catholic missionaries committed to converting pagans, both authors' writings were inherently tied to their evangelical aims. However, their differing historical contexts profoundly influenced their narrative strategies. During Cruz's era in the early 16th century, Portugal's relatively liberal policy towards foreign missionaries in Asia, despite holding the “Padroado” rights, facilitated a more open and exploratory approach. Cruz's account reflects this context through its balanced assessment of both opportunities and challenges for missionary work in China^[5]. “Padroado” is a Portuguese term with deep historical and religious connotations. Broadly speaking, it refers to the system of patronage established by the Portuguese Crown during the expansion of the Portuguese Empire, particularly in relation to the activities of the Catholic Church in the overseas territories.

Under the “Padroado” system, the Portuguese king had specific rights and duties. The monarch had the power to appoint bishops and other ecclesiastical leaders in the colonies. This measure was designed to speed up the spread of Catholicism and to maintain both religious and political control over the newly acquired lands. In return, the Portuguese Crown was obliged to fund the construction and maintenance of churches and religious institutions in the colonies and to ensure the smooth running of religious services.

By the time Mendoza composed his treatise on China, the geopolitical landscape had already undergone significant alterations. In 1576, the Spanish colonial authorities in the Philippines proposed an armed invasion of China^[7], which resulted in a marked shift in Portugal's stance towards Asia. This direct threat to Portugal's interests in the region led to a shift in attitude towards missionary affairs, which became more defensive and conservative. Mendoza's writings were produced during the intense period of rivalry between Portugal and Spain for Asian patronage, and they clearly reflect this altered context^[8]. Through this approach, he aimed to present China as an ideal missionary field, while systematically excluding any content that might undermine this portrayal or cast a negative light on Chinese society. This ideological standpoint, in turn, posed a significant challenge to Portugal's claim to maintain the Padroado in China.

The present analysis emphasises the necessity of examining Mendoza and Cruz's contrasting narratives within the broader geopolitical and ecclesiastical context of Portuguese and Spanish interactions in Asia. Consequently, their distinct accounts are valuable historical documents. They are useful not only for gaining an understanding of how Europeans perceived Ming China during that period but also for shedding light on the intricate interplay that existed between missionary activities and imperial rivalries in early modern Asia. The shift from Cruz's relatively balanced account to Mendoza's idealised portrayal reflects the evolving dynamics of European power politics in the region, specifically the intensifying competition between Portugal and Spain for Asian missionary fields and trading privileges.

7. Conclusion

This study focuses on the accounts of China in the Ming dynasty's social systems as recorded by 16th-century European missionaries, with a particular emphasis on Juan González de Mendoza's *History of the Great and Mighty Kingdom of China*. By means of a comparative analysis with Gaspar da Cruz's records, one of Mendoza's primary sources, this research has investigated the formation and characteristics of European perceptions of Chinese society within a cross-cultural framework.

Mendoza exhibited a discernible inclination towards idealisation in his portrayal of various social systems of the Ming dynasty, including the supervisory system, the judicial system, the social welfare system and the imperial examination system. With regard to the official selection system, Mendoza emphasised the channels of upward mobility created for the commoner class. In the context of the judicial system, Mendoza deliberately downplayed negative phenomena. In the domain of social welfare, Mendoza employed specific narrative techniques to minimise the challenges faced by underprivileged groups, while accentuating the superiority of the system. By contrast, Cruz's accounts adopted an objective and balanced stance, presenting the existing problems in the operation of the social systems of the Ming dynasty. This approach constituted a sharp contrast in narrative strategies and content focus.

A thorough examination of the underlying causes reveals that while the missionary imperative was the internal driving force for both writers, the differences in their historical contexts profoundly influenced their narrative orientations. During Cruz's time in the early sixteenth century, Portugal's relatively liberal policy towards Asian missionary work enabled him to record what he saw and heard in China with an open and objective attitude. By the time Mendoza composed his work on China, however, the geopolitical landscape had undergone significant shifts due to the fierce competition between Portugal and Spain for missionary territories and trading privileges in Asia. In this context, Mendoza adopted the framework of "sacred orientalism" to present China as an ideal missionary field^[8], and thus made selections and omissions of relevant content, which to some extent affected the objectivity of his accounts.

While previous research has focused primarily on the content of Mendoza's descriptions of Chinese systems, this article takes a different approach by examining his process of textual reconstruction and its underlying influences. Through the lens of the construction of 'otherness', it addresses critical gaps in existing studies and offers new insights into the formation of European perceptions of Chinese society. Moreover, by employing rigorous comparative analysis within specific historical contexts, this paper reveals the intricate connections between individual narrative variations and broader shifts in European power politics, missionary endeavours, and imperial competition.

In conclusion, Mendoza's and Cruz's accounts constitute invaluable historical sources that contribute significantly to our understanding of sixteenth-century European perspectives on the Ming dynasty. These documents not only facilitate the reconstruction of the image of China through European lenses, but also provide critical insights into key historical phenomena, including early modern Asian missionary endeavours and imperial rivalries. Moreover, they underscore the importance of considering multiple contextual factors and accurately situating historical developments within their proper frameworks, thus providing important methodological guidance for future research in the history of intercultural exchange.

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