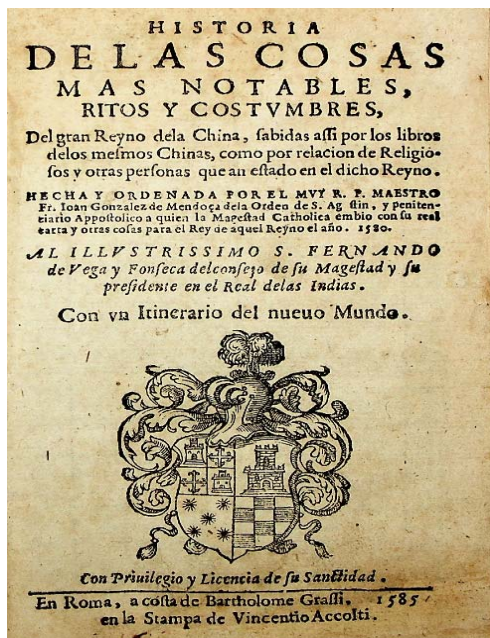


Juan González de Mendoza

Historia de las Cosas mas Notables, Ritos y Costumbres, del Gran Reyno dela China

sabidas assi por los libros delos mesmos Chinas, como por relacion de Religiosos y otras personas que en estado en el dicho Reyno



Author: Juan González de Mendoza, 1545-1618

Title: *Historia de las Cosas mas Notables, Ritos y Costumbres, del Gran Reyno dela China, sabidas assi por los libros delos mesmos Chinas, como por relacion de Religiosos y otras personas que en estado en el dicho Reyno*

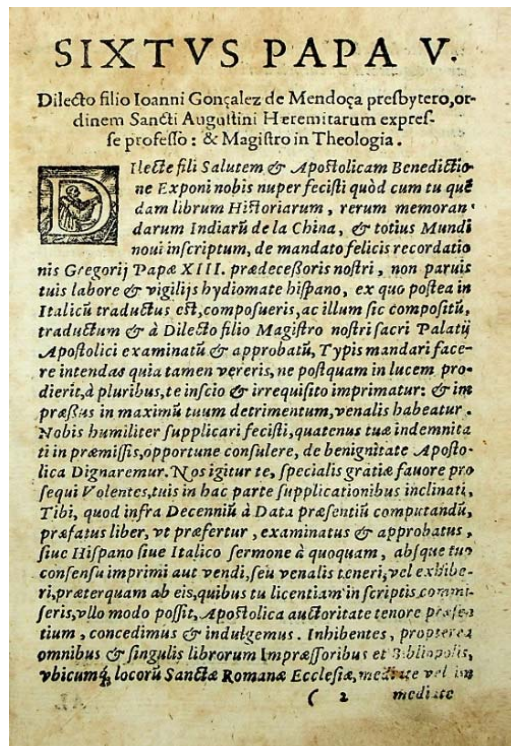
Place: Rome

Year: 1585

Language: Spanish

Juan González de Mendoza (1545-1618) was a Spanish prelate born in Torrecilla en Cameros. When he was a mere 17 years old, he went to Mexico with a relative, where he came into contact with the Augustinians, and in a short time was already wearing the religious habit. This was when Mendoza began to receive news coming from the Far East. The convent where he lived in Michoacán, was a passage for Spanish missionaries, travellers and explorers, many of whom were returning from Asia.

It was then around 1583 that Mendoza was commissioned by Pope Gregory XIII to compose “a history of all the things known about the kingdom of China.” This duty ordered by the highest figure of his time, represented a starting point for the success of his book *Historia de las cosas mas notables, ritos y costumbres del gran Reyno de la China* (Rome, 1585).



Until the beginning of the 16th century, all known information about China was scattered and filled with fanciful accounts. Everything changed by mid-16th century, with a significant increase of first hand reports reaching the European public. The letters sent by the prisoners Cristovão Vieira and Vasco Calvo from the Embassy of Tomé Pires from Canton, comprised the very first eyewitness accounts of China to reach Europe (ca. 1527). Then with the publication of the work *Historia do descobrimento & conquista da India pelos Portugueses* (History of the Discovery and Conquest of India by the Portuguese) by Fernão Lopes de Castanheda in 1551, which contains information collected through interviews with sailors and merchants from China, as well as the report of the Portuguese expedition to China led by Fernão Peres de Andrade in 1516-17. Later in 1563, the third volume of the *Decades* of João de Barros emerged, including information on China, and whose draft had already been drawn up before the mid-16th century.

The above book image shows a dedication from Pope Sixtus V in Latin

It was only in 1569 that a great work devoted exclusively to China arose, authored by the Dominican friar Gaspar da Cruz and entitled *Tratado das Coisas da China* (A treatise of China). Based on the author's own experiences, and on those of others, during his time in Asia and especially in Lampacau (a small island in the bay of Canton and a port for trade with the Chinese), where he went in late 1556, Gaspar da Cruz's book is the first complete and balanced account on China. According to Lach, this work did not achieve the impact it warranted for two major reasons: it was published in Portuguese (instead of another vernacular language more widely spoken at its time), and secondly it was published in the year of the plague.

The second book to appear in Sevilla in 1577 dedicated exclusively to China, was the Bernardino Escalante, *Discurso de la navegacion que los Portugueses hazen à los Reinos y Provincias del Oriente, y de la noticia q se tiene de las grandezas del Reino de la China* (Discourse of the navigation made by the Portuguese to the Kingdoms and Provinces of the Orient, and the existing knowledge of the greatness of the Kingdom of China). Unlike Gaspar da Cruz's book, which went somewhat unnoticed outside Portugal, Escalante's book, written in 100 folios only (200 pages in the modern counting system), was quickly translated into several European languages. Escalante, who never travelled to China, relied heavily on Gaspar da Cruz and João de Barros' previous works, and other sources resulting from interviews with Portuguese merchants who had travelled to China. However, the Escalante's work represents the first effort before Juan González de

Mendoza to synthesise all the sources of information known in his time, presented in the form of narrative. The first 5 chapters cover the history of the discoveries and explorations of the Portuguese, and the remaining chapters seek to make a systematic description of China in every aspect.

Mendoza synthesised and combined all the information contained in these works in a single volume, which he co-ordinated with other materials brought by the Spanish missionaries and administrators from the Philippines. His book represents the first major effort to bring to public all the known information made available in his time in one single volume.

Nevertheless, it is difficult to enumerate accurately all the information used by Mendoza since he does not reveal in detail how he accessed it, and to what extent he used it. He claims to have used the writings of Gaspar da Cruz as the main source for his description of religion and monastic life in China, the customs of Canton, and the Chinese justice, punishments, and prison system (certainly for being in China as a missionary and a trustworthy eyewitness). But it would require a close study of Gaspar da Cruz to see how he got his information, and consequently Mendoza through him.

Mendoza also used information gathered by Martín de Rada (1533-1578) during his embassy to Fukien in 1575, mainly in the political sphere, economic organization, and scholastic tradition. Rada was delegated to lead the first Spanish mission to China which was intended as a means to obtain missionary authorisation, and also to secure a port to which the Spanish merchants could carry out trade. However, Mendoza rejected the critical attitude and the military tone used by Rada, and by Francisco de Sande, governor of the Philippines (1576), especially in the notion that it was possible to conquer and convert China easily, to which Philip II King of Spain warned that any idea of conquest or alliance with the enemies of China should be put aside, and that on the contrary it was preferable to seek a good relationship, and so not to give China any reason of complaint against Spain.

Curiously, Mendoza never set foot in China, although he tried but failed to join the embassy of Philip II to China. In 1575, during a visit to Europe, a great opportunity presented itself to him to travel to the Philippines with the Augustinian friar Diego de Herrera, but for a reason unknown he remained behind, and in 1577 was still in Spain. A new opportunity arose for him to join Jerónimo Marín, a colleague of Martín de Rada who was visiting the court of Philip II, with a request to send more missionaries to the East and to deliver the report of the Spanish embassy to Fukien and the report of the Philippines governor Francisco de Sande. The King of Spain authorised the sending of more missionaries and appointed the Augustinian brothers Marín, Mendoza and Francisco de Ortega to lead a mission to China. Nevertheless, internal changes in Spanish politics led to the cancellation of the mission, while already in New Spain. It was then that Mendoza returned to Spain frustrated in his attempt to visit China and in 1583 he went to Rome, where he began to organise his book.

However, his work fostered the existing curiosity towards the East in Europe, whose climax materialised with the arrival of four Japanese ambassadors to the Vatican in 1582, and an increase in the importation of Chinese products to Spain. In this context one can say that Mendoza facilitated the understanding of China by compiling all the European information about China that

was available to a single book. It became the most influential book about China over the entire early modern period.

Gonzalez de Mendoza influenced the debate on the relations between Spain and China during the sixteenth century, given that he informed his readers about the greatness, political and military strength of China, and perhaps convinced them to adopt diplomacy and commercial exchanges instead of advocating the Spanish subjugation of China. Alonso Sánchez (1547-1593), a Spanish Jesuit missionary, following the theory of the time that there was a correlation between skin colour and the degree of civilisation, argued that having the Chinese light skin similar to the Europeans, it would not be difficult to Christianise them, and that they would be happy to give up on their despotic forms of government and accept the protection of the Spanish Crown. This encouraged him to draw up a wild plan to colonise China with solely a few ships and a few thousand men, just as the Spaniards had conquered Mexico and the Philippines earlier. Mendoza rejected the aggressive and highly critical attitude towards China of some of his contemporaries, such as some Spaniards in the Philippines, and authors like Martín de Rada, and instead adopted a tone of admiration, which can also be found in the works of João de Barros, Bernardino Escalante, and Gaspar da Cruz.

Mendoza got his “skin color theory” from Martín de Rada probably. He describes the diversity of people in different regions of China with different skin shades. The inhabitants of Canton were “brown like Berbers,” the inhabitants of the interior provinces, “whites,” in everything similar to the Spaniards, and the more northern ones were “yellow and red”, more similar to the Germans.

The Gonzalez Mendoza book represents the European effort to recognise the Chinese superiority, even within the margins of the dominant Eurocentrism of the sixteenth century. One could say that Gonzalez de Mendoza contributed to the decline of the *Eurocentrism*, an asymmetrical view that denies the existence of the greatness of other civilizations, and a tendency to interpret the non-European civilisations from a European perspective. The Europeans, in particular the Spaniards, could no longer think of the Chinese as *barbarians*, nor consider them as Europeans. They were neither one nor the other, but a multiplicity of people sharing the same country and the same civilization, under the same Emperor rule. Due to the continuous and complex relationship between China and Europe to this day, this renewal of the western gaze towards the *'others'* continues to be relevant and applicable in the 21st century.

By the end of the 16th century his book was already one of the bestsellers of its time, was reprinted more than forty times (eleven of which in Spanish, and nineteen in Italian), and translated into seven European vernacular languages. The first English translation appeared in 1588, translated by R. Parke out of Spanish, under the title “*The History of the Great and Mighty Kingdom of China and the Situation Thereof*”.

References:

Cruz, Gaspar. 1569. *Tractado em que se C[n]tam Muito por Exte[n]so as Cousas de China, com Suas Particularidades, & Assi do Reyno Dormuz dirigido ao muyto poderoso rey D. Sebastiam Nosso Senhor*. Évora: Andre de Burgos.

Foglia, Marc. 2019. "Michel de Montaigne." *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring). <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2019/entries/montaigne/>.

Gonzalez de Mendoza, Juan. 1585. *Historia dellas Cosas Mas Notables, Ritos y Costumbres, del Gran Reybo dela China, sabidas assi por los libros delos mesmos Chinas, como por Relacion de Religiosos y Otras personas que na estado an el dicho Reyno*. Roma: a costa de Barthome Grassi.

Lach, Donald F. 1994. "China. Jesuits writings." In *Asia in the Making of Europe*. Volume I: The Century of Discovery. Book 2. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. ProQuest Ebook Central.

Lach, Donald F. 1994. "China. Mendoza book and its sources." In *Asia in the Making of Europe*. Volume I: The Century of Discovery. Book 2. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. ProQuest Ebook Central.

Lach, Donald F. 1994. "China. The Mightie Kingdome." In *Asia in the Making of Europe*. Volume I: The Century of Discovery. Book 2. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. ProQuest Ebook Central.



Read the book online

<https://archive.org/details/historiadelascos00gonz/page/n7>