ADVANCE PUBLICATION

The Socioeconomic Image of China in the Early Modern Age and the Debate on the Decline of Castile

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1. Introduction

In the 1570s, the first travelers from the young Spanish Empire, which was then still in its heyday, began to visit—taking the Philippines as a base—the sophisticated and ancient Chinese Empire, the great power of the East, which at that time still remained "hidden" to Europeans despite the contacts established by the Portuguese since the beginning of the sixteenth century.

From such information, as Manel Ollé (2000) has shown, two different visions of China were built in parallel in Europe during the early modern age. The first, the so-called Iberian vision, was idealized. It took definitive shape in the work of a historian who had never been to Asia, Juan González de Mendoza. In 1585 he managed to forge the first general and coherent image of China by compiling, ordering, and systematizing—in an entertaining way—manuscript documents normally addressed to the Crown, whose purpose was to request support and show the possibility of carrying out important evangelizing or colonizing actions: scattered Portuguese

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testimonies (of diplomats, prisoners, and religious officials) and chronicles of short-stay Spanish travelers subject to extreme mobility restrictions (Augustinians, Franciscans, and soldiers). Despite the weakness of its foundations, this idealized Iberian vision found fertile ground in the European avidity for news about the remote and unknown China. Moreover, it ended up having a wide diffusion in the educated classes of Europe not only through the multiple translations and editions of the very successful book by González de Mendoza, but also thanks to the repeated subsequent reproduction of this image, either in popular novelized travel books or in historical texts, mostly written by members of various religious orders.

The second vision, which originated with the Jesuits from the 1580s onward, took a more realistic and critical view of Chinese society. It was based mainly on direct observations by eyewitnesses who spent long periods of time in the Celestial Empire, made an effort to learn the language and culture, and had access to Chinese documents. However, the more documented Jesuit vision initially had a much more restricted circulation, limited to letters and reports to the superiors of the Society of Jesus. It was only after the publication in Latin of Matteo Ricci's diaries in 1615, which would be widely reprinted and translated into various languages, that its definitive shape and diffusion took place. Later, other members of the Society of Jesus would also contribute to propagating this vision in their works.

The Iberian and Jesuit visions of China coexisted practically until the end of the seventeenth century, although the Jesuit perspective gained more and more weight. This article examines both visions based on primary sources and focusing exclusively on the socioeconomic aspects, which have not been specifically studied until now. The fundamental idea is that these two analyses of the possible causes of Chinese wealth, which—in its many aspects—impressed Europeans so much, are relevant for a better understanding of the seventeenth-century debate on the decline of Castile, the heart of the Spanish Empire.[1] On the one hand, the contrast between the increasingly battered Hispanic monarchy and the image of prosperity—more or less nuanced—conveyed by both visions of China showed more clearly the situation of socioeconomic decline of the Spanish Empire. In fact, from these visions could be implicitly derived

1. Castile played a central role in the Hispanic monarchy during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, esp. in relation to the overseas territories, both American and Asian. This does not mean overlooking the significant role of the Crown of Aragon, particularly its dominance over the Mediterranean still during the sixteenth century.

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various criticisms of the Spain of the last Habsburgs (the excessive taxes that undermined economic activity, the rigidly stratified society that hindered social ascent, the continuous squandering of resources in costly foreign wars, the widespread illiteracy among a large part of the population, etc.). On the other hand, it is paradoxical and surprising that the protagonists of the debate on Castilian decadence, the *arbitristas*, were not aware of these writings on China.

Indeed, while at the end of the sixteenth and the beginning of the seventeenth centuries different Spanish travelers and historians described the wealth of China, the great empire of the East, with astonishment and offered possible reasons for this, the *arbitristas* were looking at, above all, the other side of the coin, the causes of the economic backwardness of Castile, the heart of the other great empire in the West. In this task, the most outstanding authors among these protoeconomists—such as Martín González de Cellorigo and Francisco Martínez de Mata—made interesting reflections on the obstacles to economic growth, proposing possible solutions. In practical terms, they emphasized the importance of a large population and the development of productive sectors, and they discussed what form certain state policies, such as trade and support for the needy, should take.[2]

It seems, however, that the *arbitristas* were unaware of the writings by their contemporaries about China.[3] Thus, for example, the few pieces of news about the Celestial Empire that appear in the work of one of the leading *arbitristas*, Sancho de Moncada, were taken from the Italian Giovanni Botero.[4] Citing this, for example, Moncada ([1619] 1974: 99, 133, 143) said that in China, the expansion policy was considered "dangerous," that he was in favor of the population being forbidden from leaving the country, and that the heavy flow of Spanish silver abroad was directed, among other countries, to the Celestial Empire.

2. On these issues, see Perdices de Blas 1996.

3. This may be explained by the fact that the *arbitrismo* represented a current of thought associated with mercantilism, with an eminently practical orientation. For example, unlike the Scholastic doctors, the *arbitristas* mostly lacked university training and did not read each other. Their writings were generally short works on specific, topical, and polemical issues, which attempted to influence the government's economic policy.

4. Six editions of Juan Botero's *Diez libros de la razón de Estado* (*The Reason of State*) were published in Spain between 1593 and 1606; and another of his important works, *Descripción de todas las provincias y reinos del Mundo* (*Relations of the Most Famous Kingdoms and Common-weales thorough the World*), already had a Spanish edition in 1603. On Botero's influence in Spain, see Perdices de Blas 1996: 73–78.

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2. Two Different Views of China

In the Middle Ages, Marco Polo's famous story portrayed a fantastic, utopian image of the so-called Cathay as a land full of wonders. However, after the defeat of the Mongols in 1368, China was again "hidden" from Europeans, until the Portuguese renewed their contact with it at the beginning of the sixteenth century. However, the difficulties derived from the isolation imposed by the Ming dynasty in 1433, together with the Portuguese Crown's unwillingness to share its information on China, contained in letters from captives and in chronicles and reports, meant that for decades no news about this mysterious, distant, and advanced civilization reached Europe (Vilà 2009: xxi–xxx).

It was in the second half of the sixteenth century that an Iberian view of China took shape, marking the beginning of Western sinology and providing the first global and consistent image of the Celestial Empire (Ollé 2000: 16; Sola 2018a: 217): it described a huge, unified kingdom, characterized by prosperity and general abundance and by a sophisticated and orderly society, based on good governance and exemplary justice.[5] This idealized view fascinated Europeans, who at that time were experiencing continuous dynastic and religious wars on that divided continent. This view would last for a large part of the seventeenth century. However, paradoxically, it was largely indirect, as it was formed above all from the works of two Spanish authors who had never actually been there: the clergyman and cosmographer Bernardino de Escalante and, especially, the Augustinian Juan González de Mendoza. Their works, published in 1577 and 1585, respectively, are the most representative of this tradition, as they collected and summarized, among others, the piecemeal testimonies of previous Portuguese authors who had come into direct contact with China or had access to privileged information, and they later translated the testimonies into a language with greater influence in Europe at that time (Vilà 2009: lxv; Sola 2018b).[6]

5. This article does not explore the widespread dissemination of this perception of China but rather presents findings on its existence. That is, it details various editions and translations related to this view of China, but it does not delve into their forms of circulation and appropriation or their role in shaping an enduring common image of China in the early modern period—an inquiry for cultural history.

6. After establishing itself in the Philippines in 1565, Spain organized missions to China with a clear evangelizing intention, although the possibility of conquering it was also raised at first. See Ollé 2002 and Cervera 2013a.

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While *Discurso de la navegación a Oriente y noticia del reino de la China* (*Discourse on Navigation to the East and News of the Kingdom of China*) (1577), by Escalante, already offered a general overview of the country, *Historia de las cosas más notables, ritos y costumbres del reino de la China* (*The History of the Great and Mighty Kingdom of China and the Situation Thereof*) (1585), by González de Mendoza, was undoubtedly the most influential work. This was in the first place because of its wide circulation, with seven translations and fifty editions and reprints until 1625 (Vilà 2009: lxxiii; Sola 2018a: 255, 265–67).[7] And in the second place, it was influential because it provided an extensive summary (Sola 2018a: 200–207). González de Mendoza's sources included, for example, Portuguese authors such as Duarte Barbosa and, through Escalante, João Barros and Fray Gaspar da Cruz, who in turn had partly used the testimony of the captive Galeote Pereira. However, he also used Spanish authors, such as the Augustinian and astronomer Martín de Rada and the soldier Miguel de Loarca, who traveled through China for four months on an official mission in 1575; the Franciscans Agustín de Tordesillas and Pedro Alfaro, who, together with the soldier Francisco Dueñas, were there for six months in 1579 with no entry permit; and the Franciscan Martín Ignacio de Loyola, who visited China as part of a round-the-world trip between 1581 and 1584.[8]

The Iberian view would continue to be reproduced in later texts, for example, in the travel books, with elements of fantasy and adventure novels, written by Pedro Ordoñez de Ceballos and Fernão Mendes Pinto, which appeared in 1614.[9] It could also be seen in certain works of a historical nature and covering broad topics, not limited to China, by authors who either only briefly visited the Celestial Empire, such as the Franciscan Marcelo de Ribadeneira ([1601] 1947) and the Dominican Juan Diego Aduarte ([1640] 1963), or who never actually visited it, such as the Augustinian Jerónimo Román (1595), Amaro Centeno (1595), Antonio de

7. It was one of the most widely read books of the sixteenth century. Before 1600, editions were published in—among other cities—Rome, Madrid, Lisbon, London, Paris, Bologna, Venice, Frankfurt, Leipzig, Antwerp, and Alkmaar, with translations into English, French, German, Dutch, Italian, Portuguese, and Latin.

8. On the Augustinian expedition, see Sola 2017, and on the Franciscan one, see Folch 2019. On the Augustinians and Dominicans in China at the end of the sixteenth century, see Cervera 2013b. On Loarca, see Moncó 1998.

9. Mendes Pinto's book, originally written between 1569 and 1578, had a much wider circulation following its translation into Spanish by Herrera Maldonado in 1620.

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Herrera (Herrera y Tordesillas 1601), the Benedictine Antonio San Román (1603), Bartolomé Leonardo de Argensola ([1609] 1891), Francisco Herrera Maldonado (1620) and Bishop Juan de Palafox (Palafox y Mendoza 1670), who would become viceroy of New Spain. In any case, the influence of González de Mendoza can be seen in all these works, and even in the relatively late work by the Dominican Domingo Fernández Navarrete (1676), who paradoxically did have firsthand information since he had learned the language while living in China for six years during the new Qing dynasty, established in 1644 after the Manchu invasion.[10]

An alternative view, that of the Jesuits, was being forged in parallel to this Iberian view. It was more realistic and critical, based largely on the direct observations of some long-term residents who came to understand the customs and language and had access to Chinese documents. This view, which questioned or nuanced some important aspects of the Iberian paradigm, was set out mostly in letters, and its circulation was initially more limited. In fact, it did not begin to become truly public until the second decade of the seventeenth century, when Matteo Ricci's diaries were published.[11] Following in the footsteps of Michele Ruggieri, Ricci lived in China between 1582 and 1610, eventually settling in Beijing and having dealings with the imperial court. Another noteworthy Jesuit was, for example, the Portuguese man Álvaro Semedo, who spent twenty-two years in the country and published an extensive book in Spanish on the Celestial Empire in 1642.

The Spanish Jesuits include, first of all, some who visited China only briefly, such as Alonso Sánchez, who made two trips in 1582 and 1583.[12] However, there were also two long stays, each very different in nature.

10. Despite reprimanding those, such as the Jesuits, who wrote about China without knowing the language or having been in the country, Fernández Navarrete drew heavily on the work of González de Mendoza. His corrections of the Augustinian could be said to be in "minor details" (Busquets 2013: 117). He lived in Fujian for two years and Guangzhou for four, also visiting Beijing. He spent time in the Philippines and New Spain before traveling to China. For his journey through China, see Busquets 2019, as well as treatise 6 of his 1676 book, which was translated into Italian (1693), French (1748), and English (1764). See also Busquets 2008.

11. They were published by the Jesuit Nicolas Trigault under the title *De Christiana expeditione apud sinas* (1615). It was the most influential book on China in the seventeenth century. The original Latin edition was reprinted in 1616, 1617, 1623, and 1684. The French translation appeared in Lyon in 1616 and was reprinted in 1617 and 1618. The German translation was published in Augsburg in 1617, and the Spanish translation appeared in Seville and Lima in 1621. The Italian translation was printed in Naples in 1622, and the English one in London in 1625 (Mungello 1989: 48).

12. For more on these journeys and the reasons for them, see Ollé 2002.

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First we have Diego de Pantoja, who arrived in China in 1597, worked as Ricci's assistant in Beijing from 1601, and died in Macao in 1618.[13] And, second, we have Adriano de las Cortes, who in 1625 was shipwrecked on the southwestern coast of China while traveling to Macao, later spending a year in captivity, being taken from one town to another in very precarious material conditions. Despite not speaking Chinese, these circumstances allowed him to come into contact with the ordinary people.[14] Finally, we also have other Jesuits who wrote tangentially about China without ever having been there, instead using existing information provided by members of the Society of Jesus. For example, we have José de Acosta and his classic *Historia natural y moral de las Indias* (*The Natural and Moral History of the Indies*) (1590), and Luis Guzmán, who published a work on the Jesuit missions in the East one year before Diego de Pantoja sent him a long letter about China in 1602.[15] Moreover, certain criticisms coming from the Jesuit view, once it had become well known, ended up being incorporated into some of the historical texts mentioned above, which essentially followed the Iberian tradition: for example, we have that of Herrera Maldonado (1620), who was educated by the Society of Jesus, and that of Palafox (Palafox y Mendoza 1670).

3. China's Wealth according to the Idealized Iberian View: Reflections and Causes

In the Iberian paradigm, there were several areas in which the dazzling wealth of China was clearly evident. First, it had a large population capable of sustaining the country and that provoked expressions of true astonishment. Rada, faced with so many highly populated neighboring towns, said that it could be "called one large town instead of several" and that without a doubt it was the most populous kingdom in the world (Rada

13. "In the first decade of the sixteen hundreds, Diego de Pantoja did not have as large a European impact as that achieved by the Augustinian Juan González de Mendoza previously, or by Matteo Ricci subsequently, but the fact that there were up to eight editions in five different European languages of the description of the Jesuit arrival in the Ming Empire and the different aspects of the history, geography and culture of China that he wrote in 1602, and that was published for the first time in Valladolid in 1604, is far from insignificant" (Ollé 2018: 30–31).

14. As Moncó points out in Cortes (1625) 1991: 53–54, "Investigation, contrasting of opinions, empathy, personal verification and experimentation, comparison and analogy" were the golden rules that Cortes deployed to write his account. On Pantoja and Cortes, see Moncó 2012.

15. On this letter, see Moncó 2021.

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[1575] 2021: 141).[16] Loarca ([1575] 2021: 242) was surprised that people multiplied so much that it was "a marvellous thing," and this was despite how widespread homosexual practices were. Similarly, González de Mendoza ([1585] 2009: 115) concluded in his influential synthesis that "the land is so full of children that it seems that the women give birth every month."

Second, the abundance, quality, and variety of crops stood out. This, in turn, led to generally low prices for produce: sugar, honey, wax, silk, linen, hemp, cotton, wheat, barley, rye, oats, rice, wood, game, leather, medicinal herbs, spices, cattle, pigs, buffalo, goats, chickens, pearls, copper, iron, and so on (González de Mendoza [1585] 2009: 117–19; Escalante [1577] 2009: 40–42). Specific reference was also made to the availability of rich gold and silver mines, which, however, it was reported, the emperor did not allow to be mined at all.[17]

Third, there was very intense commercial activity at all levels (shops, markets, river traffic, etc.), which made China a true "trading paradise" and pointed toward a consumer society. This, in turn, was reflected, for example, in the quality of the clothing of some of the population, in their fondness for lavish banquets with different performances and entertainment, and in the profusion of taverns and inns in the cities. According to Loarca, "There did not seem to be any men on earth who were not merchants" (Loarca [1575] 2021: 216), "given the copious business . . . everywhere" (Herrera Maldonado 1620: 63).[18] Or as Escalante pictorially summarized, the rivers were always full of countless ships, and on the roads there was a continuous movement of goods: "There are many who travel across the whole kingdom, from province to province, with their goods, carrying the things people need from one place to another and going down to the seaports to sell to foreigners. . . . Others have settled in the cities and towns where there are large fish markets on public streets" (Escalante [1577] 2009: 54, 58).

16. The only exception was in Guangdong province, because it is mountainous and "very rough." Unless otherwise stated, all translations are ours.

17. See, e.g., the references to this in the accounts of Rada ([1575] 2021: 176), Loarca ([1575] 2021: 243), and Dueñas ([1579] 2021: 314). Also, later, see the references in texts as different as Leonardo de Argensola's ([1609] 1891: 157–58) and Fernández Navarrete's (1676: 34), and also in works by Jesuits, such as Guzmán 1601, 1:314, Pantoja 1605: 75, and Sánchez (1583) 1998: 71.

18. In the same sense, Aduarte ([1640] 1963, 2:357) pointed out that business was "so rich and abundant in merchandise that until now, nothing like it has been seen in all that has been discovered."

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Fourth, and linked to the notable commercial activity, there was a thriving urban life. There were many cities of a considerable size, generally located on the banks of rivers, and these were well organized and had an excellent layout and superb buildings (González de Mendoza [1585] 2009: 122–24, 126–27; Escalante [1577] 2009: 42–47; Loyola [1585] 2011: 33, 35). Beijing, for example, was four times as large as great European capitals such as Rome and Lisbon; it had so many inhabitants that it "swarmed" with people (Pantoja 1605: 62).

Fifth and finally, there was the high tax revenue raised by the emperor that, among other things, allowed him to order the construction of great works and support an enormous army, a sumptuous court, and magnificent palaces in all the important locations around the country (Loyola [1585] 2011: 38; Herrera Maldonado 1620: 7, 10).[19] From Rada and Loarca onward, different authors tried to estimate the large revenues collected by the emperor, despite the low taxes, as well as the scale of public spending.[20] Fernández Navarrete emphasized the difficulty of this calculation and pointed out that the revenue estimates tended to err on the side of "excessive" (Fernández Navarrete 1676: 26). Still, he emphasized the emperor's great ability to raise large amounts of money: "One of the most impressive things about China is its ability to put one million, two million or more soldiers into the campaign and support them for years without breaking the customs received in the Empire, without altering the prices of things and without imposing new taxes" (29).

To try to explain the remarkable Chinese wealth that the previous facts so clearly illustrated, three possible types of causes were suggested in the Iberian view: natural causes, those related to work and techniques, and institutional causes (related to good governance, the role of the state, and public policies).

Within natural causes, reference was made to the high fertility of the soil, which was advantageously combined with the range of climates found in this large country; the fertility and range allowed for the cultivation of a large number of crops and at least two annual harvests of essential foods such as rice. Reference was also made to the diversity of natural

19. González de Mendoza ([1585] 2009: 171) estimated the Chinese army at almost six million foot soldiers and one million on horseback.

20. Herrera Maldonado (1620: 131–36) could be argued to have made one of the most ambitious attempts to calculate revenue from figures provided by the Jesuits. He highlighted the wide variety of sources: income from land leases, from salt, from silk and cotton, from wheat and rice crops, etc.

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resources and raw materials in general (forests, mines, fisheries, springs, etc.), and the presence of many navigable rivers that facilitated transportation (in addition to irrigation and fishing) was emphasized (Román 1595, 3:218; Escalante [1577] 2009: 39–40, 58–61; González de Mendoza [1585] 2009: 113, 117–19).

With regard to labor and technology, together with the abundance of labor that kept wage costs down, the great industry, diligence, and inventiveness of the population was highlighted, which led to full use of the land, to a wide division of labor in society (with many mechanical trades), and, in short, to a significant degree of dedication to the different productive sectors. According to Escalante ([1577] 2009: 54–56), "They are all very ingenious and subtle with their hands . . . with great energy and natural ingenuity, and [very] inventive in all the crafts," in which there are "countless tradesmen [mechanics] . . . spread throughout the streets and squares" (silversmiths, sculptors, coppersmiths, shoemakers, etc.).[21] However, no authors specifically mentioned the concept of the division of labor later popularized by Adam Smith as being applied *within* the large weaving and porcelain workshops.[22]

In addition, the Chinese had been especially daring and creative in the technological field (as proven by their early development of the printing press and artillery and the construction of canals with locks) (Herrera Maldonado 1620: 15; González de Mendoza [1585] 2009: 131). This was particularly reflected in their intensive agricultural production based on irrigation, the construction of terraces, regular fertilization, crop rotation, the metal plow, and other techniques. In this way, all of China was cultivated carefully, like a garden, working every last inch of land, no matter

21. Rada ([1575] 2021: 170) had already mentioned that the Chinese were "hard workers," "very professional in their trades," "ingenious," and diligent in completing their work. And, some years later, San Román (1603: 260) reaffirmed that they learned easily and were great masters in different trades distributed by neighborhood. On the Spanish view of mechanical trades in China, see Paniagua 2011.

22. However, Folch (2018: 446), based on information provided by modern historians, points out the following: "At the end of the 16th century, Jingdezhen was already operating as a large modern industrial complex, with factories that carefully organised the work: although there were no machines inside, the organisation of the facilities was the same as you find in a factory. A certain production process was determined in accordance with market demands, and manufacturing protocols were established that applied to mass production and were carried out on an assembly line, in which different specialists did individual parts of the process and in which the daily quantity to be produced was strictly controlled. This internal organisation was radically different from that of a craft workshop, and in it, to keep up the pace, thousands of employees were hired, converting the initial facilities into authentic industrial areas."

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how inaccessible: "No land that can bear fruit is wasted"; "there is no exception for the mountains, valleys or riverbanks" (Escalante [1577] 2009: 40–41).[23]

Finally, with regard to the institutional framework as an explanation for the wealth, several elements stood out. First, there was no aristocracy, and social mobility through merit was possible. In fact, access to the administrative and judicial elite of the mandarins, which guaranteed the smooth running of the centralized empire, was through either a demanding system of examinations or proven services to the emperor: "There is no man in the entire kingdom who has vassals or authority, or any other title than that of *loytia* . . . which means in their own language what in ours means gentleman. It is achieved through study and sufficiency in the laws of the kingdom and through value in the arms and particular services rendered to the King" (Escalante [1577] 2009: 68). In other words, the Chinese did not recognize lineages or descendants. Even if a Chinese person had been poor and their father had worked in a manual trade, they could become a mandarin by passing examinations. Furthermore, villages paid tribute not to an individual but rather to the emperor, and positions were not inherited (Pantoja 1605: 80, 89).[24] Added to all of this was the fact that the mechanical trades were considered honorable and merchants played an important social role, sometimes becoming very rich (Pantoja 1605: 79; Cortes [1625] 1991: 135–36, 263).[25]

Second, there were various mechanisms to control the aforementioned ruling bureaucracy in order to prevent bribery and corruption. The mechanisms included good wages, laws preventing people from holding positions in the area where they were born, the monitoring by visitors of the work performed by governors and judges in the different provinces, and laws requiring public hearings and written records for trials (Escalante [1577] 2009: 75–78; González de Mendoza [1585] 2009: 185–87).

Third, stability and social order reigned, which supported economic activity. First, the efficiency and integrity of the judicial system guaranteed the rule of law and the payment of debts, all underpinned by harsh punishments and a well-developed prison system (Escalante [1577] 2009:

23. Cortes ([1625] 1991: 151, 227, 250–51) highlighted the treatment and collection of all organic waste to fertilize the land and how unnecessary it was to let the land rest as people did in Spain.

24. On honor in China, see Busquets and Torres 2016: 143.

25. Unlike in Europe, as indicated by Pantoja (1605: 78), sons were not required to adopt the trade of their fathers.

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79–80; González de Mendoza [1585] 2009: 193–95).[26] Second, docility, obedience, respect for authority, and good manners were deeply rooted values among the population, which was also structured, like a "well-governed family," into four perfectly defined "states" (lawyers, laborers, officials, and merchants) (Fernández Navarrete 1676: 51, 62; Herrera Maldonado 1620: 15; Román 1595, 3:224).[27] Likewise, the family played a central role in society, with the wife and any concubines retaining their virtue thanks to a secluded life, and with prostitution, both common and accepted, being regulated by the state (Herrera Maldonado 1620: 30; Escalante [1577] 2009: 49). Finally, there was a powerful army, composed of well-paid mercenaries and urban militias, that ensured that the kingdom could defend itself against external aggressors (Escalante [1577] 2009: 84, 92–93; González de Mendoza [1585] 2009: 171).

Fourth, taxes were low, and the state let owners "freely enjoy their estates without being bothered by impositions and taxes" (Escalante [1577] 2009: 40).[28] At the same time, however, the kingdom had a good revenue-raising capacity since nobody was excluded from their tax obligations (Herrera Maldonado 1620: 8). This funded the construction of an impressive infrastructure (bridges, canals, ports, roads, etc.) that turned China into an integrated territory (González de Mendoza [1585] 2009: 125; Herrera Maldonado 1620: 17; Fernández Navarrete 1676: 30–33).[29] As summarized by Escalante ([1577] 2009: 57–58), "From the fruits that the Chinese harvest and the goods they trade, the King is paid a very small tax. The highest tax they have is the contribution by those who own their own house . . . [and] with that, they are left with free estates to do what they want with and to leave to their children and grandchildren . . . , which is why they are very motivated to work to increase them." Along with the aforementioned tax, there were also customs duties, port duties,

26. Fernández Navarrete (1676: 15–16), who was in prison in China, highlighted their "governance, peacefulness, calm and cleanliness," which exceeded "that found in European ones." This contrasted with what Cortes had experienced.

27. Some Jesuits also pointed out that mandarins spoke to them with the utmost respect, on their knees (Román and Ricci [1584] 1998: 227), and that the Chinese were "as soft . . . as school children, being prey to the teacher who knows how to treat them as such. And so the mandarins [governed] them without other work or difficulties" (Sánchez [1583] 1998: 76).

28. González de Mendoza ([1585] 2009: 116) repeated the same thing: "The continuous work and industry of the natives . . . is easy for them with the memory of the freedom with which each person enjoys their estate, paying a small tax to the King."

29. Busquets and Torres (2018) analyze how different authors described the infrastructure that existed in the cities.

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and duties on other income, and the king also owned many leased lands for which he received a small part of the harvest collected on them (González de Mendoza [1585] 2009: 167).[30]

In the fifth place, internal security and stability were improved by minimizing contact with the outside world and focusing attention on the country itself (Tremml-Werner 2015: 59).[31] First, they renounced territorial expansion, thus avoiding the wars that consumed "many people and great wealth."[32] Second, natives were forbidden from leaving the kingdom, and foreigners were forbidden from entering it without an express permit, while foreign trade relations were strictly controlled by the state and were reduced to the bare minimum, taking advantage of the fact that China was very large, with many resources and good internal trade (Fernández Navarrete 1676: 33).[33] For most authors, it is these very restrictive laws, which prevented the free movement of people and goods, that were the key to the greatness and prosperity of China, allowing it to be a highly populated, well-cultivated kingdom with immense wealth (Guzmán 1601, 1:312; San Román 1603: 365; Román 1595, 3:222; Fernández Navarrete 1676: 60). For others, however, this kind of Chinese autarky had led to extreme isolation and had also prompted an exponential growth in illegal trade carried out by pirates and buccaneers.[34]

30. The emphasis on the idea of moderate taxes was a common feature in all the texts relating to the Iberian view. See, e.g., Román 1595, 3:229.

31. The Mings considered private foreign trade as a risk to internal stability, and they therefore prioritized national security over foreign maritime trade, which they controlled through the state.

32. "[The Chinese] were more prudent than the Greeks, Carthaginians and Romans, who, by conquering foreign lands, separated themselves so much from their own that they lost them. Considering this, they did not want to suffer their damage any more, seeing how India consumed many people and a lot of wealth . . . while they spread out conquering foreign land, having, in their own land, gold, silver and all other metals, and a lot of natural wealth, and such great merchandise that all other nations took advantage of them while they took advantage of nobody" (Escalante [1577] 2009: 60). See also González de Mendoza (1585) 2009: 175–76. On the isolationist and defensive nature of Chinese imperialism, see Ollé 2006.

33. In practice, the main channel for China's trade relations with its neighbors was the state, through a system of tax embassies. The countries that joined the list of fiscal countries fell under the scope of Chinese domination but could access a commercial flow of great economic impact (Ollé 2006: 203).

34. Leonardo de Argensola ([1609] 1891: 84) pointed out that such restrictive and severe foreign laws had made the Chinese "intractable." For Pantoja (1605: 75) and Ribadeneira ([1601] 1947: 110), the need for silver and the disproportionate growth of contraband had forced a slight relaxation of the strict trade restrictions. And according to Palafox (Palafox y Mendoza 1670: 227, 270), after the fall of the Ming dynasty in 1644, the Manchu people, who prioritized weapons over the arts, were not afraid to open up to the outside thanks precisely to their military

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Finally, much of the population was literate, as schools were provided by the emperor throughout the kingdom, and they were also active, as idleness, which could lead to bad habits, was not permitted, and there were assistance mechanisms for those who were truly struggling. After their journey, Loarca ([1575] 2021: 260–61) and Dueñas ([1579] 2021: 317) mentioned that there were many schools, even in small villages, where children were taught to read and write, which Escalante and González de Mendoza later praised, highlighting, in turn, the large amount of paper, printing presses, and books (González de Mendoza [1585] 2009: 198; Román 1595, 3:223–24).[35] In terms of the ban on begging, even the blind had to earn their keep, men, for example, by grinding wheat and rice or operating bellows, and women by engaging in prostitution. The crippled who were unable to work first had to be taken care of by their relatives, and only if they did not have any family were they kept in hospitals maintained by the emperor (Escalante [1577] 2009: 49, 53–54; González de Mendoza [1585] 2009: 116, 156–57).[36]

There are two important aspects to highlight with respect to the Iberian view. In the first place, some modern historians have taken information from these primary sources to make similar points (along the lines of a Pomeranz-like assessment of China's economy pre-1800). In the second place, the straightforwardly and simplified description of socioeconomic Chinese reality by Iberian authors (low taxes, no aristocracy and social mobility through merit, honorable consideration of mechanical trades, efficiency of the judicial system, largely literate population, little contact with the outside world, no wars, etc.) reveals something about their categorization of reality in the Iberian Peninsula: there is an implicit criticism of the Hispanic monarchy in certain important aspects. Moreover, in the seventeenth century, the contrast between the increasingly battered Hispanic monarchy and the image of prosperity conveyed by this idealized

power, which allowed them to put a stop to the actions of the many pirates who had previously made a living from the extensive contraband.

35. Escalante ([1577] 2009: 65, 67), e.g., noted that "in all cities, the King has general schools that he pays for." And González de Mendoza ([1585] 2009: 196) stated, "[There are] very few who do not know how to read and write."

36. Ribadeneira ([1601] 1947: 138–39) noted that there were houses for orphans where they were taught mechanical trades, and the state had corn exchanges for the years of famine. San Román (1603: 262) and Herrera Maldonado (1620: 19) stressed that idleness was persecuted and severely punished. Fernández Navarrete (1676: 27) highlighted the emperor's generosity toward the poor.

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vision of China made clearer the situation of socioeconomic decline of the Spanish Empire.

4. A More Critical, Documented, and Realistic View: The Jesuits

Many of the Jesuit missionaries who wrote about China emphasized that they had lived there and learned the language. Therefore, their accounts were based on experience and not on mere conjecture or simply on what others had said. Thus, for example, the Portuguese Álvaro Semedo, in the prologue to his work, was critical about the many armchair travelers who wrote about China leaving "almost all truths unsaid" and making surprising but false claims: "Some unique things that have made a great noise in the ears of the readers are not found in China." He, on the other hand, had spent twenty-two years in the country, traveling through much of it and having "legitimate information on the rest," so his account did "service" to the "truth lovers," without simply being blind praise (Semedo 1642: 2, 4).

In other words, the view of the Jesuits turned out to be harsher than the Iberian view. In this, as was reflected in the summarized statements of Escalante and González de Mendoza, criticisms of the Celestial Empire were limited, and they virtually confined themselves to idolatry, although there were some authors, such as Rada and Fernández Navarrete, who did include a few negative comments that were similar to the more critical views of the Jesuits. The latter did not really question the broad lines of the Iberian view. In fact, they largely shared its amazement at the striking Chinese socioeconomic situation (the large industrious population, the abundance and variety of productions, the very active internal trade, the important urban life, the great fertility of the soil, the agricultural production, the multitude of trades, the proven capacity for innovation, the integrated bureaucracy, etc.). However, they did significantly nuance or question some fundamental aspects of the gleaming portrait of China outlined in the Iberian paradigm.

The first idea that they highlighted was that of the general wealth of the kingdom, since this coexisted with the poverty (and even with the slavery) experienced by a good part of the population. This was something that Rada had already pointed out in passing in 1575: despite the abundance and general cheapness of products and the fact that there was a consumer society with active trade, many people were "poor because they were infinite," and there were needy people begging on the streets even though this was forbidden (Rada [1575] 2021: 176). Moreover, while the Chinese

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were diligent and hardworking, they were very subservient to their employers, who "rule[d] over and treat[ed] them like slaves and even worse" (Loarca [1575] 2021: 242). For his part, the soldier Dueñas, who accompanied the Franciscans Tordesillas and Alfaro in 1579, had also alluded to the existence of poor people on the streets rudely demanding handouts (Dueñas [1579] 2021: 317), something that the Dominican Fernández Navarrete again confirmed in 1676, stating in a few lines that there was a lot of misery and that the farmers in general were poor (Fernández Navarrete 1676: 57).[37] Ribadeneira even went so far as to refer to the existence of famines in certain years.[38]

However, it was the Jesuits who most emphasized the issue of poverty. Ricci, for example, noted the thousands of miserable coolies standing and waiting for work on the banks of the Grand Canal and in Beijing, and he mentioned the roving street gangs of young men who had been castrated but then failed to obtain employment at the palace (Spence 2002: 218). For his part, Pantoja (1605: 69–70, 71–73) pointed out that goods were indeed cheaper than in Spain and there was "a great abundance of things to eat" (all kinds of meat and fish, legumes, nuts, rice and wheat), with two and even three harvests a year for some produce. However, except for the wealthiest people, the majority of the population did not eat meat and fish every day, although they did eat legumes, vegetables, rice, and millet, with workers' wages being low due to the large population (73, 78).[39] In short, although "the abundance and wealth of this kingdom [was] plentiful . . . , and the people also [were], [there were] not very rich people, nor . . . [could they] be compared in this with our land" (79). In fact, it is telling that it was common for the poorest to sell their children to try to survive (78).[40]

37. However, this was offset by handouts from the emperor each year, this being one of his "greatest achievements."

38. "And although the abundance of seasonal things in that kingdom has been so high until our times that they never remember having had to go hungry, in the year one thousand, five hundred and ninety-five, there was so much need for rice (which is their staple food), that parents sold their children to buy rice. The Lord was punishing them with this hunger for their sins and thus removing many souls from that kingdom" (Ribadeneira [1601] 1947: 111).

39. However, as Pomeranz (2000: 92) points out, this was not the reason why wages were low: in China there were a "large number of people, mostly women, whose opportunity costs (and thus the wages one needed to pay them) were well below those of unskilled men." The Chinese also made rice wine and had oil and fruit, such as sweet oranges, that they did not eat much. However, the products were not as good as the Spanish ones. In addition, there was a lot of cheap wood (Pantoja 1605: 73–74).

40. Escalante ([1577] 2009: 50) had already mentioned this.

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The truth is that slavery was widespread in Chinese society, something that Ricci attributed to the character traits of the population (licentiousness and timidity) (Spence 2002: 209–10).[41] The country was literally "full of slaves": many Chinese people would sell themselves to a rich man so that he could then give them as a spouse to one of his slaves; others were unable to support their children and sold them; and there were also many prostitutes who were slaves and forced to do this work by their masters (218–20).[42] In particular, there were some areas where the proportion of slaves was very high: in Macao, for example, they outnumbered freemen five to one. However, the purchase and sale of Chinese slaves was also a constant feature overseas, as many were kidnapped in the southwest of the country and sold to foreigners (Spence 2002: 209–10; Crossley 2011: 188, 191–94).

All in all, it was perhaps the Jesuit Adriano de las Cortes who talked most on the issue of poverty, having moved in more modest social circles. The great productive wealth of China (meat, fish, cereals, fruit, vegetables, vinegar, oil, pearls, silk, porcelain, musk, various metals, medicines, etc.), which he described in detail in chapters 16 to 29 of his 1625 work, did not materially improve the well-being of most Chinese people: "The fact that the Chinese have many goods is not a sufficient argument to prove that they are very rich; firstly, they are generally very poor people" (Cortes [1625] 1991: 244–45). In fact, the situation was paradoxical: "The truth is that the riches of China are large when taken together, and they have many goods that they take to other kingdoms, but for each person individually, they are few" (256). Thus, the people, "the most common," had wealth that barely amounted to a dog, a cat, a hen, a pig, and a few

41. In China, there was a "wide spectrum of slavery . . . across all strata of society" (sexual, military, domestic, etc.), but there was "no precise parallel to the Roman legal construction of slavery" (Crossley 2011: 186). The essential core of slavery was also "physical coercion of labor from individuals who are invisible as legal persons," but in China "rights of use or possession of land, things and people were relative and conditional" (187). Moreover, "dependency and coercion . . . also [presented] elements that do not compare easily to the social or legal history of Europe" (188). According to Chevaleyre (2023: 299–300), "Destitution was a common motivation for selling oneself and one's children"; "*nubi* bondage thus [presented] the characteristics of a form of contract and of voluntary slavery. . . . Combined with the prohibition on trafficking, the transactional nature of enslavement seemingly made it a non-coercive process." However, "despite the illusion of the contract, *nubi* bondage was a total relation of subjugation safeguarded by the sociopolitical order" (314).

42. Prostitution, perfectly accepted, was very common in the cities and also in the villages; a register of prostitutes was kept, and they were forced to pay a tax. There was also male prostitution, of boys who had been sold as children.

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furnishings. In direct, bleak language, Cortes expanded on what ordinary people ate and wore, which contrasted with that mentioned by those who had noticed only the most positive aspects of China:

> The Chinese eat miserably.
>
> Never would I have believed so much misery and poverty in their food and clothing and so much barbarity as in the common Chinese people we saw, having seen, in the Philippine Islands, their generosity in giving and liberality and the luck with how they eat, dress and spend money. . . . The common Chinese people compared to the general people are barbarians and those in the Philippines are citizens and courtiers. . . .
>
> . . . [The Chinese] dress and eat poorly, it is rare for any part of their clothing to be made of silk. . . .
>
> It is a mystery that the earnings of ordinary people in China are used to spend their lives with a bit of bad rice and mustard greens and pickled radishes. . . .
>
> . . . Amazed at how so many with so little earnings could support themselves, but they pass because they only have misery for sustenance and they are born and continue with it until they die. (195–96, 198, 247, 249)

The second important criticism of the Jesuits referred to corruption and bribery in the empire's administrative machinery, which had been so glowingly described in the Iberian paradigm. Ricci had already mentioned at the end of the sixteenth century that the eunuchs and mandarins of the court demanded money from those who came from the provinces on business. Moreover, before leaving a position or a city, a mandarin normally attended parties to receive and grant favors (Spence 2002: 214, 217). All of this was still happening in 1676, as was confirmed by another long-stay traveler, the Dominican Fernández Navarrete: the wages of mandarins were actually "scant" and "limited," and that is why they "dirtied their hands" (Fernández Navarrete 1676: 28). For his part, Bishop Palafox, who wrote from secondary sources essentially following the Iberian paradigm, also alluded to a serious problem of corruption once the Jesuit view had become known (Palafox y Mendoza 1670: 25).

As Ricci soon found out, the eunuchs, often of low social extraction, were the intermediaries between the emperor and the bureaucrats outside the palace and therefore had enormous effective power (Spence 2002: 214): "They enjoy royal preference," and "they mandate and govern

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everything" (Herrera Maldonado 1620: 90). Together with them, the mandarins of the Royal Council also had real authority, so the emperor remained more of a symbolic figure, isolated from the people and not really exercising any power (Román and Ricci [1584] 1998: 223). However, the magnificence and grandeur of the palace complex in which he lived and the great court that surrounded him entailed an enormous cost (Spence 2002: 212).

Other elements of the institutional apparatus were also criticized. Apart from references to the excessive cruelty of the judicial and prison system (because of the serious punishments and torments and the delays in processes),[43] the capacity of the state to perform its defensive role against the outside world was also questioned, even though China had a supposedly large and powerful army. According to Sánchez, the Chinese were "very meek and peaceful people with little knowledge of weapons and how to use them." In the same sense, Ricci stated that they were "poorly trained for war and the military art," with the majority of soldiers being "criminal men of low status, [mercenaries, or] condemned to perpetual slavery." Furthermore, ordinary people were not allowed to keep weapons at home (Sánchez [1583] 1998: 72–73; Román and Ricci [1584] 1998: 228–29).[44] For his part, Pantoja (1605: 90) stated that the Chinese had been prioritizing the arts over weapons;[45] and Palafox concluded that it was precisely because of this long history of neglecting weapons that they had always had so many problems with coastal piracy and that the Ming dynasty had ended up succumbing to the Manchu invasion in 1644 (Palafox y Mendoza 1670: 227, 329).[46]

43. San Román (1603), in chap. 15 of his book, summarized some negative aspects of the judicial system that, by then, were already widely known: the sale of daughters to pay off debts, cruelty to prisoners, etc.

44. Herrera y Tordesillas (1601: 76) also noted that the Chinese population was not warlike.

45. According to Pantoja (1605: 90), soldiers were less appreciated than scholars because "honour and wealth" came from the arts and education. For Fernández Navarrete (1676: 29), if the Chinese "had taken to weapons as well as they did to the arts, who in the world could resist them? God removed from them the inclination for the military and the desire to expand their land, perhaps so that they would not dominate the entire world."

46. According to Palafox, who wrote his book in the 1640s, the Manchus simplified the administrative system, lowered taxes, and prioritized the importance of defense. On Palafox and China, see Villamar 2015. As Andrade (2016: 119, 123) points out, "Many Europeans of the time felt that their military power was more than a match for that of China" (because of "better artillery, superior soldiers, powerful ships, and deadly forts"). However, military revolution had started in China, where guns and steel had been invented, and neither the Portuguese nor the Spaniards had really military superiority vis-à-vis the Chinese forces. In fact, the

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A third criticism referred to the limitations of Chinese science. Certainly, in some disciplines, such as medicine, mathematics, and astronomy, they were "very knowledgeable . . . [,] achieving almost as much on their own as we do with communication from all over the world" (Román and Ricci [1584] 1998: 224–25). However, in others, such as geography and natural philosophy, they lagged behind. Alonso Sánchez attributed it to the effort required to master their complicated language, which was "so difficult and obscure" that, in order to become mandarins, "those who call[ed] themselves literate spent their lives learning only this and not everyone managed it"; for this reason, they did not learn "other languages or other sciences of natural things . . . and laws and moral things" (Sánchez [1583] 1998: 66). A similar comment was made by Acosta ([1590] 1985, 3:288) shortly afterward: "All the science of the Chinese stops in knowing how to read and write and goes no further; because they do not reach higher sciences . . . as there are no letters used for words, but rather figurines of innumerable things that are achieved with infinite work and a lot of time, and at the end of all their studies, a native from Peru or Mexico, who has learned to read and write, knows more than the wisest mandarin."[47]

However, more than ignorance in certain fields of knowledge, the problem was cultural arrogance and the consequent lack of interest in understanding other people, which cut them off from advances in other countries: "Because they have great abundance of everything . . . [they display so much] arrogance, that there are no people in the world who know anything but them . . . and they judge everyone as barbaric beasts, lawless people with no reason or governance, and it is a funny and very ridiculous thing that nobody presumes to want to teach them" (Sánchez [1583] 1998: 65). The fact that the Chinese Empire had closed in on itself after the establishment of the Ming dynasty (1368–1644) was what, for Cortes, explained this contempt for other cultures, which they considered inferior (Cortes [1625] 1991: 196). In fact, as indicated by Pantoja (1605: 10–11), the Chinese had a "poor attitude" to foreigners and were "extremely scrupulous" when dealing with them.[48]

Sino-Portuguese conflicts of 1521–22 show that "the European superiority [had] been exaggerated" and also that the Chinese "had an overwhelming numerical advantage" (124).

47. There is a fair bit of secondary research on the connection between Jesuit missionaries and Chinese science. See, e.g., Collani 2009 or Cams 2017.

48. By the end of the sixteenth century, this Jesuit criticism must have been fairly well known, since Centeno (1595: 1), who tried to bring together what the best historians had written

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Fourth, the quality of certain noteworthy manufactured goods, which had generally been praised in the Iberian view, was criticized. For example, in 1575 the author Rada had already classified the ships built by the Chinese as "shoddy," also referring to the poor quality of their paper (Rada [1575] 2021: 177). Pantoja (1605: 75, 78), despite acknowledging the availability of abundant and cheap clothing, said that their fabrics "with all due respect, [could not] be compared with our land," and equally in "subtlety," our craftsmen "commonly far exceed[ed]" the Chinese.[49] For his part, Cortes considered that the Chinese manufactured very "cheap" glass, and they did not know how to "decorate and benefit from" silk, whose quality was inferior to that in Europe, and they faked it whenever they could (Cortes [1625] 1991: 236, 240). Luis Guzmán (1601, 1:313), relying on "reputable" Jesuits and in many cases "eyewitnesses," had also previously referred to the fact that silk, being one of the most common and admired Chinese goods, was not really "as fine as the silk over here."

In fifth place, the precariousness of the Chinese monetary system was mentioned by various authors, not only Jesuits. In 1575, Rada did not see a "kind of currency," revealing that the usual thing was to buy goods "with pieces of silver by weight." It was only in Quanzhou where he identified "a stamped copper coin with a hole in the middle" (Rada [1575] 2021: 176). That same year, Loarca noted that nonminted gold and silver was circulating, which is why merchants used to carry round weighing scales (Loarca [1575] 2021: 243).[50] And in 1584, Ricci wrote along the same lines, also stating that silver, the basis for most exchanges, came "from India and Portugal and Japan every year" (Román and Ricci [1584] 1998: 223–24). In other words, it was "all from outside the kingdom," as Sánchez ([1583] 1998: 71) remarked.[51] Therefore, according to Pantoja

about Asia, also mentioned that the Chinese paid little attention to foreign science and arts. For his part, Herrera Maldonado (1620: 68) also referred to this issue: "The Chinese consider other nations around the world to be blind, they judge them all to be foolish, they think that only they know, and their errors and blunders are considered true science." However, both the Ming and the Qing dynasties employed a fair number of foreigners: see, e.g., Deng 2016: 57–61 on the employment of European Jesuit astronomers.

49. Chinese oil and wine (from rice) were also not comparable to their Spanish equivalents (Pantoja 1605: 73–74).

50. González de Mendoza ([1585] 2009: 132) summarized as follows: "The currency circulating throughout the kingdom is gold and silver, unmarked, but by weight." In the same sense, see Escalante (1577) 2009: 50.

51. His dubious explanation was that, although the Chinese had many very plentiful silver mines, the emperor would not allow them to be mined.

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(1605: 69–70), while in principle China did not seem to need to trade with other countries at all given its fertility and abundance, it did need to import silver in exchange for a long list of products.

Much later, in 1676, Fernández Navarrete once again said that the currency used in China was weighed, unmarked coins: pure silver and other adulterated types of silver (mixed with copper or lead) circulated, along with copper coins for small exchanges. The Dominican also indicated that the Spanish peso was highly valued (Fernández Navarrete 1676: 61). In any case, according to San Román (1603: 255), the Chinese were greedy for precious metals and looked enviously at Spanish gold, or, as Cortes ([1625] 1991: 271–73) pointed out, they were "hungry for silver," which made them "look for one thousand kinds of goods [and] profitable inventions" (Román and Ricci [1584] 1998: 223–24). But this demand for silver also came from the state, which ended up requiring taxes to be collected in this metal.[52]

This huge desire for precious metals, particularly silver, was due to the fact that paper money not backed by metal had previously circulated, paper money that, in the words of Centeno (1595: 1), was square parchment with the emperor's seal. Excessive public spending (on constructing walls, paying soldiers, maintaining public servants and the Court, etc.) had led to an overissuance of paper money, which in turn had led to its depreciation, to its fall in popularity from the beginning of the fifteenth century, along with easily counterfeited copper coins, and, finally, to inflation (Folch 2021a: 80; Tremml-Werner 2015: 63–64). Hence we have the desire of the Chinese for precious metals and Fernández Navarrete's (1676: 61) severe condemnation of the alteration in the value of the currency.[53]

52. On the Chinese hunger for silver described by the Spanish authors, see von Glahn 2016: 307–9. For the historical context of China's "silver century" (1550–1650), see von Glahn 1996: 113–40.

53. While the fondness of the Chinese for precious metals was highlighted, derived from the rejection of depreciated paper money and the inflation it caused, Spanish authors also emphasized the cheapness of basic products in China. This, which at first glance may seem to be a contradiction, has a simple explanation: even if paper money had been overissued or a type of adulterated currency had been circulating, the resulting inflation was lower than that in Spain. As explained respectively by the authors from the School of Salamanca and the Jesuit Juan de Mariana, the latter was due to the arrival of American precious metals in the sixteenth century and to the changes to the vellon coin in the seventeenth century, entirely removing its silver content. In this respect, see the classic monographs by Grice-Hutchinson (1982, 2005).

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In sixth place, some Jesuits criticized Chinese economic morality and particularly the excessive desire for profit shown by merchants.[54] According to Alonso Sánchez ([1583] 1998: 65), the Chinese generally had an "insatiable greed"; they were "so steeped in all their business and dealings, good and bad, honourable and vile . . . that there is no God or another life, nor father with mother, nor brother with brother, neither friend nor relative, neither honour nor shame." In the same sense, Ricci complained about the growing dishonesty and greed, as well as the deceit and lack of trust in society: nobody could trust anyone, and, for example, there were two prices for every good in the markets, one for the locals and another, much lower one, for civil servants (Spence 2002: 212).[55] Sánchez ([1583] 1998: 65) considered that the prevailing values were formed in a society where low morals reigned (sale of children, prostitution, etc.): there was "a lot of dishonesty and debauchery, particularly heinous sin, and not least gluttony."

5. Conclusion

This article has analyzed, based on primary sources, the first two socio-economic visions of China that were elaborated in the early modern age, one very idealized, the "Iberian" one, and the other more nuanced and critical, the Jesuit one, but both essentially positive. Once these common-places crystallized in the much reedited and translated texts of Juan González de Mendoza and Matteo Ricci, they were invariably reproduced

54. Spanish academics studied issues around the fairness of trading activities, and it is possible that some travelers to China were aware of their reflections on the matter. In any case, it does seem proven that some travelers knew about the academic reflections on the just causes of the conquest. Folch (2021b) explains Vitoria's and Soto's relationship with Rada and how Rada applied the ideas of the School of Salamanca on the conquest and treatment of natives to the situation in Asia. Alonso (2008: 87) notes, "Martín de Rada has gone down in history as a defender of Indigenous rights, an Asian Las Casas." And Bellón (2008: 4) points out that "between the humanistic and conciliatory stance of Martín de Rada and Domingo de Salazar, who respect the indigenous people and want to protect them, and the offensive and imperialist stance of Francisco de Sande and others, who dream of attacking the coasts of Fujian, there will be a debate framed in terms of the revolutionary civil law theories of Francisco de Vitoria, and the opposition of the Jesuit missionaries to violence and their willingness to evangelise the educated (Matteo Ricci) or popular classes (Michele Ruggieri)." Martín de Rada's proposal, following the lines "established by the revisionism of Father Bartolomé de las Casas and Francisco de Vitoria," preferred "the evangelising and trading path to achieving a mixed society over warlike methods" (Bellón 2008:5).

55. Some Jesuits were victims of extortion: for example, false accusations of adultery with married women were made against Fathers Ruggieri and Longobardi (Spence 2002: 219).

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in the works of successive chroniclers until the end of the seventeenth century, adding only a few nuances, evaluative judgments, or new facts.

The explanation of why these visions of China differed—apart from the more or less direct nature of the information that supported them—is a very complex subject that goes beyond the limits of this article. Nevertheless, one can venture that, among other things, it responds to the different character of the religious orders that contributed to elaborating them. Despite their different profiles, the religious orders associated with the Iberian vision (Augustinians, Franciscans, Dominicans, etc.) acted in practice as agents of the Catholic monarchy in the evangelization of the new territories of Asia and America; moreover, the legendary heritage of the medieval accounts of the mythical Cathay may have influenced their idealized perception of China. The Jesuits, for their part, were a newly created order (1540) closely linked to the papacy, whose members—of solid training—participated fully in the scientific revolution of the time and examined with critical rigor all the novelties of those distant territories they visited (compiling astronomical, geographical, and natural observations, but also annotations on culture and social organization based on knowledge of the language and local customs). In this sense, the more analytical, critical, and informed view of Jesuits such as Ricci and Pantoja, who believed in Christianization through cultural accommodation (the adaptation of Christian doctrine to the way of thinking and reasoning of the Chinese world), could be a key explanatory factor in the difference between the two views of China.

These two socioeconomic images of China—Iberian and Jesuit—are relevant for two reasons. In the first place, they were important to later seventeenth- and eighteenth-century scholarship trying to assess whether China was economically ahead or behind. These writings, in turn, were hugely important for modern scholarship and the paradigms before and after Kenneth Pomeranz's (2000) comparative ideas about the socioeconomic situation in China versus Europe during the early modern period.

In the second place, both views on the possible causes of Chinese wealth are relevant for a better understanding of the seventeenth-century debate on the decline of Castile. On the one hand, the contrast of the image—more or less nuanced—of Chinese prosperity with the increasingly battered Hispanic monarchy clearly showed the declining situation of the Spanish Empire. In fact, from these positive views of China could be implicitly derived significant criticisms of the Spain of the last Habsburgs (excessive taxes, rigidly stratified society, squandering of resources

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in continuous external wars, widespread illiteracy, etc.). There were even some members of the Jesuit order who openly questioned the Hispanic monarchy with respect to such aspects as its monetary policy (Juan de Mariana), its absolutist character (Francisco Suárez), and its system of assessed prices (Luis de Molina). On the other hand, it is surprising that—as we have seen—the protagonists of the debate on Castilian decadence, the *arbitristas*, were not aware of the writings of their contemporaries on China, which reduced the potential of their analysis.

Indeed, the *arbitrista* approach would have been enriched if they had been interested in the aforementioned Spanish writings on China or if they had had contact with some of their authors. For example, they would have learned that an abundant population was not the fundamental requirement for a prosperous economy and that closing an economy to foreign trade had significant disadvantages.

The *arbitristas* were populationists and praised the advantages of a large population. They also pointed out that Castile, the heart of the Spanish monarchy, was falling behind economically compared to the countries around it, with depopulation being precisely one of its main problems. Spanish travelers and historians, although initially fascinated by China's wealth and large population (especially in contrast to the Philippines), made two important points. First, as pointed out by the Jesuits, China's great wealth or productive capacity, which was reflected in many aspects, such as the general cheapness of goods, coexisted with widespread poverty and a low standard of living for much of the population. In other words, it did not raise the material well-being of the majority of Chinese people, for whom the institution of slavery was also deeply rooted. Second, beyond the size of the Chinese population, what was truly significant was its qualitative aspects: its discipline and industriousness, its basic education (given the proliferation of schools), its expertise in performing intensive farming on the land or a wide variety of mechanical trades, etc.

With regard to trade policy, most *arbitristas* were in favor of protectionism, with the exception of a few authors such as Dormer ([1664] 1989) and Struzzi (1624) who were in favor of openness. Some, like Moncada, even argued for a kind of autarky, applying a rigorous system to border control, inspired by the Inquisition. While in most cases Spanish travelers and historians linked Chinese prosperity to the strong restrictions imposed on the movement of people and goods, they also pointed out its disadvantages: China's tendency toward autarky had led to its isolation, which had disconnected the country from advances in science and had also

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promoted an exponential growth in illegal trade carried out by pirates that indicated a certain military weakness. Moreover, the country had been forced to open up slightly in order to obtain precious metals in exchange for products such as silk and porcelain.

Through contact with Spanish travelers and historians, the *arbitristas* would also have seen, first, their idea of "preservation" of the territory reinforced, this being advocated by Pedro Fernández de Navarrete ([1626] 1982) and the aforementioned Moncada ([1619] 1974), among others. In fact, something that was praised so highly in many of the descriptions of China was its renunciation of territorial expansion, thus avoiding wars that had a high cost in terms of lives and wealth. Second, the *arbitristas* would also have seen their ideas about criticizing idleness reinforced, and at the same time they would have been able to admire the dedication of the Chinese to the productive sectors, which were promoted by imperial policies and social characteristics (prohibition on begging, assistance for those truly struggling, good reputation of the trades, lack of an aristocracy, possibility of social advancement on merit, housing and training of orphans, etc.). Both Sancho de Moncada and Pedro Fernández de Navarrete, albeit relying on non-Spanish sources, praised, if briefly, the remarkable industriousness of the Chinese and, in the latter case, also their intensive agriculture.

In short, it can be confirmed that the reflections of the *arbitristas*, the protoeconomists of that time, on the economic backwardness of Castile, the heart of the Spanish monarchy, did not benefit from the valuable thoughts that authors who were not specialists in economic issues, such as the historians and travelers mentioned in this work, had on the causes of the wealth and weaknesses of China, the other great world empire in that period.

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