

Conquistadores or Merchants? Spanish Plans for the Conquest of China, 1565–1586

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The last decades of the sixteenth century saw the Spanish empire at the height of its splendor. During that period it expanded its sphere of influence beyond the Americas. Motivated by the competition with Portugal over world hegemony, the Asian spice trade, and the desire to convert the people of China, Spain made great efforts to find an alternative route to the Far East, and to establish a foothold in Asian waters. These attempts culminated in 1565, when Miguel Lopez de Legazpi's (1502–1572) expedition had successfully colonized the Philippine Islands.

Contrary to Spanish expectations, spices or precious metals were not abundant in the Philippines. In addition, the geographical dispersion and social organization of the local population made it hard to control. This resulted in disappointment on the side of the Spaniards as for the profitability of the Philippine venture. What helped to preserve the Spanish colonization of the Philippines was the trade that evolved between the young colony and China; Chinese commodities, mainly silk products, were exchanged for American silver, and then shipped across the Pacific Ocean to Acapulco. The Chinese side of this commerce was managed by the Chinese merchant community in Manila.

However, as early as in the first decade of colonization, it became clear that the Spaniards in Manila were interested in no less than the conquest and evangelization of China. In the three decades that followed, such aspirations were manifested in several petitions sent to King Philip II (1527–1598; r. 1556–1598).

So far, scholars have treated these plans as a mere expression of Spanish hubris and religious and territorial aspirations. The following paper suggests that in evaluating this phenomenon, the social configuration of the Spanish-Philippine society is highly significant (although previously overlooked). The colonial society in the Philippines differed significantly from its prototypes in the Americas; from its very beginning it did not generate the resources needed for its existence by using the native labor force, but rather functioned, at least from an economic point of view, as a merchant society. The shift in colonial patterns from one that emphasizes control over land and people to one that relies on trade, was not a smooth shift for the Spanish settlers in the Philippines. This essay will argue that the Spanish plans for the conquest of China were, in

fact, manifestations of the social tensions that had appeared within the settler elite in the colony, as a result of the shift from a conquering society to a merchant community.

Spanish Conquistadores and Chinese Merchants: A Rendezvous in Manila

The Spanish experience in the Philippines was very different from their previous one in the Americas; the civilizations they encountered in the Philippines were not isolated from Asia and Europe, but were connected through trade and religion to the Muslim world, or to the regions defined by the Spaniards as “India” and “China”. In addition, the Spanish settlers of the Philippines had to cope with their Lusitanian counterparts, well established in Malacca and the Moluccas since the second decade of the sixteenth century.

Under these complicated conditions, the Spaniards aspired to establish a foothold in Southeast Asia to benefit from the spice trade in the region, and to compete with the Portuguese over imperial and religious hegemony. However, the Spanish settlers were soon disillusioned of the prospects of finding exportable quantities of spices or precious metals in the islands. This disappointment was evident in petitions sent from the islands to the king, suggesting the abandonment of the newly-founded colony.

Another cause for the bitter tone was the nature of the Filipino societies encountered by the Spaniards; traditionally, these peoples inhabited in small and relatively isolated communities, known as *barangays*, that produced little surplus.¹ Thus, when applied to the Tagalog and Bisayan peoples of the Islands, the systems of control over indigenous peoples, as imported from the Americas, failed to generate anything close to the profits made in New Spain or Peru. These conditions made the *encomiendas* in the islands a rather fragile economic solution for those colonizers who wished to live an easy life. The Spanish colonizers have realized as early as 1569 that their only salvation would be to develop trade with China and Japan.²

In 1573, when the first shipment of Chinese silk made its way from Manila to the Pacific port of Acapulco, it seemed that the sun began to shine over the

1 Nuchera 1995, 209-210.

2 Mirandaola, “Letter to Felipe II”, June 8 1569, BRB 3, 27-28.

young colony's economic horizon.³ As an incentive to settle in the islands, the Crown financed the construction of the galleons, and the residents of Manila were allotted lading space, so they could participate in the commerce. As a result many of the Spanish in Manila were involved in the trade, either as active participants or as dependents on its outcome. In the decades that followed, the quantity and quality of silk sent to Acapulco rose dramatically, competing successfully with Mexican and peninsular silk industries.

However, the Spanish that have settled in the Philippines were soldiers, administrators and missionaries rather than professional merchants. The latter, already well established in Mexico, did not care to risk the hazardous three month long journey across the Pacific Ocean, or worse even, the journey back, which extended to five or even six months. However, once the profitability of the trade with China could not be denied, the Manileños managed to control it through a set of unique trade mechanisms that evolved in Manila. These mechanisms allowed the Manileños to carry out international commerce without professionalizing in its practices, founding the local merchant guild (*consulado de mercaderes*) as late as 1769. Meanwhile, the Spanish in Manila did as much as they could to exclude the participation of Mexican and Peruvian merchants. As a result, the evolution of organized merchant elite in the Philippines was a considerably late phenomenon. Thus, the Spanish in Manila managed the trade, using vessels built with royal capital whilst competing with the Mexican and Iberian markets.

The trade with the Philippine Islands was not alien to the Chinese. Fujianese merchants have been frequenting them since the days of the Song 宋 dynasty (960–1279), trading silk, porcelain, glass beads and ironware for cotton, wax, pearls, turtle shells and canvas. Also, Moluccan spices were being carried by Chinese merchants passing through the Philippines on their way to China mainland.⁴

The origin of the permanent Chinese communities in the Philippines is not entirely clear. However, it was probably incepted by merchants from Fujian, which sojourned in the area at the beginning of the fifteenth century. Later in that century, a Chinese imperial decree banning maritime international trade was issued preventing those merchants from returning to their homeland. They married local women, but at the same time preserved their Chinese identity,

3 Hernando Riquel *et al.*, "News from the Western Islands", Jan. 1574, BRB 3, 220.

4 Ptak 1993, 7-9; Viliers 1981, 737.

and maintained illegal trade connections with their clans in the port cities of Eastern China.⁵

The Spanish colonization of the Philippines unintentionally altered the characteristics of the local Chinese merchant community, both in size, places of origin and professions. These developments were possible as a result of two major transformations that occurred in the Chinese empire during the second half of the sixteenth century. The first was the final stage in the Chinese economy's shift from paper-currency to silver. This move is attributed to the "single whip reform", a tax reform, issued in the 1570s, allowing the payment of taxes, previously levied in the form of labor, in specie. This fundamental change in the biggest market of the world, especially in an era of thriving internal trade, caused an infinite demand for silver. This demand led to a silver-gold exchange rate double the one in Europe at that time.⁶

The second occurrence was the lifting of the fifteenth century ban on international maritime trade in 1576. Although the prohibition did not prevent the Chinese merchants from conducting illicit trade, its legalization made trafficking easier and safer.⁷ In addition to a relatively free maritime trade, this legalization meant that non-merchant Chinese had the ability to travel and settle outside mainland China.

These favorable conditions coincided with equally auspicious factors in Spanish America; the amount of silver extracted from the mines of Potosí and Zacatecas, was increased in the 1570s–1580s, following the wide use of mercury amalgamation to recover silver from ore.⁸ The economic boost that followed resulted in a growing demand for Chinese luxuries in Peru and New Spain.

Non-merchant Chinese, attracted by the scent of silver, began immigrating to the city. These immigrants were Fujianese of lower economic status than their merchant compatriots, and soon, they dominated the local economy of Manila as garden farmers, fishermen shopkeepers and craftsmen. As opposed to the Chinese merchants and factors that sojourned in Manila, these laborers resided permanently in Manila, and seldom went back to their ancestral home.⁹

Soon after, Manila, the economic and governmental centre of the Spanish Philippine venture, became completely dependent on Chinese commerce and

5 Wang 1996, 58.

6 Glahn 1996, 61-63, 70-72, 146; Flynn and Giráldez 1997, 266.

7 Brook 1998, 210-215.

8 Cobb 1949, 36-37.

9 Chia 2006, 521-522; Cummins 1971, 307.

labor. While the trade with China not only provided to the Spanish colony regular supply of foodstuffs, domesticated animals, furniture, paper and ammunition, the silk-silver exchange between the Chinese and Spanish became the major source of income for the citizens of Manila. On their side, the Spanish acknowledged the Chinese as highly civilized, sophisticated people, and as essential business partners.

However, the early prosperity of the city did not satisfy its citizens, and by the end of the sixteenth century, six proposals for the entry into China or for its conquest were dispatched to the Catholic emperor. Of these, the proposal sent in 1586 by the General Assembly of the Estates of the Philippine Islands (*juntas generales de todos los estados de las islas Filipinas*) is the most striking. This plan not only embodies the way the Manileños perceived China and the Chinese, but also their perception of Spain as a global empire and their central role in it.

Early Misperceptions: Spanish Knowledge, Aspirations and the Chinese Project

The idea of the Philippine Islands as a stepping stone on the way to China originated even before the foundation of Manila and can be traced to the first description of China sent by Andrés de Mirandaola (1507–1568) to Philip II as early as 1569:

[...] All of us your Majesty's servants and vassals are quite sure that, in your time, China will be subject to your Majesty, and that in these parts, the religion of Christ will be spread and exalted, and your Majesty's royal crown increased, and all this in a very short time.¹⁰

Even if Mirandaola, as the royal *factor*, meant to please the emperor more than to suggest the next course of action, it is obvious that the theme of expansion into continental Asia was present in the hearts of the Spaniards, and perhaps also in the heart of the one who commissioned their voyage. Mirandaola's letter of 1569 supplies us with an early description of China and Chinese society by a Spaniard:

[...] It was learned from these men that China is a very important country and that its people are highly civilized, engage extensively in trade, and have a well-ordered government. They tell of thirteen cities called Chincheo, Cantun, Huechiu, Nimpou, Onchiu, Hinan, Sisuan, Conce, Onan, Nanquin, and Paquin. Paquin is the

10 Andrés de Mirandaola, "Letter to Felipe II", June 8 1569, BRB 3, 29.

court and residence of the king, Fuchu, Ucau, Lintam, and Cencay are cities of especial note. There are in all fifteen in which they say that the king has placed his governors. The king is named Nontehe, and a son of his Taycu. This is the relation that we have been able to get from these men – hitherto, outside of the ancients, the only description of the greatness of China that your Majesty has. They say that these people are so fearful of a prophecy related to them many times by their astrologers – namely, that they are to be subdued, and that the race to subdue them will come from the east – that they will not allow any Portuguese to land in China; and the king orders his governors expressly not to allow it. Throughout his land he has enforced great watchfulness, and stored military supplies, as these Indians give us to understand.¹¹

It is hard to ignore the similarity of the description given here to Spanish reports on the Aztec and Inca Empires. Considering that the Spaniards were already quite disappointed of the population they had encountered in the Philippines, the idea of moving on to conquer China was not out of context. The prophecy of the future falling of China to “a race that comes from the east”, so similar to the mythical Aztec prophecy propagated by the conquistadores following the conquest of Mexico. It is possible that this prophecy is repeated here to prepare the ground for a future conquest. However, it seems that at this early stage, the Spanish colonizers of the Philippines perceived China as another American Imperial Civilization. They did not yet comprehend the vastness, wealth or strength of China.

The following proposals for the entry into China appears in three letters from 1573, all of which addressed to Felipe II; the first one was written by Diego de Artieda Chirino y Uclés (?–1591), a captain and future conquistador of Nicaragua. The second letter was written by Martin Enriquez de Almanza (d. c. 1583; r. 1568–1580), the viceroy of New Spain, and the third by Hernando Riquel (b. 1498), the king’s notary in Manila, and others from the colony (names and positions are not specified). These proposals were preceded by a short summary of what was known of China and its people at the time of writing. However, none of the above writers ever visited China, and their knowledge of the Middle Kingdom was probably acquired from Portuguese and Muslim merchants that had contacts with China, or as is the case in the third letter, from Chinese merchants in Manila. Despite this fact, the picture brought in the descriptions of 1573 is very different from the one presented in the 1569 letter of Mirandaola.

11 Andrés de Mirandaola, “Letter to Felipe II”, June 8 1569, BRB 3, 28-29.

Artieda describes the Chinese civilization in a form of a *relación* surveying industry, military capabilities, governing system, agriculture and supplies, technology, dress and appearance:

The Chinese are highly civilized. They work iron with tools. I have seen iron inlaid with gold and silver, as cunningly and skillfully wrought as they could be in any part of the world. In like manner they work in wood and all other materials... They make gold into threads as is done in Milan, and weave raised designs of it on damasks and other silken fabrics. They possess all kinds of weapons that we have. Their artillery, judging it by some culverins I have seen that came from China, is of excellent quality and better cast than ours... In each city and province there is an armed garrison. The people dress well; they wear beards and are as white as ourselves. The women are very beautiful, except that they all have small eyes. They wear long shirts and robes, reaching to the ground. They dye and dress their hair carefully, and it is even said that they rouge and color their faces. It is said that the king of that land is so great a lord, that his camp is composed of three hundred thousand men, two hundred thousand of whom are mounted on horses. On painted articles I have seen pictures of horsemen armed with coats of mail, Burgundy helmets, and lances. The country is so fertile and well provisioned, that it is believed to be the best country in the world... They possess matrices with which they have printed books from time immemorial.¹²

The same form and order of description was applied by Artieda to describe the Filipino societies, and also by Legazpi himself in an earlier *relación* of 1569.¹³ Similar pattern of description was also evident in earlier chronicles of both conquistadores and religious that had encountered the indigenous civilizations of Hispañola, Mexico and the Andes.¹⁴

The first thing that Artieda mentioned in the description is the fact that the Chinese are excellent smiths. This fact is important, as neither the Aztecs nor the Inca had casted iron for weapons or tools. It is possible that the priority given by Artieda to mentioning the Chinese' ironworking proficiency served to differentiate the Chinese civilization from the previously encountered American civilizations. It is also noticeable that Artieda perceived the Chinese as superior, in some ways, even to the Spanish themselves.

12 Diego de Artieda, "Relation to the Western Islands Called Filipinas", 1573, BRB 3, 183-184.

13 Miguel Lopez de Legazpi, "Relation of the Filipinas Islands and of the Character and Conditions of their Inhabitants", July 7 1569, BRB 3, 39-47.

14 For example, see Elliott 1970, 9.

Artieda did not offer the king to conquer China but rather to enter it as a leader of a diplomatic mission. By doing so he proposed to reconnoiter the coast and check the possibilities of commerce and conquest:

If your Majesty desires to have this land explored, I am at your service provided I be given two ships of about two hundred and fifty tons each, with forty soldiers to each vessel, and all the artillery, ammunition, and provisions that will be necessary. With our Lord's help, and bearing some power of ambassador to the lord of the land, I will enter the country myself, returning by way of Nueva España after having explored the coast. I will ascertain how both trade and conquest must be carried on there [...].¹⁵

Considering that Artieda's declared intention was espionage, the number of vessels and soldiers he requested for the mission was not as ridiculous as later numbers for greater causes seemed to be.

Viceroy Enriquez' letter is not a clear plan, but it is quite possible that its part concerning China was written when a proposal for the entry of China was being discussed:

As for the mainland of China, it is so large a land and so thickly settled that one of its hundred divisions, according to report, is as big as half the world itself. It is learned from the Chinese that they admit strangers only with reluctance to their land. For this reason, more and better soldiers would be needful than those who could go from this land, for those born here are but little used to hardship – although it is also understood that the people of China, in spite of possessing weapons, horses, and artillery, are but little superior in valor to the Indians...¹⁶

Enriquez was probably relying on Artieda's report as his source on Chinese armament. However, the claim given by Enriquez that in spite of their advanced weaponry, the Chinese resemble the Indians in their courage and fighting ability, and so, make no match for the Spaniards in the battlefield, is a new one. This motif appeared in later proposals and constituted the rationalization given by their authors for the huge gap between the greatness of China and its military abilities, to the minute number of combatants requested in their conquest plans.

The next proposal, written by Hernando Riquel was already based on knowledge obtained from Chinese living in Manila. However, the details concerning China differ little from the information given in the other two pro-

15 Diego de Artieda, "Relation to the Western Islands Called Filipinas", 1573, BRB 3, 184.

16 "Letter from the Viceroy of New Spain to Felipe II", 1573, BRB 3, 211-212.

posals of the same year. The theme of a strong but easily subdued kingdom is repeated in Riquel's letter:

It must be understood that those people are very peculiar in their traffic, costume, and customs; every day this is more evident, since some of the inhabitants of this city are natives of China. From them it is learned that the land is very rich and thickly populated. The king is well prepared for war and the frontiers are well fortified with many forts with artillery and garrisons wherein strict watch is kept. They say that from the city of Canton, one of the strongest towns on the coast of the mainland, there is a distance of one year's travel before arriving at Paquin [Pekin], the residence of the king; this means from coast to coast of the land. There are many very populous cities on the way, but if his Majesty would be pleased so to command, they could be subdued and conquered with less than sixty good Spanish soldiers.¹⁷

While some of the information included in the last two proposals was probably taken from the one composed by Artieda, their nature is entirely different. If Artieda was impressed with the Chinese civilization, and offered the king to serve as an ambassador and a spy, the letters of Riquel and Enriquez simply petitioned for a conquest.

The next proposal, written in 1576, was sent to Philip II by the governor of the Philippines, Francisco de Sande. Stronger than its predecessors, this proposal reflects the desire prevalent in the Philippines to expand into mainland China. This petition for the entry and conquest of China was structured in the same manner, and was preceded by a comprehensive description of the land and its people. However, this time the petition was based on genuine knowledge collected in 1575 by a Spanish embassy to China led by the Augustin Fray Martín de Rada and Miguel de Loarca, a soldier and former companion of Legazpi. If the China described by Sande in his *relación* of 1576 lacked the greatness described by Artieda, the account given by him was much broader than the paradoxical axiom of a militarily strong but easily subdued kingdom, as found in the letters of Enriquez and Riquel.

It seems that the Spaniards finally began to grasp China as a real country rather than a distant, legendary kingdom. Sande describes such issues as governmental institutions, provinces, roads, commerce and trade, religion and superstition, attitudes and characteristics of the people, corruption and personal safety, land ownership, medicine, fashion and social habits. He also mentions customs and traditions such as the habit of drinking hot liquids, the custom of foot

17 Hernando Riquel *et al.*, "News from the Western Islands", 1574, BRB 3, 220-221.

binding and the technique of curing by cauterizing the wounds after blood-letting.¹⁸ However, it can be argued that these descriptions were given precisely in order to alienate the Chinese by showing how peculiar they are. This way, the Chinese would become the “others” that none can identify with, prior to a planned Spanish conquest.

While it is clear from Sande’s description that China is a huge, fertile, rich and developed country, it is also very corrupted; bandits, robbers and pirates swarm its roads and waterways, the people are immoral and involved in sexual perversions, and their laziness have them strive only for an easy gain. The common men are poor and wretched, and suffer from the tyranny of those in power – judges, governors and the king.¹⁹ As he had no acquaintance with Chinese history, governmental system or society, Sande did not know how to explain this duality. However, he did not have to; it is evident from Sande’s letter that the Spanish accusations of the Chinese’ tyranny, immorality and peculiarity were not there to provide some cultural background, but rather to justify the conquest of China:

The war with this nation is most just, for it gives freedom to poor, wretched people who are killed, whose children are ravished by strangers, and whom judges, rulers, and king treat with unheard-of tyranny. Each speaks ill of his neighbor; and almost all of them are pirates, when any occasion arises, so that none are faithful to their king. Moreover, a war could be waged against them because they prohibit people from entering their country. Besides, I do not know, nor have I heard of, any wickedness that they do not practice; for they are idolators, sodomites, robbers, and pirates, both by land and sea. And in fact the sea, which ought to be free according to the law of nations, is not so, as far as the Chinese are concerned.²⁰

In this context it is important to note that all along the sixteenth century, the China described by the Spaniards was mostly Guangdong and Fujian provinces, the homelands of the Chinese that came to live in Manila, also visited by de Rada’s embassy. Although (and because) both Fujian and Guangdong harbored China’s most prosperous trade emporiums at that era, they suffered from banditry, piracy and uprisings more than any other province in China during the late Ming (1506–1644).²¹ These phenomena caused by the rapid social changes China had undergone in the second half of the sixteenth century, mainly ur-

18 Francisco de Sande, “Relation of the Philippine Islands”, June 7 1576, BRB 4, 52, 56.

19 Francisco de Sande, “Relation of the Philippine Islands”, June 7, 1576, BRB 4, 50-52.

20 Ibid, BRB 4, 59.

21 Tong 1991, 58-63.

banization, industrialization and commercialization, were probably amplified by the distance from the Imperial Court and the endless possibilities created by international maritime trade.²²

Sande was not aware that, in fact, the eras of Longqing 隆慶 (1567–1573) and Wanli 萬曆 (1573–1620) had also brought China many transformations in military organization, a reformed taxing system and greater measures of control over trade and traffic.²³ Moreover, the pirates, that during the fifteenth and most of the sixteenth centuries brought the eastern provinces to their knees, capturing merchant ships and sacking coastal cities, were diminishing after the lifting of the ban on foreign trade and the introduction of the single whip tax reforms.²⁴

It is true that China of the late Ming had seen many changes, not all of them proved to be for the best of its people. However, even if he could grasp the greatness of China, I suspect that since Sande aimed to acquire permission to plan China's conquest, he emphasized its weaknesses, and not its size, multitude of population, or its military strength. This confusion is evident in the statement that the Chinese population is more numerous than that of Germany (*"más que alemania"*) on the one hand, and claiming that the population of the smallest province of China has more people than New Spain and Peru combined (*"La menor Prouinçia tiene más gente que la Nueva España y Pirú juntos"*) on the other.²⁵

The confusion regarding the ability of China to defend itself led Sande to believe that four to six thousand soldiers would be sufficient for its conquest. He imagined that these soldiers would take a whole province without much difficulty, as the population, suffering from great tyranny, will surely revolt against the local governors. Local pirates and the Japanese would come to the aid of the Spanish soldiers, Sande assured the king, and "...finally, the kind treatment, the evidences of power, and the religion which we shall show to them will hold them firmly to us."²⁶ Paradoxically, these same degenerated and inferior people, according to Sande, were nevertheless ripe for conversion.

At the time this document was composed, the trade with China was not yet stable, and both the Manileños and the Mexicans did not have high prospects

22 Ibid, 140-151.

23 Mote 1999, 730-731.

24 W. So 1975, 154-155.

25 Francisco de Sande, "Relation to the Philippine Islands", June 7, 1576, BRB 4, 50, 53.

26 Ibid, BRB 4, 59.

of it.²⁷ This, in addition to the poor profits of the Philippine *encomiendas*, might have been Sande's incentive to move on to China, a rich albeit wild east.

However, Don Felipe, perhaps out of cautiousness or by some other sense or wisdom, was not happy with the adventure offered, and instead he dismissed the overzealous governor stating that "the opinion here is that the matter should be dropped, and instead you should cultivate good relations with the Chinese and not give aid to the pirates who are their enemies, nor give them any just to cause for annoyance with us."²⁸

Seemingly, the proposals for the conquest of China were evolving from an idea based on out of date information and rumors, to a detailed proposal, supported by a wide range of sources. The Artieda letter is somewhat unusual among these proposals, although a man of arms, he did not elude himself that China could be easily conquered. Sande, however, was sure about the Spanish superiority and the positive prospects of an invasion of China. Although he had mentioned the vastness of China and the multiplicity of its population in his account, his proposal ignored them altogether. When observing China, Sande considered it to be inferior to Spain, similarly to the way the *conquistadores* perceived the imperial societies in America.

Dreaming Big: The Plan to Invade China of 1586

The 1580's saw Spain at its zenith; the annexation of Portugal (1580), the truce signed with the Turks (1581) and the peace made with the rich provinces of the Netherlands in 1585, provided Spain with new territories and income, but also relieved its economy from additional military expenditures. Success was also evident in the New World; Buenos Aires was re-founded by Juan de Garay (1528–1583) in 1580, further exploration into North America was in progress, and the Spaniards were firmly established in the Philippines. Considering these achievements, the concept of a Catholic world monarchy under Spanish rule did not seem so outrageous anymore. The land Spain claimed to control surpassed that of any other empire and encompassed all known continents.

The next plan for the conquest of China was formulated during this jubilant era. This time, the planners were all the officials of the young colony: secu-

27 Ibid, BRB 4, 59; Letter from the viceroy of New Spain to Felipe II, 1573, BRB 4, 212.

28 Quoted in Kamen 2003, 224.

lar administrators, military commanders and ecclesiastical leaders. All from governor and bishop on down gathered in the first General Assembly of the Estates of the Philippine Islands (*juntas generales de todos los estados de las islas Filipinas*) where among other issues this plan was conceived. The leading figures among the signatories seemed to be Santiago de Vera, the governor of the Philippines and head of the *audiencia*, the first bishop of Manila, the Dominican friar Domingo Salazar (1512–1594) and the Jesuit father Alonso Sanchez (1547–1593). Vera and Salazar, having been responsible for the material and spiritual aspects of the lives of almost twenty thousand Chinese in Manila, had an intimate acquaintance with their culture and local society. Sanchez himself had visited China twice but at both times was expelled from Guangzhou after attempting to arrange for proselytising.²⁹

Different from previous proposals discussed above, this plan does not appear as a part of a *relación* but as an appendix to the final protocol of the general assembly. Contrary to earlier plans, the 1586 document is a precise military plan, divided into consistent, carefully phrased and detailed closes. For the planners this proposal meant the fulfillment of both their religious duties to god, and temporal duties to their king and country. To them, the expansion into continental Asia was a step towards global redemption and the end of time.³⁰

The plan itself, composed by professionals, specifies much more than the number of soldiers needed for the operation, but also their origins, their expected salary, their equipment and armament. Similar description is given of the supply routes and recruiting methods, as well as of cooperation and coordination with non-Spanish forces. In light of the recent union of the Iberian crowns, and the expanding Portuguese sphere of influence in the East, the twenty thousand combatants included in the plan were not solely of Spanish origin, but included Portuguese soldiers, Japanese mercenaries, and even Indian slaves, brought from the viceroyalty of Goa. All participants were planned to rendezvous in the Philippines with Spanish forces from the peninsula and native Filipino auxiliaries.³¹ The use of forces and materials from all over the known world may imply that the composers of the plan perceived themselves as a part of a vast empire on its way to become a universal one.

29 Headly 1995, 638; see also Ollé 2002.

30 Santiago de Vera *et al.*, “Memorial to the Counsel by the Citizens of the Filipinas Islands”, BRB 6, 198.

31 *Ibid.*, BRB 6, 200-203.

However, while Artieda had offered to reconnoiter and Sande's proposal was one of conquest, the plan offered by the General Assembly is somewhat different. The subjugation of China was planned to be achieved through the conversion of its people, rather than by a pure military conquest. The assumption was that the Chinese were so ripe for conversion that, once preached to peacefully, they would revolt against their tyrannous Mandarins and welcome Spanish hegemony, religion and culture. Accordingly, the preachers were to enter China with an armed escort rather than an army.³²

The voice of Bishop Domingo Salazar is clearly dominant in this section, criticizing the Spanish expeditions in America for leaving the land desolate and depopulated. As a devoted student of Vitoria and Las Casas, Salazar worked against the oppression of the indigenous population, and defended the Chinese community in Manila when maltreated by Spanish officials. Gradually, he became an advocate of the Chinese and their culture, and as such, he did not wish China to be ravaged by greedy *conquistadores*. He supported a peaceful entry into China, stating that the wealth of that country is in its people, rather than in the imperial treasure houses. Therefore, if an orderly entry was not ensured, the Spanish would alienate the Chinese, and as a result, would be unable to rule the kingdom or to convert its people:

If the Spaniards go into China in their usual fashion, they would desolate and ravage the most populous and richest country that ever was seen; and if the people of China be once driven away, it will be as poor as all the other depopulated Yndias – for its riches are only those that are produced by a numerous and industrious people, and without them it would not be rich.³³

In the opinion of Salazar and his co-planners, the Chinese governing system would somehow be preserved in order to prevent havoc and anarchy, and to maintain the existing ideal Chinese society:

His Majesty should know that the government of that people is so wonderful, both for restraining and keeping in order so great a multitude; and because, although lacking the further light and aid of the faith, it is maintained with such peace and quiet, so much wealth, happiness, and plenty, that never since its foundation, so far

32 Ibid, BRB 6, 212-213.

33 Santiago de Vera *et al.*, "Memorial to the Counsel by the Citizens of the Filipinas Islands", BRB 6, 211.

as is known, has it suffered war, pestilence, or famine, in the main body of the realm, although there are wars on the Tartar frontiers.³⁴

The planners attributed many superlatives to the Chinese, concurrently, their opinion on the Spanish nature is not entirely positive. They went as far as to depict the Chinese as superior to the Spanish in every aspect save their faith and courage.

Since the people are so clever and intelligent, with agreeably fair complexions and well-formed bodies, and are so respectable and wealthy, and have nothing of the Indian in their nature, they have the advantage of us in everything except salvation by the faith, and courage.³⁵

Although the Chinese were highly esteemed by the Spanish for their industry, mental capabilities and developed governing system, the Spaniards never assumed that they might lose even a single battle to the Chinese. The only dangers anticipated for the Spanish forces were “confusion, discouragement or desertion” caused by sending to China unqualified commanders or undisciplined soldiers.³⁶ The justifications for this confidence were the same two aspects in which the Chinese were surpassed by the Spaniards: faith and courage.

It seems that, after having been in contact with China and the Chinese in Manila for almost twenty years, the thinking pattern of “China as another American kingdom” had almost completely disappeared from the minds of the Spaniards. Yet, from a military perspective, they had difficulty comparing China to Spain or to any other European or Mediterranean power.

One of the reasons for this difficulty, I would suggest, was the Spanish failure to perceive the characteristics of the East-Asian battlefield. Although at times technologically inferior to the European arena, when it came to the use of manpower, it ousted it by far. In the case of the Japanese invasions of Korea (1592–1598), over 150,000 soldiers took part in the first wave of the invasion alone. Facing a Korean army, reinforced by a modest Ming expeditionary force of about 40,000 soldiers, Japan had failed to take Korea.³⁷ Yet, to the Spaniards it was inconceivable that against an invasion of 20,000 men, China could easily muster several hundred thousand soldiers.

34 Ibid, BRB 6, 211-212.

35 Ibid, BRB 6, 219.

36 Ibid, BRB 6, 210-211.

37 Turnbull 2002, 42, 140.

The plan ends with a bold vision of a future Hispano-Chinese Utopian society. A civilization created by mixed marriages of Spanish soldiers and Chinese women, administered by native governors under Spanish rule. Carried away by their imagination, the planners went so far as to offer the foundation of new military orders in China, the creation of titles, division of *encomiendas* and the appointment of “four to six viceroys”. In addition, controlling China would enable Spain to subjugate all the kingdoms under Chinese sphere of domination, including Cambodia and Siam.³⁸ It can be argued that the values found in this utopian dream reflect a social continuation that altered little since the Spanish *reconquista*.

The Spaniards’ perception of the Chinese as a superior civilization was a very selective one; they chose to see those characteristics of superiority where it was suitable and useful, but on less convenient occasions, they totally ignored them. Therefore, the logic for China’s role as a major Asian power simply eluded them. Henry Kamen rightly summarized this misperception: “Spaniards like to think of Manila as an outpost of a universal Spanish empire. In reality, it existed only because of the tolerance of the Chinese and Japanese.”³⁹

So far, when not dismissed as a complete folly, the plan of 1586 was treated as a part of the “messianic imperialism” or “evangelic spiritualism” that pervaded the court of Philip II following the union of the crowns.⁴⁰ Manel Ollé, in his monograph *La Empresa de China*, perceived it as the zenith of Spanish aspirations in Asia, prior to a transition in policy towards peaceful trade. Without contradicting these scholarships, I would like to suggest a different approach to the Spanish aspirations manifested in this plan.

During the early years of the colonization of the Philippines, the Spaniards had frequently complained on the poor state of their new acquisition. This may have been one of the motivations for the early proposals for the conquest of China. However, by the mid-1580s the trade with China was thriving and the new colony was enjoying a relative prosperity. The cargo of the galleon *Santa Ana*, captured by Thomas Cavendish (1560–1592) in 1587 may serve here as an evidence for that fortunate state; the Englishman’s prize contained “more

38 Santiago de Vera *et al.*, “Memorial to the Counsel by the Citizens of the Filipinas Islands”, BRB 6, 217-227.

39 Kamen 2003, 220.

40 Parker 1995.

than a million [pesos'] worth of gold, pearls, musk, civet, and rich merchandise..."⁴¹

As I have mentioned above, most Spaniards in Manila invested in or were financially tied to the Galleon Trade. Since an established merchant elite did not evolve in Manila until well into the seventeenth century, those involved in the trade were mostly the colony's administrators, clergy, officers and soldiers. True, greed has no limits; however, considering that the colonizers were getting quite wealthy without much effort, a proposal of such magnitude had to have more motives than mere covetousness.

The same question arises regarding the missionaries. Assuming they were not driven by material greed (though quite often they were), the Philippine Islands had many souls awaiting to be saved. Yet the religious orders, led by the Bishop, also supported the entry. There is no clear answer to this question, but it seems that several factors were responsible for the motivation to conquer China, as expressed by both lay and religious colonizers of Manila.

It may be easier to explain the ecclesiastical plea for entry into China. Even before meeting any Chinese or setting foot in China, some of the religious had dreamt of its conversion. Bishop Salazar himself confessed it:

For a long time I have had the conversion of that kingdom at heart, and with that thought I came to these islands. One of the reasons which made me accept this bishopric was the fact that these islands were very near China, and that many Chinese had come to live here.⁴²

Salazar was not the only one to believe that in the matter of conversion, China would be a better target than the Philippine Islands; more than once, friars left their post in the Islands without authorization in order to go to China.⁴³ Additionally, the geographical characteristics of the archipelago, its linguistic diversity, and the lack of commonly used alphabet, made it difficult for the missionaries to reach their assigned parishes and to communicate with their flock.⁴⁴ The missionaries believed that they would not encounter similar difficulties in China, perceiving it as a big landmass, densely populated "with but one stock", and a long literary tradition.

41 Santiago de Vera, "Letter to Felipe II", BRB 7, 47.

42 Domingo Salazar, "The Chinese and the Parian of Manila", BRB 7, 161.

43 Domingo Salazar, "Affairs in the Philippine Islands", 1583, BRB 5, 238.

44 Phelan 1959, 17-18.

The drive of the officials and soldiers of Manila to invade China can perhaps be better explained in cultural terms; the nature of the Spanish conquest revolved mostly around the idea of acquisition of land and the subjection of people. In the Philippines, the *conquistadores* faced the same typical geographical and social difficulties as their religious brethren. The Castilians were never seafarers by nature, and often hired foreigners to act as explorers, pilots and commanders on their behalf. This disinclination made the Spanish pacification of the Philippines a slow and continuous process.

The relative unprofitability of the Philippine *encomiendas* caused the Spanish colonists to concentrate around Manila and its lucrative commerce. However, the Spaniards were neither merchants by ideal nor by lifestyle. Even in Mexico, where a prosperous merchant elite was established at that time, merchants did not enjoy the social status clergy and government officials did.⁴⁵ High officials in Manila (often, themselves, involved in the trade) had repeatedly criticized the new profitable vocation of the colony's soldiery, scorning them as slothful, corrupt and effeminate:

The Spaniards have become effeminate in spirit by their trading, and on various occasions have greatly lost their repute, for they are not as they used to be – having given themselves over to vices, luxuries, fine clothes, eating, and drinking; consequently they have not had their wonted success on several of the expeditions, and have come back without accomplishing what they set out to do, and the friendly Indians are making war, and going out to fight.⁴⁶

I believe that the shift from a colonization focused on land control to one focused on trade created a social tension, which became an important catalyst for the Manilaños' aspirations to conquer China. Land control was seen as dignified, masculine and important for the preservation of the colony, while trade was grasped as feminine, weak and lazy. The narrative of plans for the invasion of China may have arisen from the Spanish society's inability to adapt itself to the conditions of the Philippine Islands, and its failure to adopt new ideals of prestige and models of status. Thus, even if *de facto* the colony profited from trade rather than from *encomiendas*, the officials and military elite were unequipped to make the social and ideological change. This incapability led the secular and religious elites to look for other terrains for colonization and con-

45 Schell-Hoberman 1991, 281.

46 Pedro de Rojas, "Letter to Felipe II", June 1586, BRB 6, 270-271. For more examples, see: Domingo Salazar, "Letter to Philip II", 24 June 1590, BRB 7, 254; Antonio de Morga, "Letter to Felipe II", July 1596, BRB 9, 254.

quest that would enable them to maintain the tradition they had developed during the *reconquista* and established, later, in the new world. This state of stagnation had also limited the Spaniards' perception of newly encountered civilizations such as that of Imperial China.

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