

# The “Golden Snake Kingship”: Making a Positive Image of the Chinese Other in Juan González de Mendoza’s *History of the Great and Mighty Kingdom of China* (1586)<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract:

*The History of the Great and Mighty Kingdom of China*, compiled by the Spanish missionary, Juan González de Mendoza was one of the Bestsellers about China in 16th-century’s Europe. However, its author misread and mistranslated the Chinese Dragon Totem, an exclusive symbol of the power of the Chinese emperor, as a golden snake emblem for reasons rooted in his 16th-century Spanish context, in what we thus call the “Golden Snake Kingship” interpretation. Over the years, some scholars have also paid attention to this issue, but they have not accurately interpreted the Spanish cultural connotations of the golden snake concept or explained the European attitude towards Chinese culture represented by the sign. So this article aims to reinterpret this issue based on González de Mendoza’s original texts and the first Spanish monolingual dictionary. Finally, we get the conclusion that although both “snake” and “dragon” had negative meanings in the 16th century’s Spain, “dragon” contained a supreme negative meaning against the Christianity, and this is in opposition to the evangelization purpose of González de Mendoza’s writing attitude on China. Although the snake is not the most appropriate method to represent the Chinese emperor for the Europeans, it is a choice relatively less contradictory in the 16th century’s

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Europe, dominated by Christianity, and also more congruous with the author's writing purpose.

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### 1. Dilemma in the Translation History of Chinese “Dragon”: How to Interpret the “Golden Snake Kingship”?

How to translate the Chinese character “龙” (dragon) into Western languages reveals a cultural conflict and dilemma that has troubled Chinese and European scholars for centuries. On review of its translation history, we find two methods interwoven.

One is the transliteration. The “dragon” evokes different metaphors in Chinese and Western contexts – the evil dragon in traditional Western culture and in European collective cultural memory, while in traditional Chinese culture, the dragon is a symbol of supreme power. Therefore, Li Shixue, researcher of Academia Sinica and expert on the Chinese dragon's translation history, proposed to use the Chinese pinyin long to translate “the Chinese dragon” ( 龍 ) to Western languages, acknowledging the untranslatability of dragons from one culture to another (2015, p. 466).

The other way is the free translation. Many early Western sinologists used this method and decoded “the Chinese dragon” into the Latin word “serpens” (snake). It is worth noting that this translation prevailed in Europe from the 14th to the 16th century. For example, according to Li Shixue (Li, 2015, pp. 455-456), it was widely used in *The Eastern Parts of the World* described by Friar Odoric (Yule, 1913), C.R. Boxer's *South China in the sixteenth century* (Boxer, 2010), Juan González de Mendoza's *History of the Great Chinese Empire* (Ricci, 1942), Matteo Ricci's *Storia dell'Introduzione del Cristianesimo in Cina* (González de Mendoza, 1586), and Matteo Ricci and Michele Ruggieri's *Portuguese Chinese Dictionary* (*Dicionário Português – Chinês*) (Ricci, 2002).

Besides, Li Shixue gave an explanation of the free translations used by the sinologists above: “It is probably difficult for Odoric to find the shadow of a Chinese dragon in Western languages, so finally they replaced it with a snake. Moreover, this translation also revealed that the Europeans could already recognize the Chinese dragons were different from the Western ones, so they did not dare to translate it with the Latin ‘draco’ or its plural form ‘draconis’ in European languages” (Li, 2015, pp. 465-466).

Based on the studies aforementioned, scholars have paid attention to the cultural connotations of dragons in different languages and the conflicts among them; nevertheless, their interpretation seems too vague to clarify a key issue widely ignored by researchers. That is, over two centuries, from The Eastern Parts of the World described by Friar Odoric to Juan González de Mendoza’s *The History of the Kingdom of China*, the sinologists connected “snake” and “Chinese Dragon”.<sup>1</sup> That is to say, they translated the Chinese dragon as “snake” in the European context. Furthermore, this cultural symbol prevailed in Europe for several centuries. In particular, in the 16th century, González de Mendoza specified the connection of the two signs and created a new cross-cultural sign “golden snake – Chinese Emperor”. In view of this, we cannot help reflecting: What connotations did “snake” have in the 16th Spanish context? And what is the metaphor expressed by the cultural sign “golden snake – Chinese Emperor”? Finally, what was the attitude of the Europeans towards Chinese culture in the 16th Century, with the translation widely used?

The problems above-mentioned also constitute the purpose of our investigation. Given the present author’s focus on Juan González de Mendoza’s *The History of the Kingdom of China* for many years, this paper takes the cultural sign “golden snake – Chinese Emperor” marked in González de Mendoza’s Spanish writing on China as a logical starting point, and aims to re-interpret the sign’s cultural connotations from the perspective of 16th-century’s Spain, and finally to thereby reveal the Spanish attitude toward the Chinese culture at that period.

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<sup>1</sup> In Matteo Ricci and Michele Ruggieri’s *Portuguese Chinese Dictionary*, they translated the Chinese character “dragon” as Latin “serpen”. Juan González de Mendoza translated it as the Spanish word “serpiente” in his *History of the Great Chinese Empire*. In these characters, in this article, we used the English “snake” to refer to their translation in Latin and Spanish.

## 2. “Golden Snake – Chinese Empire”: A Cross-cultural Sign Marked in Early Western Imagination about China

Before starting to read González de Mendoza’s Chinese imaginary in detail, we need to clarify which version of the book was studied in this paper. González de Mendoza’s book was published for the first time in 1585 in Rome, with the original Spanish title *Historia de las cosas mas notables, ritos y costumbres, del gran Reyno de la China, como por relacion de Religioso y otras personas que han estado en el dicho Reyno* (History of the most notable things, rites and customs, of the great Kingdom of China, as by relation to Religious and other people who have been in the said Kingdom); this title is shortened to *The History of the Great and Mighty Kingdom of China and the Situation Thereof* in the modern English edition (González de Mendoza, 1853). However, this first edition of the book was disavowed by González de Mendoza, as it was published in Italy by printers who did not know Spanish well and left many orthographic errors. According to the present author’s edition research, the Spanish revised edition published in Madrid in 1586 by Querino Gerardo is the edition approved by González de Mendoza. Therefore, this article takes this edition as a reference henceforth (Gao Bo, 2019, p.154).

The Spanish edition of 1586 has 368 pages (González de Mendoza, 1586). It consists of three parts, each of them with three volumes. The first part is an encyclopedic overview of China’s politics, economy, geography, history, culture, beliefs, etiquette, and customs in the Ming Dynasty. The second part is a recompilation of the Spanish and Portuguese missionaries’ travelogues about China, and the third part refers to the missionaries’ travelogues about the rest of the world except China, such as Mexico and China’s Asian neighbors. Obviously, from the index of the book, we can find that González de Mendoza’s representation of China is mainly concentrated in the first and second parts of the book.

It should be pointed out that González de Mendoza never visited China in all his life, and his writing on China was a compilation of materials from previous missionaries. Although before him, many European missionaries wrote travelogues based on their personal experiences in China, their cultural impact in Europe was far less than that of González de Mendoza. In these characters, D. F. Lach (1994, p. 744), makes comments on González de Mendoza’s book’s influence in the 16th century as follows:

Mendoza's clarity, his penetrating insights, and his lively style must also have contributed to its popularity. In fact, the authority of Mendoza's book was so great that it became the point of departure and the basis of comparison for all subsequent European works on China written before the eighteenth century.

This work's great historical impact underlies the specific focus of our investigation. Among other details, the present author noticed that in the Spanish edition of 1586, González de Mendoza three times used the term "serpiente dorado" (golden snake) to represent the supreme power of the Chinese emperor from his Spanish perspective. In this regard, an interlingua sign "golden snake – Chinese Emperor" was created; it appeared at the first time in chapter 8 of volume 3 of the first part: "Estan bondadas las armas del Rey, que son, como se ha dicho, unas serpientes texidas con hilo de oro" (The King's emblems are embroidered with snakes by gold thread, as told before) (González de Mendoza, 1586, p. 65).<sup>1</sup> It appeared again in chapter 17 of volume 1 of the second part: "Las armas del Rey que son unas serpientes en laçadas" (The King's emblems are linked snakes) (González de Mendoza, 1586, p. 165). Finally, it appeared for the last time in chapter 7 of volume 2 of the second part: "Las armas del Rey, que son, como ya hemos dicho, unas serpientes enlaçadas" (The King's emblems, which are, as we have already said, linked snakes) (González de Mendoza, 1586, p. 165).

Thus, González de Mendoza used "serpiente dorado" (golden snake) three times to represent the emblem of the Chinese emperor. Moreover, he grafted a new metaphor – the Chinese emperor – to the Spanish word "serpiente" (snake) in order to construct a cross-cultural sign "Golden snake – Chinese Emperor". However, we cannot ignore González de Mendoza's misunderstanding of the Chinese culture in his symbol. Clearly, González de Mendoza confused the cultural connotations of dragons and snakes in the Ming Dynasty (specifically, his writing on China was compiled in the 1580s, the Wanli period of the Ming Dynasty (1573-1620). In that period, the dragon (not the snake) was the insignia of the Chinese emperor, representing the exclusive and supreme power of the monarch. At this point, we can't help but question: Was this concept "Golden snake – Chinese Empe-

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<sup>1</sup> It should be pointed out that the English translations in this essay, unless otherwise specified, are the present author's translations.

ror” created by González de Mendoza, or does it represent his rewriting or an adaptation of an existing concept? Through a literature review, we find that the prototype of “Golden snake – Chinese Emperor” can be traced back to The Journey of William of Rubruck to the East, published in the 13th century. Flemish Franciscan monk William of Rubruck (1220-1293) was sent by King Louis IX of France as an envoy to Möngke Khan, ruler of the Mongolian Empire, in 1252. In his book, he described a golden snake wrapped around the pillars of the Great Khan’s palace; let us read the original text carefully:

Master William the Parisian had mad for [the Khan] a great silver tree, and at its roots are four lions of silver, each with a conduit through it, and all belching forth white milk of mares. And four conduits are led inside the three to its tops, which are bent downward, and on each of these is also a gilded serpent, whose tail twines around the tree (William of Rubruck, 1900, p. 208).

In the 14th century, Marco Polo perpetuated Rubruck’s oriental imagination, and The description of the world represented the Mongolian Great Khan’s palace with pillars wrapped with golden serpents (Polo, 1938). Thus, González de Mendoza’s “Golden Snake Kingship” could have reached back to these Western missionaries’ image of China. It’s just that neither Rubruck nor Marco Polo explicitly pointed out that the snake was the emblem of the Chinese emperor; instead, they only described the “golden snake” in his palace. González de Mendoza, on the other hand, actively constituted the symbol “golden snake – Chinese emperor” from a 16th-century Spanish perspective. But why did González de Mendoza use the Spanish word “serpiente” (snake) instead of a dragon to stand in for the Ming emperor’s power in the Spanish context? What connotations did the sign “Golden snake – Chinese Emperor” contain? And what attitude toward Chinese culture represented this translation? These problems will now be considered.

### **3. “Golden Snake – Chinese Emperor”: Making a Positive or negative Chinese Image for Europe?**

To answer these questions, firstly, we need to go back to 16th-century Spain to recognize the concepts of “dragon” and “snake” at that time. As mentioned above, González de Mendoza employed the cultural symbol of

“golden snake – Chinese Emperor ” three times in his writing. However, based on these texts alone, we can’t perceive the attitude of this Spanish sinologist toward China by creating such a cross-cultural sign. Besides, González de Mendoza also interpreted the role of dragons in Chinese culture. This is also the only reference to dragons in his writing, as he said in the original Spanish text:

Frontero del assietno del Virey, estaua la pared blanca, y en ella pintado vn muy fiero Dragon que lançaua fuego por la boca, ojos, y narizes: pintura (segun entendieron) que la tienen comunmente todos los Iuezes de aquel Reyno delante de las sillas y tribunales donde se sientan para juzgar, y se pone con intento de que signifique al Iuez la ferocidad que ha de tener sentado en aquel lugar en hazer justicia sin temer a ninguno (In front of the Viceroy's seat, there was a white wall, and on it was painted a very fierce Dragon that released fire from its mouth, eyes, and nose: painting (according to what they understood) that all the judges of that Kingdom commonly have in front of the chairs and tribunals where they sit to judge, and it is put with the intention that the judge signifies the majesty that he must have sitting in that place in doing justice without fearing anyone) (González de Mendoza, 1586, p. 240).

The description above reveals that in the 16th century when the Chinese “dragon” traveled from the Chinese to the Spanish context, it was interpreted as a representation of majesty and justice in official work. This was another misunderstanding by González de Mendoza; as indicated before, during the Wanli period, the dragon was the exclusive power symbol of the Chinese emperor and was forbidden to be used by others.

So far, we still can’t get the attitude of González de Mendoza about Chinese culture by creating a cultural sign “golden snake – Chinese Emperor” in his texts above cited. To clarify this question, we need to resort to the world’s first Spanish monolingual dictionary, the *Tesoro de la Lengua Castellana, o Española* (Treasury of the Castilian, or Spanish, Language). The great academic value of this dictionary is still seldom recognized by international scholars; it is the first dictionary to define Spanish vocabulary in Spanish, and it is also the first monolingual dictionary in any of the European modern languages. It was edited by Sebastián de Covarrubias Orozco

and published in Madrid in 1611, and is the first to summarize the signifiers and metaphors of “dragon” and “serpiente” (serpent) in the Spanish context, and thus it has become an important reference for the present study. The dictionary states that dragón, as a signifier in Spanish, means a species of creature: “dragon is a serpent of many years, which with age has come to grow outrageously, and some say that such wings and feet are born in the way that they are painted” (Covarrubias Orozco, 1611, p. 329). Besides, “dragon,” has been grafted into multiple additional meanings. First, “dragon,” as interpreted in the dictionary, “is painted on the flag of the Roman army, which symbolizes the extreme vigilance of the Captain General, and the care and shrewdness that he had to have in all, just like Ovidius’ book said in Latin: ‘Terrigenasque feros, insopitumque dragonem’” (Covarrubias Orozco, 1611, p. 329). In view of these characters, the dictionary again indicated, “they put the dragon under the protection of Aesculapius to imply the great warning of the doctors in looking after the patients. And the dragon is also a sacred object held by the goddess Pallas to maintain chastity. It was also a dragon that guarded the golden apples in the orchard of Hesperides, just like Horace’s verse said ‘*Omnibus hoc vitium est cantoribus*’” (Covarrubias Orozco, 1611, p. 329).

Second, the dragon also represented greed and gluttony. As explained in the dictionary, “There has been a folk saying since ancient times: If you want to become a snake or a dragon snake, you must first eat many snakes. If you want to become an emperor or rule the world to be a king, one must devour many other kings and princes and to become ‘*vt ita Rex Regum fierer, & dominantium dominus*’” (Covarrubias Orozco, 1611, p. 329).

Therefore, the dragon is interpreted as a symbol of vigilance, care, shrewdness, greed and gluttony. In addition, we also noticed that in the dictionary, “dragon” has been grafted into two metaphors, both full of negative connotations. Let us continue to read the dictionary, “Dragon is also the synonym of the devil, especially in Chapter 12 of ‘Apocalypse’, Michael et Angeli eius praliabatur cum Dracone” (Covarrubias Orozco, 1611, p. 329). That chapter refers to the battle between the archangel Michael and his angels and a dragon. Besides, according to the dictionary, “it also signifies the Tyrants, Monarchs, Emperors, Kings, Pagans, who have persecuted the Church and the people of God, before and after the accession of Christ our Lord” (Covarrubias Orozco, 1611, p. 329).



So based on the explanations above, the two negative metaphors made “dragon” exist conventionally visualized as: “Dragon – the devil” and “Dragon – tyrants, kings, emperors, kings and heretics who persecuted the church and the people of God.” Now, let us read the meaning of “snake” in the dictionary. “Serpiente”, in Spanish, refers to a species of creature, the “snake”, as explained in the dictionary: “Usually we call an imaginary long insect with wings and huge claws a snake, and all snakes belong to the ground crawling family. We call them snakes because all snakes crawl on the ground.” (Covarrubias Orozco, 1611, p. 329). The dictionary also indicated that the metaphor of “snake” meant something cunning and deceitful, let’s continue to read its interpretation:

The third chapter of “Genesis” in The Bible (United Version) pointed out that the snake is the most cunning animal among all the beasts created by the Lord, as the Lord said to the snake: “Because you have done this, cursed are you above all livestock and all wild animals! You will crawl on your belly, and you will eat dust all the days of your life.” It was mainly from the devil” (Covarrubias Orozco, 1611, p. 329).

As we can see, between the meanings of “dragon” and “serpent” in the 16th-century Spanish context, although the “snake” contained a simple metaphorical meaning; meanwhile, “dragon” had multiple and complex meanings, both of them took a lot of negativity at that period and neither of them had connections with the Chinese emperor. Given this, we have got to further understand the difficulties to translate the Chinese dragon into the European context in front of the Spanish missionary.

Among other meanings, what has caught my attention is that dragons were profiled as tyrants, kings, emperors, kings and heretics who persecuted the church and the people of God in the 16th century. Given this, if the Chinese character “dragon” had been literally translated as “dragón” in the Spanish context, it logically would have created a supreme negative image of heterogeneous civilization against Christianity. We can’t help but continue to reflect on the reason why González de Mendoza could not make a Chinese image in opposition to Christianity. This question gives us a clue to explain the translation attitude of the Spanish missionary.

In my opinion, the key issue is that making a Chinese image against Christianity would have been in contrast to the writing stance that Mendoza exhibited throughout the History of the Great and Mighty Kingdom of China. Consequently, this problem touches upon another problem: what is the position of González de Mendoza about China in his book ?

Based on the present author's many years of research on González de Mendoza 's Chinese writing, we have got to recognize that he showed evident respect for Chinese culture throughout his book. In view of these characters, he fully affirmed China's rich material life and advanced social system. At the same time, he also tried his best to construct commensurability between Christian culture and Chinese culture, to figure out a Chinese image easy to be evangelized in the European context. In reality, evangelization also constituted the purpose of his Chinese writing, as he states in the "Dedication" of his book: "I also think that only by understanding the customs and geography of that country can I guide my enthusiasm in the right way and convert the people there to my Catholic faith."(González de Mendoza, 1586, p. 13). Besides, Mendoza not only clarified his standpoint of converting China in the paratexts, this gesture was also presented throughout his book. Let's read one of his Christianizations of Chinese culture in his book. The present author has translated his original Spanish texts into English as follows:

The Chinese say that among the idols they worship, there is one that is the most peculiar and the most respected. It is painted with a body and three heads looking at each other. They say that the painting represents the three heads of one heart, that is to say, when one head is delighted, the other two are also joyful, and when one head is offended, the other two are also angry. Explained in Christian terms, this can be understood as the Holy Trinity of our faith. This and other indications confirm that the glorious saint Christopher St. Thomas had come to preach in this empire (González de Mendoza, 1586, p. 21).

According to reliable sources, he passed through the Chinese Empire on his way to India, where he preached the Holy Gospel and the belief in the Holy Trinity. The iconography of the Holy Trinity continues to this day, although there is a long history of misconceptions and blind idolatry that make it impossible for them to know the true meaning of the image of the Trinity (González de Mendoza, 1586, p. 22).

Therefore, if Mendoza had profiled the Chinese emperor as a hateful pagan emperor against Christianity, it would have been contrary to his writing position on China presented in the whole book. However, we can't ignore that the use of the snake to symbolize the Chinese emperor also had negative connotations, as snakes implied cunning and related to the devil in the dictionary. But, at least the "snake" did not take an obvious implication of opposition in the Spanish context to Christianity, which constituted one of the most important purposes of his book, that is to say, the evangelization of China. In reality, González de Mendoza's position on China is also a refraction of the King of Spain Felipe II, as he declares in the "Dedication" of his book:

My Lord:<sup>1</sup>

In 1580, His Majesty the King ordered me to bring numerous rare treasures as gifts to China, expressing His Majesty's friendship and desire to establish friendly exchanges with the Chinese emperor, as well as the needs of the subjects of the two countries for trade through the Island of the Philippines. At this time, His Excellency's predecessor, the well-known Don Antonio de Padilla-Meneses, suggested that when I arrived in China, I should carefully note the situation there, so that I could tell him in detail what I had seen and heard when I returned. I also think that only by understanding the customs and geography of China can I guide my enthusiasm in the right way and convert the people there to my Catholic faith. (González de Mendoza, 1586, pp. 11-13).

According to the texts above stated, González de Mendoza – the ambassador on behalf of the King Philip II of Spain to visit Emperor Wanli – indicated clearly in his paratexts that the Spanish king revealed a friendly attitude towards China, as the Augustinian said, the purpose of his tour was to establish friendly relations and seek business and evangelization. In these characters, making a Chinese "Golden Snake Kinship" would be more consistent with the evangelization purpose, promoted by his delegation to China, than a "Chinese dragon Kinship". Besides, evangelization was also the González de Mendoza's intention exposed in his writing on China.

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<sup>1</sup> This dedication is to Mr. Fernando de Vega Fonseca, Presidente del Consejo de Indias.

## Conclusion

So far, we have deciphered González de Mendoza's cultural standpoint based on the cross – cultural sign “golden snake – Chinese emperor” marked in his Spanish imagination about the Ming Dynasty. That is to say, according to him, the golden snake is the emblem of the Chinese emperor. Obviously, the use of “snake” to represent the supreme power of the Chinese monarch is regarded as a desecration under traditional Chinese culture. However, in 16th-century Spain, this kind of imagination about China implicated a process of cultural adjustment. As González de Mendoza never visited China all his life, his writings on China were based on the previous travelogues about the Asian Empire. Logically, the “Chinese emperor's golden snake emblem” was not simply a description of what he saw in China, but consisted in representing a heterogeneous civilization based on previous missionary's reports. In this character, making a cultural symbol implicates a choice. That is to say, in spite of the similarity in profiles of the two creatures, the snake and the dragon contained different cultural connotations at the time when he lived.

According to the first Spanish monolingual dictionary, both words had negative meanings. However, the “dragon” existed as a “evil dragon” in the European' collective memory and, in particular, went against Christianity. This connotation of “dragon” would be in opposition to the evangelization purpose of González de Mendoza's writing attitude on China. As we see, finally he sorted to the “snake” instead of the “dragon” to refer to the Chinese emperor. As a result, he got to make an image of China relatively less contradictory in the 16th century's Europe, dominated by Christianity, and also more congruous with his writing purpose. To this extent, we can perceive the effort that González de Mendoza made to leave a positive, or, at least, a less negative image of China by constructing “the Chinese Golden snake kinship” in the 16th century's Europe.

Furthermore, as far as we know, his book was translated into almost all the European languages after its first publication in Rome and became a bestseller in the 16th century's Europe. Therefore, the sign “Golden Snake – Chinese emperor,” employed by González de Mendoza in the 16th century, can trigger a deeper reflection: the Spanish missionary's attitude on China was also a refraction of the 16th century's relationship between China and the Western countries? This question is to be further explored in our follow-up research.

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