

Diplomatic Envoy, Courtier, and Missionary: A Comparative Study of Juan Cobo and Diego de Pantoja in East-West Exchanges of the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries

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Abstract. Objective/Context: This article offers a comparative analysis of two early modern missionaries—Dominican Juan Cobo and Jesuit Diego de Pantoja—within the broader context of early globalization. While Cobo operated in the colonial setting of Manila and engaged in diplomatic missions like the 1592 embassy to Japan, Pantoja worked at the heart of the Ming court, using scientific and cultural knowledge to promote engagement among the elite. **Methodology:** Drawing on primary sources and recent scholarship, this study explores the divergent evangelization strategies, political roles, and identity negotiations of these two missionaries. **Originality:** By situating both figures within the interconnected maritime and diplomatic networks of East Asia, the article contributes to global historical debates on cross-cultural mediation and the complex entanglements among religion, empire, and knowledge in the early modern world. **Conclusions:** The article argues that the trajectories of these two missionaries reflect the tensions between European imperialist ambitions and the Chinese imperial government.

Keywords: Asia, Diego de Pantoja, Dominicans, early modern world, history of Sino-Hispanic relations, identities, Jesuits, Juan Cobo.

Enviado diplomático, cortesano y misionero: un estudio comparativo de Juan Cobo y Diego de Pantoja en los intercambios este-oeste de los siglos XVI y XVII

Resumen. Objetivo/contexto: este artículo presenta un análisis comparativo de dos misioneros de la Edad Moderna temprana, el dominicano Juan Cobo y el jesuita Diego de Pantoja, en el contexto más amplio de la globalización temprana. Mientras Cobo operaba en el entorno colonial de Manila y participaba en misiones diplomáticas, como la embajada a Japón de 1592, Pantoja trabajaba en el corazón de la corte Ming, utilizando conocimientos científicos y culturales para fomentar el compromiso de las élites. **Metodología:** con base en fuentes primarias y estudios recientes, este estudio examina las divergentes estrategias de evangelización, los papeles políticos y las negociaciones identitarias de estos dos misioneros. **Originalidad:** al situar a ambas figuras dentro de las interconectadas redes marítimas y diplomáticas de Asia Oriental, el artículo contribuye a los debates históricos globales sobre la mediación transcultural y los complejos entrelazamientos de la religión, el imperio y el conocimiento en el mundo de la temprana modernidad. **Conclusiones:** el artículo sostiene que las trayectorias de estos dos misioneros reflejan las tensiones entre las ambiciones imperialistas europeas y el gobierno imperial chino.

Palabras clave: Asia, Diego de Pantoja, dominicos, mundo de la temprana modernidad, historia de las relaciones chino-hispanas, identidades, jesuitas, Juan Cobo.

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Enviado diplomático, cortesão e missionário: um estudo comparativo de Juan Cobo e Diego de Pantoja nos intercâmbios Leste-Oeste dos séculos 16 e 17

Resumo. Objetivo/Contexto: Este artigo apresenta uma análise comparativa de dois missionários da primeira modernidade — o dominicano Juan Cobo e o jesuíta Diego de Pantoja — no contexto mais amplo da globalização na primeira modernidade. Enquanto Cobo operava no ambiente colonial de Manila e participava de missões diplomáticas como a embaixada ao Japão em 1592, Pantoja trabalhava no coração da corte Ming, utilizando o conhecimento científico e cultural para promover o envolvimento das elites. **Metodologia:** Com base em fontes primárias e estudos recentes, este estudo analisa as estratégias divergentes de evangelização, os papéis políticos e as negociações identitárias desses dois missionários. **Originalidade:** Ao situar ambas as figuras dentro das redes marítimas e diplomáticas interconectadas do Leste Asiático, este artigo contribui para os debates históricos globais sobre mediação transcultural e os complexos emaranhados de religião, império e conhecimento no mundo do início da modernidade. **Conclusões:** Argumenta-se que as trajetórias desses dois missionários refletem as tensões entre as ambições imperialistas europeias e o governo imperial chinês.

Palavras-chave: Ásia, Diego de Pantoja, dominicanos, mundo da primeira modernidade, história das relações sino-hispânicas, identidades, jesuítas, Juan Cobo.

Introduction

During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, European missionaries played various roles as religious evangelists, cultural mediators, and imperial agents. Their activities often entangled them in diplomatic, cultural, and political affairs. This article focuses on two emblematic figures — Spanish Dominican Juan Cobo and Jesuit Diego de Pantoja—who operated within different imperial systems: Cobo in the Spanish Philippines and Pantoja at the Ming imperial court. Both men assumed complex and evolving identities shaped by their missionary commitments and political engagements.

Cobo, operating within Spain’s colonial framework, worked closely with Chinese communities in Manila and undertook diplomatic missions, most notably his 1592 envoy to Japan. His trajectory reflects Spain’s strategic use of missionaries as agents of both evangelization and political outreach in Asia. Pantoja, in contrast, integrated into the Ming elite through the Jesuit accommodationist approach, leveraging his scientific and cartographic knowledge to earn imperial favor. Yet his proximity to the court also made him vulnerable to political shifts, culminating in his expulsion during the 1617 Nanjing anti-Christian campaign.

In recent years, scholarly interest in both figures has grown significantly. Professor Zhang Kai’s monograph *Pang Diwo yu Zhongguo: Yesuhui Shiying Celue Yanjiu* 龐迪我與中國：耶穌會適應策略研究 (Diego de Pantoja and China: A Study on the “Adaptation Policy” of the Society of Jesus) remains a landmark study of Pantoja’s evangelization strategies in the Ming context.¹ Additional contributions—including Haitao Peng’s doctoral dissertation and his co-authored article with Ignacio Ramos Riera on Qike (Pantoja’s *Septem Victoriis*)—have deepened our understanding

1 Zhang Kai 張凱, *Pang Diwo yu Zhongguo: Yesuhui Shiying Celue Yanjiu* 龐迪我與中國：耶穌會適應策略研究 (Diego de Pantoja and China: A Study on the ‘Adaptation Policy’ of the Society of Jesus) (Zhengzhou: Daxiang Chubanshe, 2009).

of Pantoja's moral philosophy and textual legacy.² Similarly, the publication of three previously unknown letters of Pantoja in 2024 by Ramos Riera and Diego Sola García has shed light on his transimperial intellectual connections.³ Works by scholars such as Li Shixue and Albert Chan have also explored the literary and theological dimensions of his contributions.⁴

Juan Cobo has likewise received renewed scholarly attention. Manel Ollé's study of *Mingxin Baojian* and Albert Chan's analysis of *Shih-lu* have highlighted the cultural and linguistic sophistication of his writings, while Ubaldo Iaccarino's doctoral dissertation on diplomacy and commerce between Japan and the Philippines revisits Cobo's 1592 mission from the perspective of interregional power dynamics in the East Asian maritime sphere.⁵ Despite this growing body of scholarship, few studies have undertaken a comparative analysis of Cobo and Pantoja within a global historical framework or examined how their identities were shaped at the intersection of religion, empire, and culture during the early modern period.

This article argues that the comparison between Cobo and Pantoja illuminates the broader tensions between European colonial ambitions and Chinese imperial governance. It examines how their respective environments shaped their evangelization strategies, political roles, and cultural negotiations. Methodologically, the study draws on a close reading of primary sources, including letters, missionary texts, and Chinese official records, as well as recent historiography on early globalization and cross-cultural mediation. By situating these two missionaries within a global historical framework, the article contributes to ongoing debates on the role of religious actors in early modern imperial dynamics.

Following this introduction, the article is structured into four sections. The first examines Juan Cobo's activities in Manila and his diplomatic mission to Japan, highlighting the complexity of his multiple roles as a missionary, linguist, and imperial envoy. The second focuses on Diego de Pantoja's evangelization strategies at the Ming court, analyzing how he navigated the challenges of cultural adaptation, political expectation, and theological mediation. The third section presents a comparative analysis of the two missionaries, situating their trajectories within broader frameworks of early globalization and imperial interaction. Finally, the conclusion reassesses their legacies and reflects on how their experiences illuminate the intricate entanglements between faith, empire, and cultural exchange in the early modern world.

2 Haitao Peng 彭海涛, "Diego de Pantoja's Septem Victoriis (Qike 七克) and the Reconstruction of the Moral Authority in Late Ming China" (PhD diss., Universitat Pompeu Fabra, 2021); Haitao Peng 彭海涛 and Ignacio Ramos Riera, "Traducción de los prefacios a Las siete victorias (Qike) de Diego de Pantoja (1571–1618)," *Hispania Sacra* 74, n.º 150 (2022): 483–494.

3 Ignacio Ramos Riera and Diego Sola García, "Desde Pekín al mundo hispanohablante. Tres cartas inéditas del jesuita Diego de Pantoja (1571–1618)," *México y la Cuenca del Pacífico* 13, n.º 38 (2024): 89–121.

4 Li Shixue 李爽学, "Ruhe zhizao Zhongguoshi de Shanshu? — Shikui Zhao Han Lanyan jiqi yu Mingmo Xixue de Guanxi" 如何制造中国式的善书—试窥赵韩《橛言》及其与明末西学的关系 (How to Make a Chinese-Style Edifying Book? A Glimpse into Zhao Han's Lanyan and Its Relation to Late Ming Western Learning), *Wenbei: Bijiaowenxue yu Bijiaowenhua* 文贝: 比较文学与比较文化 (A Journal of Comparative Literature and Culture), 1 (2014): 25–61; Albert Chan, "A Note on the *Shin-lu* of Juan Cobo," *Philippine Studies* 37, n.º 4 (1989): 479–487.

5 Manel Ollé, "Del Mingxin Baojian de Fan Liben al Beng Sim Po Cam de Juan Cobo," in Juan Cobo, *Rico espejo del buen corazón (Beng Sim Po Cam)* (Barcelona: Editorial Península, 1998), 7–15; Chan, "A Note on the *Shin-lu*"; Ubaldo Iaccarino, "Comercio y diplomacia entre Japón y Filipinas en la era Keichō, 1596–1615" (PhD diss., Universitat Pompeu Fabra, 2013).

1. Juan Cobo: The Interwoven Fate of a Missionary and Diplomatic Envoy

1.1 Juan Cobo's Missionary Approach

Juan Cobo (1546–1547), known in Chinese as 高母羨, was a Dominican missionary. Born in Consuegra, he received theological and literary training at the convent of Ávila, ultimately becoming a distinguished cleric. In 1588, he arrived in Manila with the Dominican mission, initially tasked with evangelizing the Chinese community in the Parián district.

For Cobo, mastering the Chinese language was essential to ensuring the success of his missionary work; in a remarkably short time, he managed to learn, read, and write 3,000 Chinese characters.⁶ Additionally, within months of his arrival in Manila, he was reportedly able to hear confessions in the Southern Min dialect spoken by the local Chinese community. His linguistic skills not only allowed him to communicate directly with Chinese converts but also impressed both Spanish officials and the local Chinese population:

He was the first Dominican to preach publicly to the Chinese, and because such an event was unprecedented and greatly anticipated, the Governor of Manila, Santiago de Vera, attended the sermon along with the city's elite. The Chinese were particularly astonished, as they had never imagined that a foreigner could master their language so fluently.⁷

These linguistic skills gave Cobo unique access to the Chinese community, which in Manila primarily consisted of merchants and laborers from coastal Fujian. Unlike the Chinese literati whom the later Jesuits, like Matteo Ricci, sought to engage in China, the Parián community was composed largely of Hokkien-speaking and Southern Min-speaking traders and craftsmen.⁸

Most of these immigrants came from Xiamen, Zhangzhou, and Quanzhou, forming the core of the Parián community. The linguistic environment in Manila was thus mainly Fujian,⁹ rather than the Mandarin or classical Chinese used by scholars in mainland China. Given this demographic context, Cobo adopted Southern Min as his primary language for evangelization. He actively used the local dialect in religious instruction.¹⁰ The linguistic adaptation went beyond verbal preaching; Cobo and his fellow Dominican friars also compiled the first Chinese Christian catechism using Southern Min vocabulary. The 1593 edition of the *Doctrina Christiana en Letra y Lengua China*

6 Diego Aduarte, *Historia de la Provincia del Santo Rosario de la Orden de Predicadores* (Manila, 1640), 1:219.

7 “Él fue el primero que públicamente predicó a los chinos, a cuyo sermón, como a cosa nunca vista y muy deseada, se halló presente el Gobernador de Manila, Santiago de Vera, con todo lo bueno de la ciudad, con no pequeña admiración suya y mucho mayor de los chinos, que nunca se persuadían a que una persona de otra nación pudiese llegar a alcanzar tanto de su lengua”; Aduarte, *Historia de la Provincia del Santo Rosario*, 1:218.

8 Antonio de Remesal, *Historia de la Provincia de S. Vicente de Chiapa y Guatemala de la Orden de Ntro. Glorioso Padre Sancto Domingo* (Madrid, 1619), 681.

9 Zeng Shaocong 曾少聰, “Ming-Qing Haiyang Yimin Feilübin de Bianqian” 明清海洋移民菲律宾的变迁 (Changes in Maritime Migration to the Philippines during the Ming and Qing Dynasties), *Zhongguo Shehui Jingjishi Yanjiu* 中国社会经济史研究 2 (1997): 70–77.

10 Carlos Sanz, *Primitivas relaciones de España con Asia y Oceanía* (Madrid: Librería General Victoriano Suarez, 1958), 278.

provides crucial evidence of this strategy. The text features phonetic transliterations of Christian terminology using Southern Min pronunciation, revealing a conscious effort to ensure that the text resonated with the spoken language of working-class Chinese in Manila.

For instance, in the translation of the Apostles' Creed, Cobo's choice of words reflects a deliberate attempt to appeal to Southern Min speakers, as Gu Weiyong pointed out:

“俺有冤家” (àn yǒu yuān jiā) means “I have enemies.” The use of “俺” (àn) instead of the literary “我” (wǒ) mirrors the vernacular speech of lower-class Southern Min speakers. “冤家” (yuān jiā) meaning “enemy” was a colloquial term frequently used in daily life. “本头僚氏” (běn tóu liáo shì) means “The Lord.” “本头” (běn tóu) is a common Southern Min expression for “master” or “boss,” aligning with the concept of God as a supreme ruler. “僚氏” (liáo shì) is a phonetic transcription of the Spanish “Dios” (God), maintaining religious authenticity while ensuring familiarity for Chinese converts.¹¹

Such linguistic choices reveal Cobo's deliberate adaptation strategy, which embeds Christian ideas within a familiar linguistic and cultural framework. This approach contrasts with his later translations, in which he occasionally used the Mandarin term Tianzhu (天主) to align with more educated Chinese audiences. Cobo's deep integration into Chinese daily life extended beyond linguistic adaptation. He displayed a keen interest in Chinese cultural practices, including theatrical performances, which played a significant role in the social life of Chinese immigrants in Manila. A Dominican historian noted:

One of the most difficult tasks was prohibiting Chinese infidels from performing plays and preventing Spaniards and Spanish women from attending them... These theatrical performances were discovered by Father Juan Cobo, who, having learned their language, literature, and customs, reported them to the authorities, leading to their suppression as superstitious.¹²

This observation shows that the Chinese community in Manila actively engaged in theatrical traditions, often with themes related to social morality and interpersonal relationships. While Cobo did not support these performances—in fact, he denounced them as superstitious and played a direct role in their prohibition—his ability to identify and report on these activities presupposes a significant level of cultural familiarity. Instead of suggesting a strategy of accommodation similar to that of Jesuits in mainland China, who studied Confucianism to find doctrinal convergences with Christianity, Cobo's approach reflects a different form of engagement: one rooted in close observation and linguistic competence but aimed at regulation rather than integration. His actions illustrate how missionary interaction with Chinese culture could simultaneously involve deep knowledge and active suppression, highlighting the complex and sometimes conflicting dynamics of early Iberian evangelization in Asia.

11 Gu Weiyong, “The Formation of Catholic Liturgical Texts in China,” *Journal of Research for Christianity in China* 22 (2024): 8–30.

12 “En lo que más cuidado puso, y más dificultad halló, fue en prohibir a los chinos infieles las comedias que hacían, y a los Españoles y Españolas el salir a verlas... Estas comedias fueron descubiertas por el P. Fr. Juan Cobo, quien, habiendo aprendido su lengua, letras y costumbres, dio noticia de ello al Provisor, y él las mandó cesar como supersticiosas”; Juan Cobo, *Pien Cheng-Chiao Chen-Chu'an Shih-lu 辨正教真傳實錄* (Testimony of the True Religion), ed. Fidel Villarreal (Manila: University of Santo Tomas Press, 1986), 10.

By the late sixteenth century, the Chinese community in Manila was not only engaged in commerce but also maintained a vibrant cultural life, including regular theatrical performances. These performances often focused on social morality and interpersonal relationships, serving as a crucial medium for cultural exchange between the Chinese and the Spanish.¹³

Such records suggest that drama was an established form of entertainment among the Chinese in Manila, much like in mainland China. However, Cobo did not confine his missionary efforts to laborers and merchants; rather, he displayed a significant interest in engaging with the Chinese intellectual elite.

While the Parián community was primarily composed of traders and artisans, it also included a minority of literate individuals who could serve as intellectual interlocutors for Spanish missionaries.¹⁴ Some of this literati in Manila may have belonged to the “scholar-merchant” class (士商融合)—a notable social trend in late Ming China where scholars increasingly engaged in commercial activities.¹⁵ Despite the Ming dynasty’s relatively conservative stance on foreign trade, some members of the literati recognized its economic benefits and advocated for a more open approach to trade.¹⁶ This pro-trade sentiment was particularly strong in Fujian, a province with a long history of overseas commerce. The region’s elite families were deeply invested in maritime trade, financing long-distance voyages to Europe, Japan, and the Spanish Philippines.¹⁷

Unlike missionaries who focused primarily on popular evangelization, Cobo actively sought intellectual dialogue with Chinese scholars. His admiration for the Chinese literati is evident in his writings, where he refers to them with deep respect:

I have seen their way of speaking, resembling that of the Flores Doctorum—those celebrated masters of discourse. The sayings of these learned men are admirable, yet astonishing, and utterly beyond our expectations.¹⁸

Cobo’s engagement with educated Chinese led to more complex and multifaceted collaborations between Chinese intellectuals and Spanish missionaries in Manila. Notably, the first page of his work *Pien Cheng-Chiao Chen-Ch’uan Shih-lu* 辨正教真傳實錄 (*Testimony of the True Religion*) features an image of a Dominican friar presenting an open book to a Chinese literatus dressed in traditional scholar’s robes.¹⁹ Some scholars have even suggested that the Chinese literati and Cobo himself may have been involved in the creation of the famous Boxer Codex, a richly illustrated manuscript that depicts various ethnic groups of the Philippines and East Asia. Some scholars

13 José Antonio Cervera, *Cartas del Parián. Los chinos de Manila a finales del siglo XVI a través de los ojos de Juan Cobo y Domingo de Salazar* (Mexico City: Palabra de Clío, 2015), 95–96.

14 Cobo, *Pien Cheng-Chiao Chen-Ch’uan Shih-lu*, 4b–5a, 11a.

15 Yu Ying-shih 余英時, *Zhongguo Jinshi Zongjiao Lunli yu Shangren Jingshen* 中國近世宗教倫理與商人精神 (Religious Ethics and the Merchant Spirit in Early Modern China) (Beijing: SDX Joint Publishing, 1987), 122.

16 Zhang Han 张瀚, *Songchuang Mengyu* 松窗夢語 (Dream Notes by the Pine Window) (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1986), 86.

17 Wang Tan 王澐, *Manyou Jilue* 漫游纪略 (Brief Records of Wanderings), quoted in Xie Guoyu 谢国桢, *Mingdai Shehui Jingji Shiliao Xuanbian* 明代社会经济史料选编 (Selected Historical Materials on Ming Social Economy) (Fuzhou: Fujian People’s Press, 1980), 2: 150.

18 “Otros he visto al modo de Flores Doctorum, de dichos de hombres doctos suyos: admirable pero cierto, y de gran confusión nuestra”; Cobo, *Pien Cheng-Chiao Chen-Ch’uan Shih-lu*, 15.

19 Cobo, *Pien Cheng-Chiao Chen-Ch’uan Shih-lu*, 15.

believe that “Juan Cobo may have served as an intermediary between the Spanish authorities and the Chinese artists involved in the production of the Boxer Codex. His deep knowledge of Chinese culture, as well as his growing friendships and mutual respect with the Sangley literati of the Parián, made him a likely candidate for such a role.”²⁰

Cobo’s engagement with the Chinese intellectual elite may also have influenced the composition of his most important work, *Shih-lu*. This book, intended for a literate Chinese audience, was written in the style of classical Chinese literature and extensively referenced Confucian and Daoist texts.

Unlike his Southern Min-language catechisms, *Shih-lu* sought to reconcile Christianity with Chinese moral philosophy, introducing Christian doctrines through scientific and ethical reasoning. It is also considered one of the first works in Chinese to introduce European scientific thought. Given the complexity of its language and argumentation, it is unlikely that Cobo wrote the work alone. Scholars have suggested that he was assisted by Chinese intellectuals familiar with Western ideas. The text adopts a dialogue format, in which a European friar (presumably Cobo himself) debates a Chinese scholar. Based on the sophistication of the arguments, it is plausible that the Chinese interlocutor was a literatus with sustained exposure to Western thought—otherwise, he could not have articulated European ideas so precisely in Chinese.²¹

Cobo’s deep engagement with the Chinese literati in Manila reflects a deliberate missionary strategy that went beyond popular evangelization. His role as a cultural intermediary, particularly in the potential creation of the Boxer Codex, and his scholarly ambitions in *Shih-lu*, illustrate his belief that Christianity could be introduced to China through intellectual exchange. This approach made Cobo a precursor to the scholarly evangelization efforts of figures such as Matteo Ricci.

1.2 Juan Cobo as a Diplomatic Envoy

Cobo’s identity extended far beyond that of a mere missionary; he was a cultural envoy facilitating the exchange between Eastern and Western civilizations. Through his translation of the Chinese moral text *Mingxin Baojian* 明心寶鑑, titled as *Beng Sim Po Cam*, or *Espejo rico del claro corazón*,²² he not only introduced Chinese popular ethical wisdom to the West but also inaugurated a new chapter in Sino-Western cultural interactions. *Mingxin Baojian* stands as one of Cobo’s most significant works, alongside his *Shih-lu*. It was the first Chinese book ever translated into Spanish. This work compiles sayings from various classical Chinese authors, with a focus on ethical principles and interpersonal relationships. Unlike Confucian classics like *The Analects*, *Mingxin Baojian* is a compilation drawn from multiple sources. During the translation process, Cobo not only substituted vocabulary but also sought to reinterpret Chinese philosophical concepts through Christian theological frameworks.

20 John N. Crossley, “Juan Cobo, el Códice Boxer y los sangleyes de Manila,” in *El Códice Boxer. Etnografía colonial e hibridismo cultural en las islas Filipinas*, ed. Manel Ollé and Juan-Pau Rubiés (Barcelona: Publicacions i Edicions de la Universitat de Barcelona, 2019), 107.

21 Chan, “A Note on the *Shih-Lu*,” 484.

22 Juan Cobo, *Libro chino intitulado Beng Sim Po Cam, que quiere decir Espejo rico del claro corazón o Riquezas y espejo con que se enriquezca y donde se mire el claro y límpido corazón. Traducido en lengua castellana por fray Juan Cobo, de la orden de Santo Domingo. Dirigido al príncipe Don Felipe nuestro Señor* (Manila, 1593), transcribed by Manel Ollé Rodríguez, accessed February 15, 2025, <https://arxiu-web.upf.edu/asia/projectes/che/s16/bengsi.htm>

Upon completion, this book was presented by Bishop Domingo de Salazar to King Philip II of Spain, who remarked: “Cobo’s work demonstrates that military incursion into China is futile, as the only way to enter China is through the power of wisdom and the transformation of hearts.”²³ A few years later, Cobo’s work was once again introduced, this time by his fellow Dominican Miguel de Benavides y Añosa, to Prince Philip, the future Philip III of Spain. In his dedication, Benavides suggested that presenting the book was not merely a cultural gesture but also a symbolic act with political implications—an attempt to integrate the Chinese empire into the Spanish Catholic domain through religious and cultural means. By emphasizing “the riches of Chinese science, wisdom, and virtues,” he sought to reshape Spanish perceptions of China, countering stereotypes of the Chinese as mere “pagans” or “barbarians.” This strategy aimed to enhance Philip’s awareness of China’s civilizational achievements, or at least to foster a more positive impression that might lead the king to support cultural exchange rather than military conquest. Undoubtedly, the presentation of this book to Philip conveyed a strong political message, seeking royal endorsement for the idea that this “great and admirable empire (China) shall come,” in an effort to align missionary efforts with Spanish imperial ambitions.

Cobo’s work appears to have influenced some prominent Spanish religious figures—most notably Bishop Domingo de Salazar—who began to recognize that the path to gaining the acceptance of Chinese intellectuals lay in reason rather than military force or mere religious indoctrination. Salazar’s presentation of Cobo’s book to King Philip II reflects a growing recognition within certain ecclesiastical circles of the limitations of conquest-based evangelization. Similarly, Miguel de Benavides’s later presentation of the same work to the future Philip III suggests an effort to frame the Chinese empire as a civilization worthy of dialogue and integration into the Catholic world through persuasion rather than coercion. While it is difficult to determine the full extent of Cobo’s influence, these cases suggest that his work contributed to shaping a more diplomatic and culturally sensitive vision of missionary activity in East Asia among some senior members of the Spanish Church. In this sense, Cobo unintentionally became a participant in the Spanish imperial colonial enterprise, introducing Chinese culture to Spain and helping to shape a more positive view of China within the Spanish government. However, claiming that his translation alone played a decisive role in Spanish diplomacy toward China would be somewhat tenuous. His mission to Japan, on the other hand, unequivocally positioned him as an agent of Spanish imperial strategy.

Toyotomi Hideyoshi (1537–1598), after unifying Japan, pursued an expansionist policy in East Asia, aiming to subjugate Korea, the Ryukyu Islands, and Luzon.²⁴ This marked Japan’s challenge to the China-centered tributary trade system, as Hideyoshi sought to establish a Japan-led regional order in East Asia. Thus, while preparing for the invasion of Korea, he also sent a letter to the Spanish governor of Manila, demanding that Luzon become a vassal state of Japan and dispatch envoys to pledge its allegiance. At the time, the governor-general of the Philippines, Gómez Pérez Dasmariñas (1539–1593), had become increasingly aware of Japan’s threat to Manila through his intelligence network. He wrote to the king of Spain, outlining the situation, explaining his defensive measures, and requesting reinforcements from Spain.²⁵

23 Letter of Domingo de Salazar to Philip II, cited in Cobo, *Pien Cheng-Chiao Chen-Ch’uan Shih-Lu*, 15.

24 Emma Helen Blair and James Alexander Robertson, eds., *The Philippine Islands, 1493–1803* (Cleveland: Arthur H. Clark, 1903), 8:261.

25 Blair and Robertson, *Philippine Islands*, 8:228.

To carry out diplomatic negotiations and gather intelligence, Dasmariñas decided to send an envoy to Japan. In 1592, he chose Juan Cobo to deliver diplomatic correspondence to Hideyoshi. This diplomatic mission positioned Cobo as a leading figure in Spanish imperial expansion in East Asia. As the governor's envoy, Cobo was received with great honor. Hideyoshi read Dasmariñas' letter and expressed surprise at the vast territory under the Spanish king's control. In response, Cobo presented him with a globe, marked with Chinese characters denoting the dominions of Philip II and their distances from each other. This gesture was likely intended to impress Hideyoshi with the might and reach of the Spanish Empire.²⁶

Cobo fulfilled his diplomatic mission with utmost loyalty, prioritizing the security of the Spanish colony in Manila. Furthermore, when Portuguese and Castilian interests clashed, he aligned himself with the latter. This is most evident in his conversations with Hideyoshi, where he informed him that Portugal had become part of the Spanish Crown, thereby exposing Jesuit claims of paying tribute to Japan in 1588 as fraudulent. This move was clearly aimed at safeguarding Spain's diplomatic standing, asserting that Spain had never submitted to Japan, and discrediting the Jesuits' actions as unauthorized by the Spanish king. This ultimately led Hideyoshi to order the demolition of Jesuit churches in Nagasaki, weakening the Jesuits' dominant position in Japan.²⁷

For Hideyoshi, the priority at the time was achieving military success in Korea. Thus, he sought to reassure the envoys from Luzon with conciliatory rhetoric. He clarified that his previous envoy to the Philippines, Harada Kiyemon, had been dispatched solely to establish friendly relations and secure trade ties with the Spaniards, since the Japanese in Luzon had always been treated well. He reiterated multiple times that Japan had no interest in extracting gold, silver, or tribute from Luzon.²⁸

Having secured Hideyoshi's assurances, Cobo's mission to Japan appeared successful. However, on his return journey, he tragically died at sea, unable to report his findings to the governor or Spain. Even Cobo's tragic fate at sea was connected to his unwavering dedication to his diplomatic duties. Despite warnings from the Japanese envoy Harada Kiyemon about the perils of the voyage, he insisted on setting sail, possibly hoping to reach Manila ahead of a Japanese delegation to deliver his report. His fears were justified, as intelligence suggested that Hideyoshi's trusted retainer might have been planning an attack on Manila.²⁹ Cobo's companion, a Chinese man named Antonio López, managed to bring back some of the intelligence he had gathered. Despite the ostensibly peaceful meeting with Hideyoshi, Cobo remained convinced that Japan harbored an aggressive plan on the Philippines and recommended the expulsion of all Japanese from Manila.³⁰

Cobo's dual identity as both a Dominican missionary and a colonial diplomat was fraught with contradictions. His primary religious mission was to evangelize the Chinese community in the Philippines. However, geopolitical realities pushed him into a diplomatic role. Despite his reluctance to abandon his unfinished literary work,³¹ he dutifully executed his diplomatic assignment

26 Blair and Robertson, *Philippine Islands*, 8:23, 45.

27 Blair and Robertson, *Philippine Islands*, 8:41.

28 Antonio de Remesal, *Historia de la Provincia de Chiapa y Guatemala*, 683.

29 Blair and Robertson, *Philippine Islands*, 9:23.

30 Blair and Robertson, *Philippine Islands*, 36.

31 Cobo, *Pien Cheng Chiao Chen-Chu'an Shih-lu*, 378.

in Japan, skillfully balancing Spain's imperial ambitions with his monastic humility. Yet, his actions inadvertently exacerbated conflicts between Spain and Portugal, damaging Jesuit interests in Japan and illustrating the deep tensions between missionary ideals and colonial strategies.

2. Diego de Pantoja: The Dual Identity of Missionary and “Courtier”

2.1 Residing in Beijing

The embassy led by Cobo marked the beginning of formal diplomatic exchanges between Japan and the Spanish-controlled Philippines, laying the groundwork for subsequent interactions. Although Cobo perished in a storm near Taiwan in November 1592 on his return journey, his mission held great significance.³² Through his efforts, Hideyoshi gained an initial understanding of Spain's power and its colonial presence in the Philippines, which provided valuable experience for future Spanish diplomatic strategies and indirectly led to the dispatch of a second mission. This second delegation, in turn, facilitated the arrival of Franciscan missionaries in Japan.

However, these diplomatic and missionary efforts came to a dramatic halt in 1597. In October of that year, the Spanish merchant vessel *San Felipe* was shipwrecked off the coast of Tosa, Japan. During the investigation following the *San Felipe* shipwreck, Japanese authorities learned of Spain's colonial expansion strategy, which relied on missionary activity as a precursor to military conquest. This revelation alarmed Toyotomi Hideyoshi, who came to view the missionaries as an existential threat to Japan's sovereignty. On February 5, 1597, he ordered the execution of twenty-six Christians in Nagasaki, including six Franciscans, three Jesuits, and seventeen Japanese converts.³³ Known as the twenty-six Martyrs of Japan, this event became a turning point in Japan's Christian history, marking Hideyoshi's decisive shift toward the persecution of Christianity.

One year later, on September 18, 1598, Hideyoshi passed away, bringing an end to his direct threat to the Spanish Philippines and plunging Japan into a power vacuum, leading to the outbreak of the Battle of Sekigahara. This chain of events had far-reaching consequences for Spanish missionaries, particularly the young Jesuit Diego de Pantoja (1571–1618), whose original mission to Japan was abruptly redirected to China.³⁴ Although Cobo and Pantoja never directly interacted, their fates were inextricably linked by larger historical forces that shaped the trajectories of Spanish missionaries in East Asia.

At the age of 25, Pantoja arrived in China, determined to integrate himself into the local culture. Under the guidance of Matteo Ricci (1552–1610), his Spanish name, Diego Pantoja, was transliterated into Chinese as 龐迪我 (*Pang Diwo*). In accordance with the Confucian tradition, he also received a courtesy name, *Shunyang* (順陽), which conveyed both phonetic adaptation and religious meaning: 迪 (*Di*) corresponds to Diego, meaning “to guide” or “to enlighten,” and 我 (*Wo*) refers to the self, suggesting a dual meaning of “self-enlightenment” and “guiding others”; 順 (*Shun*) signifies “to follow the divine way,” while 陽 (*Yang*) represents light and righteousness (potentially

32 Blair and Robertson, *Philippine Islands*, 9:23, 46.

33 Archivo General de Indias, Filipinas 79 N28, *Relación de la arribada al Japón del galeón San Felipe y martirio de franciscanos*, 1597.

34 Diego de Pantoja, “Letter to Father Luys de Guzmán, Provincial of Toledo,” in *Purchas His Pilgrimes*, ed. Samuel Purchas (Glasgow: James MacLehose and Sons, 1905), 12:332.

symbolizing God). Together, his name and courtesy title formed an interconnected meaning: “to follow the divine path and act righteously,” aligning with Confucian ideals of self-cultivation and moral leadership. This subtle cultural adaptation reflected the Jesuit strategy of accommodation, blending Western religious ideals with Chinese philosophical traditions. In contrast, Juan Cobo’s Chinese name 高母羨 (*Gao Muxian*) was a direct phonetic transliteration of his Spanish name in Southern Min, lacking deeper religious or philosophical connotations. Moreover, while Cobo primarily learned Southern Min to communicate with Chinese migrants in Manila, Pantoja was trained in standard Nanjing Mandarin (南京官話).

His Mandarin tutor, a eunuch from Nanjing, assigned a young boy with clear pronunciation to assist Pantoja and Ricci in learning the imperial court’s standard dialect.³⁵ Nanjing Mandarin was regarded as the official pronunciation of the Ming dynasty, enabling Pantoja to communicate fluently with the Chinese literati and navigate court society. Although he did not initially anticipate residing in Beijing later, his early language training laid the groundwork for his eventual role at the Ming court.

On May 19, 1600, Pantoja and Ricci, carrying European gifts, left Nanjing for Beijing via the Grand Canal. After overcoming many obstacles, the missionaries finally reached Beijing. Although the Wanli emperor did not meet with them in person, he was interested in their gifts, especially the European clocks. He had a court painter make their portraits and asked about European customs through his eunuchs.³⁶

More importantly, the emperor granted them an annual stipend exceeding 100 taels of silver, an amount ten times the salary of a common laborer in Beijing. This imperial patronage not only provided economic support but also symbolized the emperor’s tacit approval, allowing them to stay in the capital. Their presence in the Forbidden City granted them prestige, and soon, Chinese officials and scholars began visiting them.³⁷ Despite the benefits of imperial favor, court patronage also restricted their freedom. Ricci lamented in a letter to Jesuit Superior General Claudio Acquaviva, saying that he could not leave Beijing. In his letter, Pantoja also stated that the emperor did not allow him to leave the capital.³⁸

Nonetheless, Pantoja remained committed to his missionary efforts. While Ricci stayed in Beijing, Pantoja ventured into the countryside to evangelize among the common people. He was accompanied by Xu Bideng 徐必登 (also known as António Leitão, 1580–1611), a Chinese friar from Macau with a Portuguese name.³⁹ Although their missionary success was relatively limited, they persisted, traveling to rural areas on the outskirts of Beijing, undeterred by the constraints of court life. In 1605, Pantoja traveled to villages near Beijing to evangelize. In one village, 24 leagues from the capital, with a population of a thousand, he baptized twelve people and named the village after San Clement. It appears that Pantoja sometimes visited villages near the capital to evangelize.

35 Matteo Ricci and Nicolas Trigault, *China in the Sixteenth Century: The Journals of Matthew Ricci, 1583–1610*, trans. Louis J. Gallagher (New York: Random House, 1953), 362.

36 Ricci and Trigault, *China in the Sixteenth Century*, 362.

37 Ricci and Trigault, *China in the Sixteenth Century*, 355.

38 Matteo Ricci, *Lettere: 1580–1609*, ed. Piero Corradini and Francesco D’Arelli (Macerata: Quodlibet, 2001), 426, 495; Pantoja, “Letter to Father Luys de Guzmán,” 389.

39 Pantoja, “Letter to Father Luys de Guzmán,” 389.

Since Pantoja was occupied at the royal palace, Gaspar Ferreyra was sent in his place. Ferreyra later reported that Pantoja's efforts had led to many conversions in the village.⁴⁰

However, as a resident of Beijing, esteemed among the literati, and a recipient of the imperial stipend, Pantoja had to take his role as a "courtier" seriously. In 1612, when the emperor sought information about foreign countries, Pantoja revised a world map and offered to translate a book on global geography for him:

If Your Majesty, in moments of respite from state affairs, wishes to gain knowledge of the nations of the world, there exists a book titled *Wanguo Tuzhi* 萬國圖志 (*Illustrated Geography of the World*), which we humbly presented to Your Majesty in previous years. The information contained within is detailed and comprehensive, based entirely on the firsthand accounts of our countrymen—scholars and merchants—who have traveled, studied, and conducted business abroad. It is not a work of mere conjecture or fabrication. Having long been sustained by Your Majesty's boundless grace, we have acquired a modest understanding of the great classical texts of this land and thus believe ourselves capable of translating this book into Chinese. However, we do not currently possess a copy of the text. If Your Majesty wishes to examine its contents in greater detail, we humbly request that the original book be returned to us so that we may carefully transcribe and translate it for Your Majesty's review. This book contains a comprehensive account of the geography of nations, their customs and moral conduct, religious and philosophical traditions, systems of governance, strengths and weaknesses, as well as their natural wonders and unique commodities. Beyond broadening one's knowledge, it may also serve as a valuable reference for Your Majesty's enlightened governance. Having long received Your Majesty's generous patronage, we wish to contribute in whatever small way we can. By undertaking this translation, we hope to offer a token of our gratitude, alleviating the burden of having benefited from imperial favor without rendering due service: a privilege and an honor beyond measure.⁴¹

Beyond cartography, Pantoja also crafted two sundials for the Wanli emperor. Aware of the emperor's fascination with exotic Western instruments, the Spanish Jesuit seized every opportunity to captivate and impress him.⁴² Pantoja was extremely active after Ricci's death, sparing no effort to maintain the favor of the emperor while developing a close relationship with the literati. As a result, he became well-acquainted with their concerns and even shared similar views on certain issues, earning him the trust of many scholars.

During their interactions with the literati, the Jesuits realized that Chinese elites were in urgent need of a calendar reform. To gain their trust, they planned to assist in rectifying the existing calendar system. The original calendar, Datong Calendar (大統曆, *Datong Li*), despite being in use for over 270 years, was riddled with errors. Since 1450, officials of the Directorate of Astronomy had

40 Pantoja, "Letter to Father Luys de Guzmán," 446, 450–451.

41 如蒙皇上幾務之暇，欲得通知萬國情形，則有《萬國圖志》一冊，先年原系臣等貢獻御前者。其中所說至詳至備，又皆臣國人遊學經商耳目見傳信之書，並無鑿空駕造之說。臣等仰蒙聖恩，養育有年，略通經書大義，似可翻譯成書。臣今外無副本，倘聖意必須詳備，伏乞發下原書，容臣等備細變寫，上呈聖覽，即四方萬國地形之廣狹，風俗之善惡，道術之邪正，政治之得失，人類之強弱，物產之怪異，俱載無遺，非徒以廣見聞，爾或少裨於聖治，而臣等蒙恩日久，得效絲毫之勞，略解素餐之愧，有餘榮矣；Han Qi 韓琦 and Wu Min 吳旻, *Xichao chongzheng ji. Xichao ding'an (wa san zhong)* 熙朝崇正集·熙朝定案(外三種) (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2006), 364.

42 Han Qi and Wu Min, *Xichao chongzheng ji*, 120.

repeatedly failed to accurately predict solar and lunar eclipses, underscoring the pressing necessity of calendar reform.⁴³ Some mandarins suggested reforming the calendar and were impressed by the Jesuits' knowledge of astronomy and calendrical science. Because of this, an official from the Directorate of Astronomy, named Zhou Ziyu 周子愚 (?-?), recommended Pantoja to revise the calendar.⁴⁴ Two years later, Li Zhizao 李之藻 (1571–1630), one of the most famous Chinese who converted to Christianity, presented a memorial to the emperor, not only recommending Pantoja and his companions for revising the calendar but also showing his admiration for the scientific knowledge of the missionaries. For this reason, he asked the emperor to establish a bureau under the Ministry of Rites to translate and adopt Western calendrical methods before Pantoja getting too old and battered to do the job.⁴⁵

If, during Matteo Ricci's lifetime, Diego de Pantoja was regarded as Ricci's assistant or disciple, then after the Italian missionary's death, Pantoja assumed his position, becoming the most important "Western courtier" among the Jesuits in China. This role was solidified when, immediately following Ricci's passing, Pantoja leveraged his extensive network in Beijing to successfully petition for an imperial burial site for Ricci—a groundbreaking achievement for the Jesuit mission in China. This not only set an unprecedented example but also greatly enhanced Pantoja's reputation within the Ming imperial court.

Until then, Chinese authorities had rarely granted a foreigner a burial site. Prior to Ricci, all deceased Jesuits had been buried at the Jesuit college in Macau. Pantoja, however, sought to establish a new precedent. He drafted a humble petition to the emperor, requesting a small plot of land for Ricci's burial and permission for the Jesuits to live near the tomb. Li Zhizao, who had been baptized by Ricci shortly before his illness, revised and refined the memorial's language to ensure its clarity and elegance. Nevertheless, to minimize any risk of rejection, before presenting the petition to the emperor, the Jesuits sought the counsel of two grand secretaries, Ye Xianggao 葉向高 (1559–1627) and Li Tingji 李廷機 (1542–1616), both of whom had been friends of Matteo Ricci. Their endorsement strengthened the petition's credibility and increased the likelihood of success.

With the assistance of these two high-ranking officials, Pantoja's memorial quickly reached the Wanli emperor. Meanwhile, Pantoja personally visited two influential mandarins responsible for overseeing the matter, presenting them with books authored by Ricci in Chinese as well as the *Great Universal Geographic Map*, which he had co-produced with Ricci. At the same time, Li Zhizao sought the support of his teacher, Wu Daonan 吳道南 (1550–1624), the right vice minister of rites, to advocate for Ricci's burial. A month later, officials from the Ministry of Rites, responsible for handling foreign affairs, submitted memorials to the emperor in support of Pantoja's request. They urged the emperor to bestow imperial favor upon Pantoja and his companions, who had been drawn to China's civilization and were now seeking to be laid to rest in the Middle Kingdom.⁴⁶

Seeing that Pantoja's petition had garnered substantial support from high-ranking officials, the Wanli emperor granted a plot of land to the Jesuits. Notably, Pantoja's name was explicitly

43 Zhang Tingyu (張廷玉), *Mingshi* (明史) (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1974), 518, 520.

44 Zhang Tingyu, *Mingshi*, 528.

45 Li Zhizao (李之藻), *Li Cunwo Ji (Yi)* 李存我集(一), in *Huang Ming Jingshi Wenbian* 皇明經世文編, ed. Chen Zilong 陳子龍 (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1962), 483:5321.

46 Qi and Min, *Xichao chongzheng ji*, 22–23.

mentioned in the officials' memorials, indicating that the Chinese elite regarded this Spanish Jesuit highly and acknowledged him as the leader of the mission.

Following the imperial decree, officials from the Ministry of Rites instructed Huang Jishi 黃吉士 (?-?), vice governor of the Shuntian Superior Prefecture, to identify a suitable burial site for Ricci. Pantoja, determined to ensure the smooth progress of the matter, personally visited Ye Xianggao and Wu Daonan, bringing them gifts, as both a token of gratitude for their assistance and a means to encourage them to exert pressure on Huang Jishi. Recognizing that the Jesuits enjoyed the favor of these senior officials, Huang Jishi and his subordinates quickly identified five potential sites for the Jesuits to choose from.

Among the proposed locations, the Jesuits favored one on the outskirts of the capital—Shanjiao Temple 善教寺—which came with adjacent land. Unbeknownst to them, the temple had previously belonged to a eunuch who had fallen out of imperial favor and been condemned to death. Naturally, the eunuchs remained resentful over losing the land. They informed the missionaries that the temple had been granted by the emperor specifically to Pantoja and his companion, Sabatino de Ursis (1575–1620),⁴⁷ rather than to the Jesuits as a whole. Therefore, once the two of them passed away, the eunuchs intended to reclaim the land.⁴⁸

This historical account certainly highlights the arrogance of the eunuchs, but it also underscores the exceptional status of Pantoja and Sabatino de Ursis in China. They had gradually become integrated into the imperial court, earning the trust of the emperor as “court retainers.” At this point, Pantoja’s identity was no longer solely defined by the Jesuit order; it was also influenced by the political environment of the Ming dynasty.

2.2 A Clash of Loyalties

As a Spanish Jesuit missionary residing in the capital of the Ming Empire, devoted to spreading Christianity while simultaneously serving as a “courtier” to the Wanli Emperor, Pantoja had a vested interest in maintaining amicable relations between the Ming and Spanish Empires. However, when conflicts arose, his dual identity became a source of crisis.

On May 23, 1603, a Ming diplomatic mission arrived in Manila, claiming to investigate the existence of the “Golden Mountain” (Jiyi Mountain in Cavite). This visit sparked an uproar among the Spanish authorities. Dispatched by the Wanli emperor, the delegation—comprising the official Wang Shihe 王時和 (?-?), the military officer Qian Yicheng 千一成 (?-?)—represented the authority of the Ming dynasty.⁴⁹ Their grand ceremonial procession and symbols of official power were intended to demonstrate China’s imperial prestige. However, such a display was misinterpreted by the Spanish as a prelude to invasion.

The Spanish suspected that the mission was meant to evaluate their defenses, possibly as preparation for a Ming military expedition. This paranoia was not without reason; during the 1570s,

47 Sabatino de Ursis was an Italian Jesuit missionary and a close collaborator of Matteo Ricci in China. Trained in mathematics and astronomy, he played a key role in the transmission of Western scientific knowledge to the Ming court. He made significant contributions to the reform of the Chinese calendar and participated in translating and introducing European works on astronomy and hydraulics. His scientific expertise and adaptation to Chinese scholarly culture made him one of the central figures in the Jesuit mission in China after Ricci’s death.

48 Sabatino de Ursis, *Yesuhuishi Xiong Sanba zhushu ji* (耶穌會士熊三拔著述集) (Writings of Sabatino de Ursis S.J.) (Guangzhou: Jinan daxue Aomen yanjiuyuan, 2022), 376.

49 Zhang Tingyu, *Mingshi*, 8737.

Governor Francisco de Sande and Jesuit Alonso Sánchez had previously suggested the military conquest of China. Viewing the situation through their colonialist perspective, Spanish authorities found it easy to see the Ming delegation not just as investigators but as a military reconnaissance force.⁵⁰

Ultimately, Governor Pedro de Acuña facilitated the mission's visit to Jiye Mountain in Cavite, located two leagues from Manila. In the presence of Spanish captains, interpreters, and other officials, the Ming envoys publicly questioned a local Chinese merchant, Zhang Yi 张巖 (?-?), about the location of gold. His response, however, provoked outrage among the Spanish audience: "Cut off the heads of the local natives, and you will find their necks adorned with chains and necklaces of gold—this is the gold that I speak of."⁵¹

Zhang Yi's sarcastic reply deeply angered the Spanish authorities. It must be said that this was an exceptionally poor diplomatic maneuver. From the Ming emperor's perspective, however, he saw little distinction between the Spanish rulers of Luzon and the previous native kings of the island. Moreover, he did not view Spain as fundamentally different from other Asian states within the tribute system. The imperial envoys also failed to grasp the sensitivity of Spanish colonial rule, underestimating how their assertive diplomatic approach could provoke tensions. The high-profile nature of the mission ultimately led to tragic consequences: shortly after the envoys departed, the Spanish colonial government in Manila carried out a massacre of the Chinese population, primarily driven by fears that the local Chinese community might act as internal collaborators in a Ming invasion of Luzon. The situation threatened to escalate further—several Ming officials petitioned the emperor to launch a military expedition against Luzon.⁵² In Manila, Spanish authorities likewise feared that Ming retaliation was imminent. Some believed that the Ming navy might be preparing to attack Manila.⁵³ However, for various reasons, the Ming expedition never materialized. Yet, the incident shook the Ming court, sparking debates during the Wanli reign about China's response to foreign aggression.

From the perspective of the Ming Empire's internal affairs, the overseas gold-mining expedition during the Wanli era was indeed a consequence of the domestic expansion of the mining tax system. However, this incident also marked a confrontation between the Spanish Empire and the Ming Empire in the East Asian seas, one that went beyond the mere issue of mineral taxation. The tribute system led by China placed the Ming Empire in an unchallenged position of dominance in Asia. This international order—along with the ideology underpinning it—clashed

50 For a discussion of the Wanli emperor's motives in sending a mission to the Philippines to investigate the "Golden Mountain," see Chenguang Li and Jesús Paniagua Pérez, "El Dorado de Wanli: La embajada imperial a las Filipinas de 1603," *Anuario de Estudios Americanos* 78, n.º 2 (2021): 415–438.

51 "Cortéis las cabeças a los yndios de esta tierra, y todo el cuello lo hallareis lleno de cadenillas y gargantillas de oro, y este es el oro que yo digo"; Francisco Colín, *Labor evangélica, ministerios apostólicos de los obreros de la Compañía de Jesús* (Barcelona: Henrich y Cía, 1900; 1.ª ed. 1663), 2:415.

52 Xu Xueju 徐学聚, "Bao Quhui Lüson Qiu Shang Shu" 報取回呂宋囚商疏 (Memorial on the Retrieval of Chinese Prisoners from Luzon), in *Ming Shenzong Shilu* 明神宗實錄 (Veritable Records of Emperor Shenzong of the Ming) (Taipei 臺北: Academia Sinica 中央研究院歷史語言研究所, 1966), 404:7552.

53 For Spanish concerns over a possible Ming invasion, see Blair and Robertson, *Philippine Islands*, 13:38–39, 141–161.

with the political vision of expansion pursued by the Spanish. In this sense, the Wanli-era overseas gold-mining affair can be seen as a direct confrontation between the traditional tributary system and an emerging global order.⁵⁴

How did Pantoja, living in Beijing and closely associated with the Ming literati, perceive and interpret these events? In a letter dated March 4, 1605, addressed to Gregorio López, the Jesuit superior in Manila, Pantoja discussed the Chinese embassy to the Philippines and the subsequent massacre of the Chinese population in Manila. His account provides valuable insight into the Wanli emperor's decision-making process and the deliberations among his ministers regarding this controversial diplomatic initiative.

From Pantoja's letter, it is clear that the Spanish authorities were shocked and outraged by the fact that the Chinese emperor had ordered an investigation into mineral resources in foreign territories. However, despite his frequent criticisms of Wanli's greed and despotism, he downplayed the emperor's direct involvement, instead blaming the deception of unscrupulous opportunists. It is evident that he aimed to de-escalate tensions between the Ming Empire and the Spanish colonial authorities.

According to Pantoja, the main responsibility for the incident lay with the two deceivers who had misled the emperor, and they had already endured severe punishment. He even expressed regret, noting that this diplomatic mission could have built a strong friendship between the two sides. He then told López about the calls for retaliation from Fujian officials. However, he also pointed out that many in China resented the Chinese migrants in Luzon, viewing their change in dress and hairstyles as a sign of betrayal.

Pantoja then detailed the responses considered by Chinese officials following the massacre. Two main proposals were put forward. The first was a military retaliation, suggested by the governor-general of Fujian. However, it was the governor himself who highlighted the numerous challenges associated with this plan: China lacked a fleet capable of conducting long-range maritime warfare and was therefore unable to transport troops across the sea; the strong fortifications of the Spanish, despite their relatively small garrison, would enable them to ally with the Japanese samurai residing in the Philippines, posing a serious threat to China; and launching a large-scale war merely to avenge two Fujian cities (which suffered the most from the massacre) would plunge the entire country into turmoil, causing severe disruptions in military mobilization and weapons procurement. Due to these substantial obstacles, the plan for military retaliation was abandoned.

The second proposal from Chinese officials was to cut off trade with the Philippines. However, this idea was also rejected. Nine out of ten officials in Fujian opposed ending trade because they were unwilling to break such a crucial economic link under any conditions. The province had a dense population but limited arable land, and without trade with the Philippines, many people would struggle to survive. Additionally, the cessation of trade would cause a significant drop in tax revenue for the region, which was essential for the national treasury. Therefore, regardless of the massacre, economic ties with the Philippines could not be severed.

54 Li Qing 李庆, "Zaoqi quanqiuhua jin Cheng zhong de Dongya haiyu: Ming Wanli haiwai caijin shijian shimo" 早期全球化进程中的东亚海域: 明万历海外采金事件始末 (Some Notes on the Incident of Cavite [1602–1603]: A Case Study of the East Asian Sea and Early Globalization), *International Sinology* 国际汉学, 4 (2020): 114.

Pantoja reassured his Spanish counterparts: in China, neither the emperor nor the governor had seriously considered waging war to seize the Philippines, nor had such an idea ever been suggested. He further asserted that they would never contemplate war over the massacre, as Chinese rulers and officials had no interest in foreign conquests. Even if the mountains and rivers of the Philippines were filled with gold and silver, they would not be willing to pay the price of an invasion. The rulers of China had no desire for territorial expansion or warfare; they were only concerned with preserving and maintaining their existing domains.

Finally, Pantoja disclosed a crucial piece of information: after the Wanli emperor had severely punished the culprits, he no longer pursued the matter further. Although he had appointed ministers to discuss possible responses, this was merely a procedural formality, and no concrete actions were taken. At most, China might dispatch envoys to the Philippines to request the repatriation of Chinese still residing there. They might seek to retrieve those who had shaved their heads and assimilated into “foreign” culture while simultaneously expressing concern and urging the Spanish to treat the Chinese in the Philippines with kindness.⁵⁵

Ultimately, this is precisely what happened. Fujian officials issued a warning to the Spanish authorities in Manila, urging them to treat the Chinese residents well, and the matter was left unresolved. Pantoja’s letter provided Manila with valuable insight into how the Ming court handled the Luzon massacre. He repeatedly stressed the need for confidentiality, urging López not to disclose the details he shared. This suggests that Pantoja was cautious about revealing to the Spanish authorities in the Philippines that he was providing intelligence from Beijing. At the same time, he was wary of being perceived in China as too closely aligned with Spanish interests. Certain actions, such as the governor-general’s use of *Anno Domini* in official documents, had already raised suspicions among Christian converts in China; fortunately, however, it had not led to further scrutiny.

While Pantoja acknowledged that the Spanish massacre of the Chinese was “extremely brutal,” he refrained from outright condemning the colonial government’s systemic violence. Instead, he shifted part of the blame onto the “betrayal” of Chinese Christian converts, subtly attempting to justify Spain’s actions. By firmly denying any Ming ambitions to expand into the Philippines, he sought to dispel fears among Spanish authorities that China might launch a military intervention. He understood that if Spain perceived the Ming court as harboring expansionist intentions, it could trigger a full-scale conflict.

Despite his careful balancing act and cautious life in Beijing, Pantoja ultimately became caught up in a political storm. In the summer of 1616, an official named Shen Que (沈淮) (1565–1624) in Nanjing led a formal attack on Christianity, the missionaries, and their Chinese Christian converts by submitting a memorial to the throne. This event marked the start of a serious crisis for the Jesuit mission in China.

In his memorial, titled *Can Yuanyi Shu* 參遠夷疏 (Memorial Impeaching the Distant Barbarians), Shen Que emphasized the traditional distinction between the Chinese and foreigners, a concept rooted in the long-standing ideology of Chinese cultural superiority. In classical Chinese thought, *Zhong Guo* 中國 (Central Kingdom) was always distinguished from cultural or ethnic outsiders, who were regarded as barbarians. Shen Que also reminded the emperor that his ancestor, the Hongwu emperor (洪武帝) (1328–1398), had strictly maintained this distinction and would

55 Diego de Pantoja, “Carta al Padre Gregorio López,” March 4, 1605, Archivum Romanum Societatis Iesu (ARSI), Jap. Sin. 14 II, fols. 195v.

never have allowed foreigners to enter China without proper scrutiny. He then expressed his deep concern about the potential threat from the missionaries, warning that they might incite the people to rebel against the government. Based on these arguments, Shen Que requested an imperial rescript instructing the Ministries of Rites and War to coordinate on the matter. He called for the Jesuit leaders to be put on trial according to the law and for the remaining missionaries to be expelled from China.⁵⁶

Pantoja understood the potential damage that Shen Que could cause to their mission. For that, he wrote a defense of Christianity entitled *Ju Jie* 具揭 (A statement in clarification), in which he responded to the accusations. In his self-defense, Pantoja emphasized his supra-secular role as a missionary. He likened himself to *Motueng* 摩騰 and *Falan* 法蘭, the Buddhist monks who first brought Buddhism to China, thereby drawing a parallel between the Jesuit mission and the historical transmission of Buddhism, both of which introduced foreign beliefs peacefully rather than through military conquest. This comparison aimed to mitigate the hostility of the scholar-official class toward the “Western barbarians.”

Pantoja then asserted that “having received the emperor’s grace and nurtured for years, I am thus his subject,” integrating himself within the Confucian framework of ruler-minister relations. This dual identity construction was crucial for his survival in China. By interpreting loyalty to the sovereign as obedience to the divine will, he aligned the Catholic doctrine of submission to earthly authorities with the Confucian principle of *ruler-guiding-the-minister* (君為臣綱).

Furthermore, Pantoja juxtaposed the Catholic doctrine of martyrdom with the Confucian concept of *sacrificing life for righteousness* (捨生取義), arguing that *to die for loyalty and filial piety is to die for God*. This interpretation served two purposes. First, it provided religious legitimacy, integrating the spirit of martyrdom into the Confucian moral framework and shielding Catholicism from being dismissed as an *unorthodox barbarian heresy*. Second, it positioned missionaries as possessing a moral superiority beyond that of the typical scholar-official. He criticized those officials who *cling to life out of concern for their families*, implying that Christian believers, strengthened by their faith, could transcend worldly fears of life and death and attain a higher moral plane.

Pantoja further invoked the chaos of the Yongjia era (永嘉之亂) during the fall of the Western Jin dynasty, when Liu Yuan 劉淵 and Shi Le 石勒 led invasions that resulted in the collapse of the imperial court.⁵⁷ He condemned the scholar-officials of that time for *abandoning their sovereign and fathers*, contrasting their actions with his own unwavering loyalty to the emperor. He declared his willingness to sacrifice his life for the emperor without hesitation, arguing that Catholicism provided the moral cohesion necessary to reinforce imperial authority.

56 Xia Guiqi 夏瑰琦, ed., *Shengchao Poxieji* 聖朝破邪集 (Collection of Refuting Heresies in the Holy Dynasty) (Hong Kong: Alliance Bible Seminary, 1996), 61.

57 The *Disaster of Yongjia* (永嘉之亂), also known as the *Yongjia Calamity*, refers to the turmoil following the fall of the Western Jin dynasty (265–316 CE). In 311 CE, the Xiongnu ruler Liu Yuan 劉淵 (r. 304–310) and his successor Liu Cong 劉聰 (r. 310–318) led the forces of the Qian Zhao state (304–329 CE) in the sack of Luoyang, the Jin capital, resulting in the capture and execution of Emperor Huai of Jin 晉懷帝. The chaos continued with the conquest of Chang’an in 316 CE, marking the collapse of the Western Jin and the beginning of the Sixteen Kingdoms period.

Through this line of reasoning, Pantoja sought to demonstrate how Catholicism could serve as a stabilizing force within the Chinese state.⁵⁸

Pantoja's efforts ultimately failed to prevent the missionaries' expulsion. According to Álvaro Semedo (1585–1658), a Portuguese Jesuit priest who recorded this incident, Shen Que secured the support of a eunuch, who subsequently persuaded a grand secretary to draft an imperial edict ordering the Jesuits' removal. Semedo argued that this decree did not reflect the emperor's personal decision but was instead orchestrated by court eunuchs. According to Álvaro Semedo in *The History of That Great and Renowned Monarchy of China*, the edict was discreetly included among a stack of petitions for the emperor to sign without scrutiny; in contrast, others claim that the Queen, to whom the Emperor often delegated such matters, was convinced to authorize it.⁵⁹

Under this imperial order, Pantoja was expelled from Beijing in March 1617. Then he was transferred to Macau. Even after his exile, Pantoja continued to plead for imperial clemency on behalf of his fellow Jesuits, but his petitions were ignored.⁶⁰ On July 9, 1618, at the age of 47, he passed away in Macau, where he was laid to rest. It is said that until his final days, he remained dedicated to translating Christian doctrines into Chinese.⁶¹

3. Cobo and Pantoja in Comparison

The experiences of Cobo and Pantoja in China vividly illustrate the complexity and uniqueness of missionaries as cross-cultural actors within the context of early globalization. Operating under the auspices of the Spanish Empire, these two figures engaged with vastly different communities—Cobo among the marginalized Chinese immigrant population in Manila, and Pantoja within the elite circles of the Ming court in Beijing. Their distinct environments, observational perspectives, evangelistic strategies, and degrees of cultural adaptation not only shaped the tensions inherent in their multifaceted identities but also profoundly influenced their contributions to Sino-Western cultural exchange and the tragic trajectories of their fates.

3.1 Differences in Target Audiences

Cobo and Pantoja engaged with significantly different groups in their missionary efforts. Cobo primarily preached to the Chinese immigrant communities in the Spanish-controlled Philippines and other parts of Southeast Asia. During this period, a large number of Chinese, mainly from Fujian, migrated to Manila and its surrounding areas, where they worked as merchants, artisans, and fishermen. Shortly after the establishment of Manila, these Chinese settlers were assigned to live in the Parián district outside the city walls. Cobo and other missionaries frequently visited these Chinese enclaves, directly interacting with lower-class immigrants and gaining firsthand

58 Diego de Pantoja, *Yesuishi Pang Diwo Zhushuji* 耶穌會士龐迪我著述集 (Writings of Diego de Pantoja S.J.), ed. Ye Nong 葉農 et al. (Guangzhou: Guangzhou Renmin Chubanshe, 2019), 268.

59 Álvaro Semedo, *The History of That Great and Renowned Monarchy of China* (London: John Crook, 1655), 218.

60 Zhang Tingyu, *Mingshi*, 8462.

61 Jin Guoping 金國平, "Pang Diwo Yu Aomen Shishi Riqi Ji Zangdi Kao" 龐迪我於澳門逝世日期及葬地考 (Research on the Date and Burial Site of Diego de Pantoja's Death in Macau), in *Yesuishi Pang Diwo Zhushuji* 耶穌會士龐迪我著述集 (Writings of Diego de Pantoja, S. J.), ed. Ye Nong 葉農, Jin Guoping 金國平, Luohui Ling 羅慧玲, and Jiang Wei 蔣薇 (Guangzhou: Guangdong Renmin Chubanshe, 2019), 114–120.

knowledge of their lifestyles and belief systems. Compared to the Confucian literati in mainland China, these overseas Chinese settlers had a lower level of formal education and were primarily concerned with practical economic benefits.

In contrast, Pantoja entered Beijing alongside Matteo Ricci and focused on engaging with the intellectual elite of the Ming Empire, including Confucian scholar-officials and eunuchs within the imperial court. His dual identity as both a scholar and a courtier allowed him to integrate into the social circles of the imperial capital, where he discussed Western learning and theology with high-ranking officials. For example, he established close ties with Li Zhizao, minister of rites, and other scholars who were open to foreign knowledge. These elite contacts enabled Pantoja to observe the Ming government from within the imperial core. The individuals he interacted with were highly educated in Confucian traditions and deeply invested in state affairs, providing Pantoja with unique insights into Chinese political culture.

3.2 Divergent Perspectives and Approaches to Their Environment

Due to their distinct environments, Cobo and Pantoja differed in their perspectives and interactions with their surroundings. Situated in the Philippines, Cobo was particularly attuned to the economic activities of the Chinese settlers and their critical role in the colonial economy. His writings detail the daily lives and cultural practices of the Chinese community in Manila, reflecting both his deep engagement with local society and his awareness of imperial economic interests.

Pantoja, on the other hand, resided in the heart of the Ming Empire and closely analyzed its bureaucratic structures and imperial governance. In a 1602 letter to the Provincial Superior of Toledo, he explicitly stated his intent to document “China’s political affairs, customs, governance, and etiquette.” Through his engagement with court officials, he witnessed firsthand the decision-making processes and factional struggles of the Wanli court. Despite being a foreigner, he was aware of significant political controversies such as the “Succession Crisis” (disputes over the imperial heir). His reports also touched on factional infighting and the emperor’s neglect of state affairs, highlighting how these internal dynamics affected missionary work. Nonetheless, as a Spaniard from another great empire, Pantoja maintained an external observer’s perspective, situating China within a global context and analyzing its geopolitical interactions with Spanish colonial territories.

3.3 Contrasting Missionary Strategies

To minister effectively to Manila’s Chinese communities, Cobo adopted a pragmatic evangelization strategy. He preached in local vernaculars and distributed Chinese-language catechisms in the Parían district, emphasizing the tangible and moral benefits of Christianity to encourage rapid conversions. Although he studied Chinese texts such as the *Mingxin Baojian* and translated them for European audiences, his cultural engagement was selective and instrumental. Unlike Jesuits stationed at the imperial court in Beijing, such as Diego de Pantoja, whose deep immersion in Confucian learning was shaped by the need to engage with China’s scholarly elite at the heart of the empire, Cobo operated within a colonial and diasporic context where missionary expediency took precedence over cultural synthesis. His approach reflected the demands of a frontier environment, where social fragmentation, linguistic diversity, and the urgency of religious instruction shaped a distinctly utilitarian form of engagement with Chinese culture. As a Dominican tasked with converting Manila’s Chinese population, Cobo targeted both lower-class settlers and elites.

His *Shih-lu*, written in Chinese, blended doctrinal defense with European scientific knowledge—geography and astronomy—to appeal to the Ming literati’s growing scientific curiosity. While pioneering as the first Sino-Christian text (predating Ricci’s *Tianzhu Shiyi* by four years), its impact in China was limited by Manila’s geographic isolation and poor distribution networks.

In contrast, Pantoja adhered to the Jesuit approach, cultivating relationships with Confucian elites and serving the imperial court. He introduced Western science to generate scholarly interest, leading to discussions on theological matters. By presenting European clocks, atlases, and descriptions of foreign lands, he sought imperial favor. Within the court, his status evolved into that of an “imperial retainer,” necessitating compliance with Ming court rituals and political norms. No longer solely defined by his Jesuit identity, he became increasingly shaped by Ming political expectations. Under Ricci’s guidance, Pantoja adopted Confucian attire and classical studies, framing Christian doctrine within Confucian ethical discourse to gain acceptance. His engagement with Ming scholars positioned him as a cultural intermediary between China and the West.

3.4 Identity Tensions and Tragic Fates

Both missionaries had to navigate their political identities in response to their respective environments. While their primary roles were as evangelists, they also assumed additional political functions. As a missionary in a Spanish colony, Cobo was compelled to serve the interests of Spanish imperialism. When ordered to negotiate with Hideyoshi to secure Manila’s safety, he reluctantly accepted his role as a diplomatic envoy. Ultimately, he lost his life on his return journey, embodying the conflict between religious devotion and political duty.

Pantoja, initially focused on missionary work, gradually became an imperial retainer and confidant to Confucian officials. His expertise in Western science and his adaptation to court culture earned him favor, but he also expressed concerns about his deviation from the purely missionary objectives.⁶² Despite these reservations, he dutifully served the emperor, introducing European astronomy and mathematics to China. His privileged status, however, also made him vulnerable to political shifts. When Ming officials accused the Jesuits of “transforming barbarians into Chinese,” Pantoja defended his presence by equating Christian martyrdom with Confucian loyalty and sacrifice. Yet, his reliance on court patronage proved fragile—his ultimate expulsion demonstrated how quickly political tides could turn against him. In 1618, he died in Macau, unable to complete his mission.

Despite their different contexts, both Cobo and Pantoja struggled with the tension between religious commitment and political constraints. While Cobo directly served Spain’s colonial strategy, Pantoja sought survival within the Ming power structure. Their experiences highlight the complex roles missionaries played in early globalization, balancing faith, diplomacy, and empire. Their contributions—Cobo’s cultural translations and diplomatic outreach, and Pantoja’s scientific exchange and ethical synthesis—left a lasting impact on Sino-Western relations, offering a historical lens into the intricate interplay between religion and politics in the early modern world.

62 Sabatino de Ursis, *Yesuishi Xiong Sanba Zhushu Ji*, 470.

Conclusion

In sum, the trajectories of Juan Cobo and Diego de Pantoja reflect two contrasting yet interconnected paths of missionary engagement in early modern East Asia. Their respective contexts—the colonial frontier of Manila and the imperial center of Beijing—shaped not only their evangelization strategies but also their political entanglements and cultural roles.

Juan Cobo's enduring impact lies in his multifaceted role as a linguist, cultural mediator, and diplomatic envoy. His mastery of the Southern Min dialect and his translations, notably *Mingxin Baojian*, facilitated early cultural exchange between Chinese and Spanish societies. His 1592 diplomatic mission to Japan, undertaken to safeguard Spanish colonial interests, further highlights the intersection of evangelization and imperial policy. By balancing missionary zeal with the demands of empire, Cobo anticipated later intellectual approaches to evangelization, leaving a lasting imprint on early modern intercultural dialogue and Spanish diplomacy in Asia.

While Cobo's mission exemplifies a pragmatic, externally-oriented approach aligned with colonial objectives, Diego de Pantoja's experience illustrates the complexities of internal cultural mediation within the Ming court. His strategic handling of the 1603 crisis in Sino-Spanish relations and his defense during anti-Christian campaigns reveal the delicate balance he maintained as both missionary and courtier. Though ultimately expelled from China in 1617, Pantoja played a central role in consolidating the Jesuit presence in the empire. His legacy rests on his deep engagement with Chinese elites, his contributions to astronomical knowledge, and his efforts to articulate Christian doctrine through the lens of Confucian ethics.

Ultimately, both Cobo and Pantoja were constrained by the political forces surrounding them, and their lives ended in exile or premature death. Yet their legacies—through texts, translations, and cross-cultural encounters—embody the intricacies of early globalization. Together, they offer critical insights into how religious actors navigated the volatile intersection of faith, imperial ambition, and cultural identity in the early modern world.

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