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Why Cervantes in China?
Hyperreality and Cervantine Cultural Encounters in Beijing 2016
(Tang Xianzu, Shakespeare, Cervantes, and Borges)

Juan Pablo Gil-Osle
Arizona State University

In this year of 2016, we celebrate the 400th anniversary of the death of Cervantes, and the 30th of Borges. It is almost a unique year since Shakespeare died in the same year as Cervantes, in 1616; and in the Americas the great writer from the Andes, known as Inca Garcilaso de la Vega, also died the same year. So, three literary geniuses passed away in the same year, 400 years ago, leaving us with the task and pleasure of going deeper and deeper into the meanings of their work. But, this is not all; in 2016, we should also remember that the Chinese playwright Tang Xianzu passed away in the same year. We already have a book on this, *1616: Shakespeare and Tang Xianzu's China*, to which some of my colleagues from Arizona State University contributed, such as Stephen West and Lin Xiaoqiao. The fact that Tang Xianzu, Shakespeare, Cervantes and the Inca Garcilaso died in the same year provokes thoughts that perhaps only Borges's mind would have been able to handle in one of his essays or short stories.¹

That said, I wonder how Borges would have thrown us into hyperrealist connections between Cervantes, Tang, the Inca Garcilaso, and Shakespeare. It is an impossible guess, which reminds me of disparaging data classifications. For some scholars, one of the most paradigmatic moments in Borges's writings is the passage on the fictional Chinese encyclopedia "Celestial Empire of Benevolent Knowledge." It reads as follows:

ambiguities, redundancies and deficiencies remind us of those which doctor Franz Kuhn attributes to a certain Chinese encyclopedia entitled 'Celestial Empire of Benevolent Knowledge'. In its remote pages it is written that the animals are divided into: (a) belonging to the emperor, (b) embalmed, (c) tame, (d) sucking pigs, (e) sirens, (f) fabulous, (g) stray dogs, (h) included in the present classification, (i) frenzied, (j) innumerable, (k) drawn with a very fine

camelhair brush, (l) et cetera, (m) having just broken the water pitcher, (n) that from a long way off look like flies. (Borges, *Other* 391)

This famous passage comes from his essay “The Analytical Language of John Wilkins” published in *Other Inquisitions 1937-1952*. As it is well known, Borges’s writings are filled with non-existent erudite publications. Maps, places, books, and encyclopedias populate his works, giving us a realistic impression in a twilight zone, in the midst of beyond-consciousness, among the insights of what could well be.

Borges’s mental power brings us once and again to a vertical trip around the world. Borges is so global in his intents of comprehending all knowledge that he is absolutely conscious of the impossibility of accumulating knowledge in an efficient way. And in these hallucinations of the world that we might really inhabit, Chinese culture and Chinese peoples are once and again present in Borges’s work.

Unlike Borges, Cervantes made only one direct reference to Cathay/China (Mancing 144; Ollé n.p.).² Besides, some indirect references to Angelica occur. Angelica is Chinese, about whom Christina Lee has analyzed the Chinese references in the Barahona’s epic *Las lágrimas de Angélica*. In his dedication of the second part of *Don Quixote*, Miguel de Cervantes refers to the Emperor of China as a seeker of his services:

DEDICATORIA. AL CONDE DE LEMOS

Enviando a Vuestra Excelencia los días pasados mis comedias, antes impresas que representadas, si bien me acuerdo dije que don Quijote quedaba calzadas las espuelas para ir a besar las manos a Vuestra Excelencia; y ahora digo que se las ha calzado y se ha puesto en camino, y si él allá llega, me parece que habré hecho algún servicio a Vuestra Excelencia, porque es mucha la priesa que de infinitas partes me dan a que le envíe para quitar el hámago y la náusea que ha causado otro don Quijote que con nombre de *Segunda parte* se ha disfrazado y corrido por el orbe. Y el que más ha mostrado desearle ha sido el grande emperador de la China, pues en lengua chinesca habrá un mes que me escribió una carta con un propio, pidiéndome o por mejor decir suplicándome se le enviase,

porque quería fundar un colegio donde se leyese la lengua castellana y quería que el libro que se leyese fuese el de la historia de don Quijote. Juntamente con esto me decía que fuese yo a ser el rector del tal colegio. Pregunté al portador si Su Majestad le había dado para mí alguna ayuda de costa. Respondíome que ni por pensamiento.

—Pues, hermano —le respondí yo—, vos os podéis volver a vuestra China a las diez o a las veinte o a las que venís despachado, porque yo no estoy con salud para ponerme en tan largo viaje; además que, sobre estar enfermo, estoy muy sin dineros, y, emperador por emperador y monarca por monarca, en Nápoles tengo al grande conde de Lemos, que, sin tantos titulillos de colegios ni rectorías, me sustenta, me ampara y hace más merced que la que yo acierto a desear.

Cervantes is required to work as “rector” of the Spanish Academia that the Chinese emperor wants to sponsor. Here Cervantes would be making a reference to the Wanli Emperor (1572-1620). This pretension of fitting a Ming ruler in the shoes of a postulant for his patron is nothing but one of Cervantes’s pleasantries, so abundant in his introductions. Collective academies, imaginary friends, pretended patrons, and hasty patron seekers are over-present in the dedicatory pages of *La Galatea*, *Don Quijote* parts I and II, and *Los trabajos de Persiles y Segismunda*. Nevertheless, from other points of view, like those expressed in the China Radio International Spanish—CRI Spanish—, an online radio that acts as a bridge between China and the Spanish-speaking world, it has been said that “Miguel de Cervantes y el emperador Wanli de la dinastía Ming de China: hace más de 400 años, los dos tuvieron la oportunidad de reunirse pero no lo hicieron” (CRI Spanish).³ The disparity between Western and Eastern sources in the case of Cervantes and a missive from the Wanli emperor is quite remarkable. All in all, from the last quotations I infer that the Wanli period and the Habsburgs in Spain seem like fertile terrain for the study of global “recubremientos,” imperial overlapping, and global cultural circulation, since Cervantes’s humor does not travel well from one language to another.

The Spain of Philip II and Philip III (1555 to 1620) and the Wanli Period (1572-1620) seem to have a number of points of contact. No doubt that some of these global connections would be worthy of Jorge Luis

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Borges's pen, but the most obvious one is that, taken as a whole, 1620 marks the end of an era both in Spain and China. The results of Wanli and Philippine politics seem to be both the consequence of, and the reason for, the decline of a dynasty: the Ming in China and the Habsburg in Spain. By 1650, both Spanish Habsburgs and Chinese Ming are either a second-rank world power or they have disappeared. As for Spain, in 1648 the Peace of Utrecht means the end of its de facto first rank among Western powers. Regarding China, in 1650 the last Ming emperor is killed and the new Qing dynasty will govern the territories until the 20th century.

Both of the polities—the Ming Sinosphere and the Habsburg world Catholic conglomerate⁴—decided to close themselves to foreign influences of dubious repute. The cause of the closures is not totally clear, but in the case of the Habsburg, it seems to stem from a paralyzing fear of the immense changes that the Renaissance produced in the balance of powers in Europe. The consequences of the Ming and Habsburg closures were lasting ones, and perhaps could be the origin of decline for both dynasties.

Concerning Habsburg Spain, it is said that the naval foray against England in 1588 was the turning point. As for Ming China, too, the decade of 1580 has been identified as a turning point for the Ming dynasty. And yet, from the 1580s to 1620, both Spanish Habsburgs' and Ming letters and cultures experienced an illustrious moment. For the Chinese, the Wanli period was one of the most prosperous times of the Han history; and for Spain, this marks the heart of the so-called Golden Age.

The direct information that both countries shared seems to be scanty, and jeopardized by linguistic ignorance and procedural mishaps, as Carmen Hsu has clearly showed in the analysis and transcription of the missives sent by Philip II to emperor Wanli (Hsu, "Dos cartas"). That said, and focusing only on the information about China that would have been circulating in Spain, perhaps available to Cervantes, there was an increasing offer and demand for materials about Cathay, or Katay, or the great kingdom of China.

Unfortunately, it has been said that most of the information available to Cervantes about China came from two books: the medieval *Il millione* by Marco Polo, and late Renaissance historical effort displayed in *History of the Great Kingdom of China* (1585) by Juan González de Mendoza (Mancing).⁵ This assertion misrepresents the situation, since we could add many others, published between 1515 and 1615, such as:

- Historia Natural de las Indias* by Jose Acosta, published in Seville;
Bernardino de Escalante, *Discurso de la navegación que los Portugueses
hazén a los Reinos y Provincias de Oriente y de las noticias que se
tienen de las grandezas del Reino de la China*, Sevilla, 1577
- Historia Natural y Moral de las Indias* by Jose de Acosta, 1590, Sevilla
- Juan González de Mendoza, *Historia de las cosas más notables, ritos y
costumbres del Gran Reyno de la China*, Medina del Campo,
1595
- Historia de las islas del archipiélago y reinos de la gran China*, Marcelino
Ribadeneira, Barcelona, 1601
- Relación annual de las cosas que han hecho los padres de la Compañía*, 1604

In addition to these works, there are a plethora of extant documents related to China in digital corpuses such as *China en España* or *Biblioteca Sinica* that attest the importance given to the news from and about China at the time. As a consequence, it seems to me that curious readers in Spain, such as Cervantes, had a number of sources, starting with books published in Seville, Medina del Campo, and Barcelona.

Nevertheless, asserting which books Cervantes read on China is of a speculative nature, and a bit futile. More likely, his mention of the Emperor Wanli offering him a job in China accounts for one way to subscribe himself into an even larger network than the one created in his *Galatea*, where he is the center of a Mediterranean and Transatlantic network of intellectuals, or *ingenios*. Furthermore, the Chinese connection is a hilarious one: in 1615, the date of the publication of the second part of *Don Quixote*, China had closed its frontiers except for Guangdong to European traders, and all borders were closed to religious orders and intellectuals (Boxer, *South China* xxi-xxviii).

And yet, Cervantes's pleasantry is almost prophetic. The *Instituto Cervantes* exists in China, and according to some websites, the Beijing *Instituto Cervantes* is the biggest in the world. There are translations of *Don Quixote* into Chinese published in the last years by Yang Jiang, Dong Yansheng, Liu Jingsheng, Zhang Guangsen, and most likely these translations are being used to study Cervantes's work in China. One imagines that this plethora of modern translations might animate some to read the book in the original language; and reflect on the existence of a

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vibrant community of scholars in Spanish literature who run the graduate programs and increasing number of Spanish departments in Chinese universities. And, I hope the current symposium at The University of Chicago Beijing Center, and the one on Borges on July 16, 2016, at the Argentine Studies Center at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences will help to open and deepen the relations between Spanish departments in China and USA, especially with the Arizona State University and the University of Chicago Spanish faculty and students.

¹ While reading Enrique Rodríguez Larreta’s “Borges and China” article published in *Bangdai: First Journal on Argentina-China Cultural Exchange*, it confirmed many of my impressions about Borges as a connoisseur of Chinese thought, and even as a practitioner of some traditional Chinese disciplines. Perhaps even unconscious connections that were made in my brain now have been confirmed, during the process of writing for this presentation. For instance, I always associated Borges with some of my cherished German fictions by Herman Hesse, or the theoretical claims by Carl Gustav Jung about chance and revelation, or quantum physics in Schrodinger, and even Schopenhauer’s philosophy. In fact, according to Rodríguez Larreta, Borges saw China’s culture through the lens of German orientalism. I do not want to claim that German orientalism can help to explain all the work written by Borges, but it definitely helps to make sense of the striking originality of Borges in the Spanish-language literary canon.

² “Incluso en el Quijote cervantino hay ecos tangibles del mito del «Gran Reino de la China» que el fraile agustino Juan González de Mendoza se encargó de difundir. Al inicio de la segunda parte de la novela *El ingenioso caballero don Quijote de la Mancha*, publicada en 1615, Miguel de Cervantes incluyó una dedicatoria al conde de Lemos y virrey de Nápoles, don Pedro Fernández Ruiz de Castro y Osorio. En dicha dedicatoria, Miguel de Cervantes contaba como la aparición del Quijote falsario de Avellaneda había causado náusea «por todo el orbe», lo cual a su tiempo provocó que se le hubiese estado dando prisa para publicar sin dilación la auténtica segunda parte de las aventuras del hidalgo manchego. Contaba asimismo Miguel de Cervantes que quien más mostró desear este libro fue el gran emperador de la China, y relató su petición en estos términos: ‘(...) en lengua chinesca habrá un mes que me escribió una carta con un propio, pidiéndome, o, por mejor decir, suplicándome se le enviase, porque quería fundar un colegio donde se leyese la lengua castellana, y quería que el libro que se leyese fuese el de la historia de don Quijote. Justamente con esto, me decía que fuese yo a ser rector de tal colegio’” (Ollé).

³ Servicio de español de Radio Internacional de China, radio en línea, puente entre China y el mundo hispano, 中国国际广播电台西班牙语.

⁴ Composite term borrowed from the words used by Serge Gruzinski (*Las cuatro 46*), and Ivone del Valle (3).

⁵ “En 1585 se publicaba en Roma el libro *Historia de las cosas más notables, ritos y costumbres del Gran Reyno de la China* (1585) de Juan González de Mendoza. Su autor, el fraile agustino que debía liderar la embajada de Felipe II ante el emperador Wanli que quedó empantanada en México, no estuvo nunca en China pero compiló en su libro todo aquello que en aquel momento se sabía sobre China. Sus fuentes eran en buena medida portuguesas, aderezadas con los relatos de los misioneros que se habían adentrado sin fortuna en tierras chinas: Martín de Rada, Pedro Alfaro, Agustín de Tordesillas, Martín Ignacio de Loyola... El libro de Juan González de Mendoza se convirtió en la obra que difundió una imagen utópica e hiperbólica de China entre los medios cultos europeos, ávidos de noticias sobre este mitificado reino, durante las últimas décadas del siglo XVI y durante las primeras décadas del siglo XVII. Se tradujo a las principales lenguas europeas y gozó de más de cuarenta ediciones en apenas dos décadas. Autores tan diversos como Montaigne, Francis Bacon o como Sir Walter Raleigh se basaron en la obra de Juan González de Mendoza cuando se escribían sobre China. En el ámbito de las letras castellanas encontramos su huella en las piezas teatrales *Angélica en el Catay*, de Lope de Vega, así como *Las lágrimas de Angélica*, de Luis Barahona de Soto” (Ollé, n.p.). Christina H. Lee has a wonderful article on the references to Chinese geography in Barahona’s *Las lágrimas de Angélica* (Lee, “Imagining”).

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