Assessing Indigenous Forms of Writing

José de Acosta's View of Andean Quipus in Contrast with Chinese "Letters"

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Abstract

In this article, the Jesuit José de Acosta's interest in Andean *quipus* is analyzed as it evolved throughout his works, beginning in the preface of *De procuranda indorum salute* (1588) and reaching a point of arrival in his *Historia natural y moral de las Indias* (1590). In *De procuranda*, Acosta established different categories of "barbaric nations," placing the Indians from Mexico and Peru after the Chinese and Japanese. The latter belonged to the first category of "barbaric nations" because of their judgement, a stable republic, laws, fortified cities, and—most importantly in Acosta's eyes—use and knowledge of letters. In the *Historia* Acosta resumed aspects of this classification, with a focus on letters—or the lack of them—and writing, bringing China to the forefront. The difference with *De procuranda* was that Acosta's *Historia* fed on fresh information from the first Jesuits to establish a mission in China, Michele Ruggieri (1543–1607) and Matteo Ricci (1552–1640), which invigorated Acosta's analysis of letters, writing, and all that in his view could not be considered "letters" or "writing." In the first section of this article, Acosta's views on Andean *quipus* are analyzed, based mainly on his experience in the Peru mission. In the second section, focus shifts to Acosta's analysis of letters and writing, especially in his *Historia*, in which China played a preeminent role, bringing out interesting points of comparison with the Andean *quipus*. In the conclusion, are reflections on Acosta's own view of indigenous forms of writing in contrast with alphabetic script.

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Keywords

José de Acosta – Quipus – Peru – Indians – Matteo Ricci – Michele Ruggieri – China – letters

In the *Proemio*, the preface of *De procuranda indorum salute*—finished in 1577 in Peru and published in Spain in 1588—José de Acosta (1540–1600) established distinctions between different categories of “barbarians” which in turn would lead to different modes of evangelization for their salvation, the ultimate goal. Acosta placed the Indians from Mexico and Peru after the Chinese and Japanese. The latter belonged to the first category of “barbaric nations” because of their judgment [*recta razón*] and its application, common to the human species, to a stable republic, laws, fortified cities and—most importantly, according to Acosta—use and knowledge of letters.¹ The “nomads”—that is, the Indians in the Caribbean—“similar to beasts,” belonged to a third and last group. The second group, according to Acosta, may have had empires and republics, laws and institutions, but they lacked a writing system—a key characteristic of the first group of Chinese and Japanese. Nevertheless, in the case of Peru, they found in the *quipus*—knotted string devices—a means of recording their memories and history, their laws and genealogies, as well as figures and numbers. Indeed, Acosta stated that the *peruanos* had replaced writing with the *quipus*, a pre-Columbian memory technique used for those different purposes.

The fifth book in Acosta’s *Historia natural y moral de las Indias* (1590) marks the start of the “moral history” and is mostly dedicated to the religion of the Indians or, more precisely, their “superstitions” and “their rites and idolatries.”² The sixth book is devoted to the Indians’ “civilization and government, their laws, customs and deeds” [*su policía y gobierno y leyes y costumbres y hechos*]. In the first chapter of this sixth book, Acosta stated the double purpose of these pages: first, to rebuke the common false belief that the Indians were barbaric people, without intelligence, or too little deserving to be called such. The wisest and most curious men that had penetrated their secrets, style, and ancient government judged them in a wholly different way, amazed at how much order and reason there was among them. The second goal to be achieved by means of the knowledge of their laws, customs, and civilization was to rule

1 Francisco Mateos, S.J., ed., *Obras del P. José de Acosta* (Madrid: Biblioteca de Autores Españoles, 1954), 392.

2 Ibid., 139.

the Indians by means of their practices, since as long as the people did not contradict the laws of Christ and the church, it was proper for them to be ruled in conformity with their own regional laws. Ignorance of this, claimed Acosta, among those who judged and ruled but did not know how to judge and rule their subjects, had led to great errors.³

In this article, Acosta's thought on such matters is analyzed, specifically with respect to his evolving thought on the Andean *quipus*, which reached a point of arrival in his *Historia natural y moral de las Indias*. In the *Historia*, Acosta resumed certain aspects of this contrast among the different "barbaric nations" with regard to letters—or the lack of them—and writing, bringing China to the forefront. Indeed, China entered the scene with Acosta's description of Chinese characters—most of the time described as "letters"—and the country's institutions related to them. Regarding this aspect, the difference with *De procuranda indorum salute* is that Acosta's *Historia natural y moral de las Indias* fed on fresh information from Michele Ruggieri (1543–1607) and Matteo Ricci (1552–1640), the first Jesuits to establish a mission in China. This information circulated in Europe as a compendium of Jesuit letters, with which Acosta might have become familiar once in Europe in the late 1580s. However, Acosta first obtained information in Mexico, on his way back to Spain, through a Jesuit missionary in the Philippines, Alonso Sánchez (1547–1593), who had been to the province of Canton in China, where he met Ruggieri. Sánchez is mentioned in the *Historia*, together with his remarks on Chinese "letters" and writing.

In the first section of this article, Acosta's views on *quipus* in Peru are examined, mainly based on his experience as the primary theologian of the mission to Peru. In the second section, focus shifts to Acosta's analysis of letters and writing after his departure from Peru and on his way back to Spain, especially in the *Historia* where China played a preeminent role. In the *Historia*, Acosta described and analyzed *quipus* and Chinese characters in various chapters. Here, comparison of his views on both enables us to better understand Acosta's assessment of *quipus* and their uses and to reflect more broadly on Acosta's developing views on indigenous forms of writing in contrast with alphabetic script.

Views and Uses of *quipus* during Acosta's Years in the Peru Mission

The Society of Jesus in Peru was summoned by King Philip II of Spain to redirect evangelization in the Andes and impose Tridentine Catholicism, independently of Rome—a task that entailed compliance with the demands of colonial

³ Ibid., 182–3.

authorities. In 1568, Philip reorganized all the aspects of the colonies: political, economic, religious and ecclesiastical, among others. Sent by the king to implement all these reforms, Viceroy Francisco de Toledo (r. 1569–1581) played a key role in this new stage in the colonization of Peru. In 1569, with the vast colonial enterprise now in his hands, he arrived in Peru together with members both of the Society of Jesus and of the Inquisition. José de Acosta arrived in Peru in 1571 in a third, smaller Jesuit contingent.

As the primary theologian of the mission, Acosta played a key role in adapting Catholic doctrine to the Andean soil. Before his arrival, Philip II had in 1565 imposed the decrees of the Council of Trent (1545–1563) as unquestionable law for the colonies. However, it would not be until the Third Lima Council (1582–83) that an authoritative catechetical corpus shaped by the Tridentine decrees, the *Doctrina christiana y catecismo para instrucción de indios* (1584–1585), was imposed. Acosta was the author of the Spanish text, and many sections of the *Doctrina christiana* were also translated into Quechua and Aymara.

As mentioned earlier, in *De procuranda* Acosta stated how the Peruvians found in the *quipu* a means of recording their memories and history, their laws and genealogies, as well as figures and numbers. The *quipu* is not known to have had any phonetic component. Created out of cotton and wool cords that were colored, spun, twisted, and knotted in different ways and combinations, Andean *quipus* hold and convey knowledge in a way that is distinct from language.⁴ Marcia Ascher has characterized *quipus* as a logical-numerical system and, as such, it is a general recording system; units of meaning are constructed with numbers. Establishing the logical structures of the *quipus* and drawing meaning from them is possible through knowledge of the Incan culture. On a *quipu*, the numbers represented by knots on cords, whether they be magnitude or labels, are the data that are placed into the cord array. The logical structure of the cord array is the framework for the interpretation of the data. That is, both the structure and the data within it carry information. Each array is defined by how the cords are placed, how they are spaced, and by their colors. Cords can be directed upward or downward, and they can be distinguished or related by colors.⁵

4 In this regard, Elizabeth Hill-Boone states that *quipus* have been almost universally excluded from the larger family of writing systems, even by Mesoamericanists (who see them as codes or counting devices), because they seem to lack linguistic referents of any kind. See *Writing Without Words: Alternative Literacies in Mesoamerica and the Andes*, eds. E. Hill Boone and Walter D. Mignolo (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994), 20–21.

5 Marcia Ascher, “Reading Khipu: Labels, Structure and Format,” in *Narrative Threads: Accounting and Recounting in Andean Khipu*, eds. Jeffrey Quilter and Gary Urton (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002), 87–102.

As for the functions of *quipus*, specialists in the subject have distinguished two kinds of *quipu* in the Inca empire: the accounting *quipu* and the historical, memory or rhetorical *quipu*. The accounting *quipu* registers only numbers; it was used to fulfill accounting functions from Cuzco down to the smallest groups in a lordship. Regarding the historical *quipu*, the European sources emphasized the “technical memory” of the team trained to reproduce their “reading”; these specialists were the *quipucamayoc*. There was a first loss of *quipus* that coincided with the European invasion, when the *quipucamayocs* were killed by the Spaniards and their *quipus* were burned. However, local *quipucamayocs* could supply the Spanish officials with statistical information, on whose basis the newly reorganized colonial state began to take shape.

In 1549, the general inspections or *visitas* ordered by Pedro de la Gasca, the president of the Real Audiencia, which was the court of appeals in Lima, precipitated an initial episode of systematic transcription of statistical data from *quipus* into written Spanish documents. During Francisco de Toledo’s viceroyalty (1569–1581), inspection procedures called for a more systematic collection of historical information than had been carried out up to that time, and so the documents produced as a result of these new rounds of inspection visits grew in profusion. Soon thereafter, conflict escalated over the *quipus* and the written records. In short, relations between Andean and Spanish record keepers were by no means always amicable, especially when the question arose as to whether natives or Spaniards would control public records in the colony. As the *quipus* were too distant from European modes of expression, the Toledan reforms of the 1570s had aimed at replacing them with alphabetic records, but this effort was not very successful.⁶ In sum, the new colonial regime spawned two contradictory perspectives and responses regarding the *quipus*. On the one hand, it needed to retain the accounting for a certain period of time to facilitate the colonization of the newly subjugated people. On the other hand, it was in the regime’s interest to suppress the dangerous historical-ideological “official records” or memory *quipus*.⁷

After their arrival in Peru, the Jesuits encouraged a “religious” use of *quipus*, but they were not the first religious order to do so. Before the Jesuits, the Mercedarian Diego de Porres had recommended their use for each village to keep lists both of the Ten Commandments and of the resolutions of the First

6 Alan Durston, *Pastoral Quechua: The History of Christian Translation in Colonial Peru, 1550–1650* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), 69.

7 Carlos Sempat Assadourian, “Native Accounting and Memory According to the Colonial Sources,” in *Narrative Threads*, 122–134.

Lima Council in 1551.⁸ Acosta's positive appreciation of the *quipu* is observed in a letter to Superior General Everard Mercurian dated February 15, 1577, in which he referred to their use in the *doctrina*, or Indian parish, in Juli:

I forgot to say how in these boys who learn the doctrine I find many more skills than I thought. After just one week some of them know how to cross themselves and also the Our Father, Hail Mary and the Creed and the Salve in the language [Spanish], so they all sang it during the procession on Sunday; and many men and women and boys and girls are all day with their *quipos*, like students repeating a lesson.⁹

In this same letter, Acosta also compared the *quipus* and alphabetic script, stating that the Indians could remember what they were taught—especially prayers and Christian doctrine—because of the “*quipus* or records, these knotted strings they have, so they can remember what they are taught as we do through writing.”¹⁰ He also claimed that the sacrament of confession profited from the Indians' use of *quipus*: “The call of God has been notably observed in the confessions [...]. An Indian kneeled down in front of a Father, with many *quipos*, which are records [*memoriales*] of their own sins that they bring, saying that he wanted to confess, because he had always silenced a sin.”¹¹

This use of *quipus* for confession is also mentioned in one of the catechisms that formed part of the Third Lima Council catechetical corpus, the *Doctrina christiana y catecismo para instrucción de indios*. The *quipus* are also cited in the twelfth sermon of the *Tercero catecismo por sermones*, another catechism in the council's corpus, as having helped the Indians make thorough confessions. In the sermon, the Indians are encouraged to record their sins with *quipus*:

For your confession to be good, and please God, the first thing you have to do, my son, is to make a *quipu*, just like you make them [...] of what you give and what people owe you. So you make a *quipu* of what you have done against God and against others, and how many times, if many or a few. And not only is it about deeds, but also about your thoughts [...] if

8 Juan Carlos Estenssoro, *Del paganismo a la santidad: la incorporación de los indios del Perú al catolicismo, 1532–1750* (Lima: IFEA, 2003), 217.

9 Mateos, *Obras*, 286. *Quipu* is a modern Spanish transliteration of *quipu*, and so the original spelling has been retained when quoting Spanish sources.

10 Ibid., 287.

11 Ibid., 296.

you desired to commit sin with a woman and you looked at her with that purpose, if you want to steal a blanket or someone's ram.¹²

Acosta requested to return to Spain in 1580. However, after claiming that he had done everything in his power to delay his departure because the Society in Peru needed his influence at the Third Lima Council, he finally set sail for New Spain at the end of May 1586. In Mexico, Acosta met the Jesuit Alonso Sánchez, missionary in the Philippines, who had travelled twice to Macao—the Portuguese port near Canton, in the South China Sea. On his first voyage in 1582, Sánchez sailed from the Philippines to China to carry out two tasks assigned to him by the governor of the Philippines: to have Philip II recognized as the king of Portugal and to establish commercial relationships with the islands and China. Sánchez was successful in the first mission and failed in the second. In fact, his failure in carrying out this second assignment aroused in him a desire to make war against China. The sometimes unbending Ming attitude toward foreigners and the obstacles the Jesuits had had to overcome drove Sánchez to state that Christianity should be introduced in China in the same way as in Spanish America: first by force of arms and in a second stage by preaching the Gospel.¹³ From Mexico, Acosta wrote two memos addressed to Superior General Claudio Acquaviva confuting Sánchez's arguments.¹⁴ Regardless of this conflictive episode, it was through Sánchez that Acosta gained some insight into certain aspects of a "Chinese world of letters."

On Letters and Writing in Acosta's *Historia Natural y Moral de las Indias* (1590)

Acosta's sojourn and experience in Mexico left their imprint in the *Historia natural y moral de las Indias*. As already mentioned, in New Spain Acosta met the Jesuit missionary to the Philippines, Alonso Sánchez, who had been in

12 *Doctrina christiana y catecismo para instrucción de indios*, ed. Luciano Pereña (Madrid: Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas: 1986), 482.

13 Ana Carolina Hosne, *The Jesuit Missions to China and Peru, 1570–1610: Expectations and Appraisals of Expansionism* (Oxon: Routledge, 2013), 22.

14 The first memo, "Remarks on the War against China," of March 15, 1587, listed four reasons why it was unlawful to make war against the Middle Kingdom and the second, "Response to the Grounds for a War against China," of March 23, 1587, was a complement to the first.

China and provided him with first-hand information from the China mission. In Canton, Sánchez met Ruggieri when the latter was negotiating the establishment of the mission in China. Alonso Sánchez showed him the papers he had brought with him, all of them addressed to the Chinese authorities of the Canton province, with whom he was able to communicate thanks to Ruggieri's interpreting skills. Ruggieri was aware of the difficulty of this enterprise, not only on account of the Chinese, who distrusted the Spaniards, but also because of the Portuguese in Macao, who were against the Spaniards entering China by way of Manila. In the end, Sánchez failed to achieve his purpose.¹⁵ Unable to settle a deal between Canton and Manila, the two Jesuits, Sánchez and Ruggieri, were allowed to return to Macao.

Turning now to the sixth book of Acosta's *Historia*, devoted to the Indians' civilization and government, their laws, customs, and deeds, we find that letters, or the lack of them, had begun to play an important role in Acosta's thought about the Indians following his encounter with Sánchez. In the sixth book, China is in the forefront of Acosta's discussion. In its fourth chapter, entitled "Of no letters discovered in any Indian nation" [*Que ninguna nación de indios se ha descubierto que use de letras*]¹⁶—Acosta drew a dividing line between "letters" and "drawings." He claimed that letters were invented to refer to and signify the words human beings pronounce, these words being "signs" [*señales*] of concepts and men's thoughts. In his view, signs that signified things, rather than words, were not actually "letters," even if they were written. Far from holding exceptional views on this point among Europeans in the New World at the time, Acosta concluded that writing and letters referred only to words, and if they referred to things, it was through words. But if they denoted the things themselves directly, then they were neither letters nor writing, but rather "painting and figures" [*pinturas y dibujos*]. Consequently, men could preserve memory of histories and antiquity by means of one of three modes: either by means of letters and writing, as in Latin, Greek, Hebrew, and the writing of "many other nations," or by means of painting, as was common throughout the world, or by means of figures or characters.¹⁶ Acosta then concluded that no "nations of Indians" had yet been discovered, up to his time, which used letters or writing. Rather, the natives of the Americas resorted to the other two ways, images and figures. Just as the *quipus* in Peru had earlier captured Acosta's attention, in the *Historia* he emphasized that in the "New World," figures and

15 Astrain, Antonio, SJ, *Historia de la Compañía de Jesús en la asistencia de España*, vol. 4 (Madrid: Administración de Razón y Fe, 1913), 452.

16 Mateos, *Obras*, 185.

“hieroglyphics” [*jeroglíficas*] were to be found in Mexico.¹⁷ He then claimed that the “paintings and characters,” “images,” and “figures” found in the Americas all of them have one thing in common: “[T]hey are not sufficient as our script and letters, and that is why they cannot match them with specific words, but in the essence of the concepts.”¹⁸ However, by underscoring images or figures, Acosta then claimed not to be referring exclusively to “the Indians in Peru and New Spain,” but also “to the Japanese and Chinese. And, even though what I am saying may seem false, for all the accounts of the libraries [*librerías*] and studies in China and Japan [...] it is the sheer truth.”¹⁹

Acosta advanced an analysis of Chinese “letters” in the sixth chapter of the same book of the *Historia*, “On the kind of letters and books used by the Chinese.” There, Acosta stated:

[A]s countless as things are, the letters or figures the Chinese—*los chinos*—use to depict them are also countless [...]. He who reads or writes in China, as the mandarins do, must know eighty-five thousand figures or letters; and those whose reading skills are perfect, a hundred and twenty or so thousand. It is prodigious, and would be hard to believe were it not for the fact that fathers of our Society are currently learning their language and writing [...]. This is the reason why in China the literati are so esteemed [...]. And it is why only they are mandarins and take the offices of governors, judges and captains.²⁰

Here, Acosta’s remark on Chinese “letters” echoes Ricci’s observation that there is “one letter” for “each thing.” Matteo Ricci had defined Chinese “letters” as “such a gentle yet difficult invention,” according to which “as many things as are in this world, so many are the letters, so different from one another,”

17 Jorge Cañizares Esguerra, who claims that “the work of the Spanish Jesuit José de Acosta typifies sixteenth-century Spanish perception of Amerindian scripts,” is mistaken when stating that Acosta overlooked the similitude between Egyptian and Mexican systems of writing as conceived in the Renaissance, even though “he could have easily cast Mexican glyphs as Egyptian hieroglyphs symbolizing arcane knowledge.” Recognition of the similitude is implicit in his choice to refer to the Mexican form of writing as “hieroglíficas,” instead of “figures,” “images,” or “paintings.” See Esguerra, *How to Write the History of the New World: Histories, Epistemologies, and Identities in the Eighteenth-Century Atlantic World* (California: Stanford University Press, 2001), 70.

18 Mateos, *Obras*, 188.

19 *Ibid.*, 185.

20 *Ibid.*, 186.

as he explained in a letter of September 13, 1584, with a long description of China in Spanish, to Juan Bautista Román, the royal representative in the Philippines.²¹

Acosta returned to Europe in the late 1580s, when China was just beginning to be portrayed in missionaries' chronicles. However, it had not yet become an object of intellectual curiosity in Europe when Acosta's *Historia natural y moral de las Indias* (1590) elaborated on the few works circulating, in particular a compilation of letters from Jesuits, including some by Michele Ruggieri and Matteo Ricci. Ricci's letter was part of a selection of Jesuit letters compiled in a book entitled *Cartas anuas titulado avisos de la China y Japón del fin del año 1587, recibidos en octubre de 88, sacados de las cartas de los padres de la Compañía de Jesús que anda en aquellas partes* [News of China and Japan in Late 1587, Received in October '88, Taken from the Annual Letters from the Fathers of the Society of Jesus in Those Parts], published in 1589 in Madrid. Among others, it contains Ricci's letter to Juan Bautista Román.²² But Acosta might have learned all these things that Ricci said to Román, again, through Sánchez, for the latter made a second trip to Macao in 1584 in the company of Juan Bautista Román. In his account on the Jesuit mission to China, which editor Pasquale D'Elia, SJ, entitled *Storia dell'introduzione del cristianesimo in Cina*, Ricci narrated that Sánchez and Román had gone from the Philippines to China to propose an embassy on behalf of Philip II to China. Prior to their arrival, Sánchez claimed that Ruggieri and Ricci had written to the governor in the Philippines, to the bishop in Manila, and to Sánchez himself informing them about the progress of the mission and also asking for financial help. The governor of the Philippines, Don Gonzalo Ronquillo de Peñalosa, and the bishop in Manila decided to help the two Jesuits. In exchange, the latter wanted Ruggieri and Ricci's help in finding a place in the Canton province where they could send their ships to trade and thus make higher profits for the government.²³ Therefore, "to that effect," wrote Ricci, "they sent one of our Fathers, Alfonso Sanci [Sánchez] and the Spanish Royal Representative in those parts, named Giovanni Battista Romano."²⁴ But only Ruggieri met Sánchez in person at that time, not Ricci.

21 Pietro Tacchi Venturi, S.J., *Opere storiche del P. Matteo Ricci S.I.*, 2 vols. (Macerata: F. Giorgetti, 1911–1913), 2:45.

22 Manel Ollé, "The Jesuit Portrayals of China Between 1583–1590," *Bulletin of Portuguese/Japanese Studies* 16 (2008): 50–51.

23 Hosne, *Jesuit Missions*, 55.

24 Matteo Ricci, *Storia dell'introduzione del cristianesimo in Cina*, 2 vols., ed. Pasquale M. D'Elia (Rome: La Libreria dello Stato, 1942–1949), 1:214, n. 4.

In sum, whether through a collection of printed Jesuit letters, through Sánchez alone, or through both, Acosta gleaned fresh information regarding the China mission from this collection and included certain aspects of it in his *Historia*. However, Acosta's recognition of the complexity of Chinese writing and of the esteem for those who mastered it did not overlook the "inconvenience" of such a writing system. Again, in the *Historia* Acosta narrated how in New Spain he had asked some Chinese he met there to write his name in Chinese characters. He did so to find out how the Chinese could write foreign names in their language, names they had never seen before. They had to invent figures for them:

They have this trick [*artificio*] of searching for something similar in their language to that [foreign] name, and put the figure for that thing; and since it is difficult to find things that are similar to certain names with a similar sound in their language, so it is painstaking for them to write so many names. So difficult that Father Sánchez said that in the time he spent in China [...] in so many courts, from mandarin to mandarin, they would spend lots of time writing his name on those metal sheets [*chapas*] that they use, and then they would end up naming him in such a ridiculous way that they could hardly find him [*que apenas acertaban con él*].²⁵

Acosta's summarized his rather negative view of Chinese letters as "a witty and skilful invention, but lacking substance," for all their science was about reading and writing, without reaching higher sciences. He added, furthermore:

[T]heir reading and writing is not real reading and writing, since theirs are not letters that serve for words, but little figures of countless things, involving an endless and time-consuming task, and at the tail end of their science. An Indian in Peru or Mexico who has learned how to read and write knows more than the wisest mandarin, for the Indian combining the twenty-four letters he has learned can read as many words as are in this world, and the mandarin with his hundred thousand letters can hardly write any proper name such as Martín or Alonso, and least of all the names of the things he does not know. Because, in fact, Chinese writing is nothing other than painting or encoding.²⁶

²⁵ Mateos, *Obras*, 186–7.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 187.

As a man of his times, Acosta would not doubt the superiority of alphabetic writing and how “economical” it could be. The legitimacy of the Spanish conquest was reflected in this: the Indians in Peru and Mexico, in his view, were to become more skillful than the Chinese at reading and writing because they had learned the alphabet, something that could not be imposed on the Chinese or Japanese. With regard to the latter, Acosta did not have much information. He stated that Japanese letters and writing were very similar to those of the Chinese. His scant information seems to have resulted from what Acosta might have heard about a Japanese embassy that visited Europe in 1584. He mentioned the “Japanese lords who were in Europe” as having stated that “they could easily write anything in their language, even if they were local proper names.”²⁷ Here Acosta referred to European names. Indeed, in 1582, the visitor of the Society of Jesus in the missions to the East, Alessandro Valignano (1539–1606), assembled an expedition consisting of four Japanese Christian boys from noble Kyushu families, several Jesuit escorts and personal servants. They departed from Nagasaki in 1582 and arrived in Lisbon two-and-a-half years later, in August 1584. Valignano himself accompanied the envoys as far as Goa, after which they sailed to Lisbon, travelling by land across the Iberian Peninsula and then sailing to Rome and journeying throughout northern Italy.²⁸

Following all these events, and Acosta’s reception of information about the Chinese, the author of *De procuranda* wrote of the Andean *quipus* in a new way in his *Historia*:

The Indians in Peru did not have any kind of writing system before the Spanish arrived, neither letters, characters nor figures like in China or Mexico; but that did not mean that they did not keep the memory of their past [*sus antiguallas*], because they were very diligent in keeping their memory. Apart from this diligence, they [the Indians] replaced their lack of writing and letters [...] mostly with *quipos*. *Quipos* consist of records made with strings, in which different knots and colors mean different things. And what they achieved with *quipos* was incredible, for they were able to replace all of what books can tell regarding history, law, ceremonies, and accounting with them.²⁹

Acosta then was tempted to compare the *quipus* to alphabetic script: “I saw a handful of these strings that an Indian woman brought written, a confession of

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Dauril Alden, *The Making of an Enterprise: The Society of Jesus in Portugal, its Empire, and Beyond, 1540–1750* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), 64.

²⁹ Mateos, *Obras*, 189.

her whole life, and through them she confessed, as I would do with a written paper.”³⁰

Interestingly, Acosta's remarks in the *Historia* about how uneconomical Chinese “letters” were—one of the reasons the Jesuits did not marvel at them—can be contrasted with those about the *quipus* in Peru, since Acosta regarded them as economical as alphabetic writing. Twenty-odd knots, he noted, could express countless things, just as alphabetic writing could: “[E]ach handful of these knots and little knots, with strings attached, some red, some green, some blue, others black [...] that just like us (the Spaniards), combining twenty-four letters in different ways can have countless words, so they with their knots and colors obtained countless meanings of things.”³¹

Last but not least, Acosta did not stop short of providing information regarding other alternative writing systems in Peru. Jan Szeminski has studied a kind of pre-Hispanic alternative writing system still used today in Bolivia. In most of the cases, the authors were people who neither spoke Spanish nor were knowledgeable of the Latin alphabet. One of these alternative writing systems is a catechetical pictography, presented on a round surface—“clay pizzas”—with a sequence of clay figurines, pebbles, and other elements representing prayers and some variants of the catechism.³² In the *Historia*, Acosta described these: “Beside these *quipos* made of strings, they [the Indians in Peru] also have pebbles, through which they learn the words they want to remember by heart, and very old men can be seen with a wheel made of pebbles to learn the Our Father, and with another one the Hail Mary, and with another for the Creed, knowing which is the right stone.” Acosta then concluded, “if this is not wit and if these men are beasts, it should be judged at everyone's own discretion; as for myself, what I gather is that these things they apply, they are of great benefit to us.”³³

Indigenous Forms of Writing through the Lens of Acosta

We have seen how Acosta's view of *quipus* evolved over time in his writings, based both on his own experience in the Peru mission and indirectly on that of the Jesuits in the China mission. Fresh information regarding the China mission invigorated Acosta's analysis of letters, writing, and everything that, in his

30 Ibid., 190.

31 Ibid., 189.

32 Jan Szeminski, “¿Qué Sabemos de Quillqa en Qulla Suyu?,” *Estudios Latinoamericanos* 30 (2010): 129–86.

33 Mateos, *Obras*, 190.

eyes, could not be considered “letters” or “writing.” Broadening the picture did not soften his disparaging views of writing systems that were not alphabetic, or which were not written languages. It is well-known that Europeans who arrived in the Americas imposed an evolutionary model based on such premises. Walter Mignolo has noted that systems in the New World did not record speech.³⁴ Indigenous forms of writing eventually came to be defined as pictures or mnemonic aids—the latter especially in the case of *quipus*, while alphabetic script, by contrast, has become nearly synonymous with “writing.”³⁵ José de Acosta’s views were thus not exceptional. What Acosta conceived at that time was what scholars have held until quite recently, that alphabetic writing, which uses a relatively small number of signs that, when combined, represent an almost infinite number of sounds, can be regarded as more efficient and accurate than all other forms of writing.³⁶ In a similar vein, if in his *Historia* Acosta stated that Peru, unlike China, was in a better position regarding letters and writing, it was not because of the *quipus* but because the Indians were learning alphabetic reading and writing. So it would be naïve to deny that in Acosta’s view alphabetic script was always the standard. At the same time, he found a way to nuance and work around the more negative, commonly held views of the Spaniards in the New World, with his positive assessment of the economy of *quipus*, seeing the knots as comparable to the twenty-four letters of the Latin alphabet. As for Chinese characters, it is possible that Acosta was more influenced by Alonso Sánchez and his negative view of China than by the information circulating in Europe at that time contained in Jesuit letters from the missions to the East. Unlike Sánchez, and, indirectly, Acosta, Matteo Ricci hardly ever compared Chinese “letters” to alphabetic writing, least of all to conclude that the latter was “better.” As early as February 1583, in a letter to Martino de Fornari, one of Ricci’s mentors in the Roman College, Ricci described Chinese characters in the same terms as in his letter to Román:

With regards to letters it is hard to believe until one sees it, as I myself did. There are as many letters as words or things, so they are more than seventy thousand, all of them so different and tangled [...]. All the words are of one syllable; their writing is more like painting; so they write with a brush, like our painters. It is so useful for them that all the nations that have these letters can understand each other through letters and books,

34 Boone and Mignolo, *Writing without Words*, 20.

35 Birgit B. Rasmussen, *Queequeg’s Coffin: Indigenous Literacies and Early American Literature* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), 19–20.

36 Rasmussen, *Queequeg’s Coffin*, 22.

even if they have different languages [...]. For Japan, Siam and China, which are completely different and large kingdoms, with different languages, can understand each other very well.³⁷

In sum, Acosta set his own tone not only regarding his assessment of the use of Andean *quipus* when, at the same time, he was not very impressed with the Chinese world of letters and writing, unlike many of his fellow Jesuits, whether they were staffing the missions to the East or still in Europe. Undoubtedly, Sánchez was an exception among them, and he was the one whom Acosta met and who personally informed the latter about the progress in the China mission and, further, about Chinese letters. Still, this would not stop Acosta from refuting Sánchez's war plans against China. Acosta neither advocated war against the Chinese nor idealized their *belles lettres*. Before Acosta knew of the fuller experiences of other Jesuits in China, regardless of where he was in his own travels, China found a true place in his works.

37 Tacchi Venturi, *Opere Storiche*, 2:27–28.