

Sinica venetiana 1

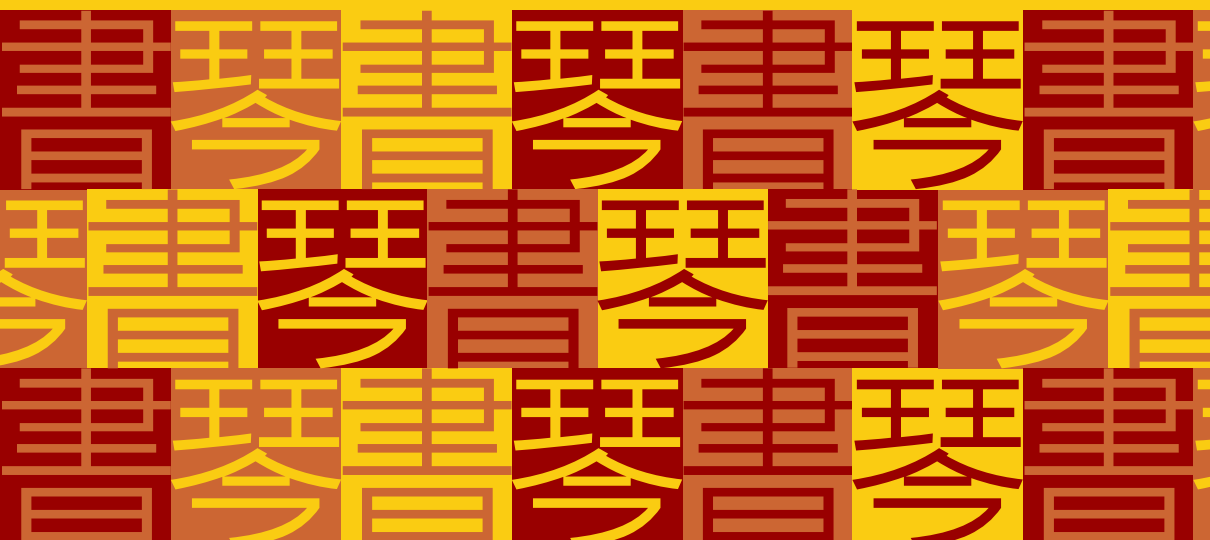
Il liuto e i libri

Studi in onore di Mario Sabattini

a cura di
Magda Abbiati, Federico Greselin



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Sinica venetiana

Collana diretta da
Tiziana Lippiello, Chen Yuehong

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Sinica venetiana

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Amicitia palatina

The Jesuits and the politics of gift-giving at the Qing court

Eugenio Menegon

Abstract Scholars of late imperial China have studied gift-giving within two main contexts: official corruption flourishing at the interface of imperial bureaucratic institutions and society; and exchange of tribute items in the diplomatic and trade system with foreign countries and other tributary peoples. Gift-giving from European Catholic missionaries in Beijing to emperors and members of the Ming and Qing courts, however, occupied a space between these two spheres. The missionaries' gifts were mostly exchanged and perceived within the customary economy of gift-exchanges among officials, although they also responded to the court's pursuit of foreign exotic items. These objects usually did not figure within the highly-charged symbolic economy of tribute, which entailed a Qing imperial counter-offering of gifts. Missionaries used these exchanges to gain political stature within the court, and lubricate their patronage network in Beijing, especially in the late Kangxi era (1710s-1720s). Gifts, therefore, were in the final analysis a way for European missionaries to position themselves within existing hierarchies of power and try to exploit them to their own advantage within a fully Chinese framework.

1 Gifts in China and at court

Since the publication of the classic *Essai sur le don* by Marcel Mauss in 1923, anthropologists and sociologists have dedicated hefty tomes to the politics of gift-giving both in non-Western 'primitive societies' and, more recently, in contemporary capitalist societies. Marketing experts have eagerly applied those insights to study consumer behavior and to teach new generations of business types how to capture larger shares of markets exploiting human psychology and cultural habits connected to gift-giving. The topic is vast, has been thoroughly explored from multiple points of view, and China scholars have delved into the matter especially to consider the implications of gift-giving in the formation of social relations (*guanxi* 關係) under Socialism in post-1949 China (Yang 1994; Yan 1996). Gifting has been idealized as free from material gains, and as separate from the kind of commodity exchange that «establishes objective quantitative relationships between the objects transacted, while gift exchange establishes personal qualitative relationships between the subjects transacting» (Gregory 1982, p. 41; Klekar 2006, p. 89). Skeptics of this distinction between gifts and commodities, however, abound, and they have worked at «demystify[ing] the social work of the gift by deconstructing the gift's obligatory nature»

(Klekar 2006, p. 89).¹ In other words, gifts have both a symbolic *and* monetary value, and are given with a clear sense of economic accounting, and in expectation of benefits to be gained.

Scholars of late imperial China have also studied gift-giving, albeit with less intensity than historians of modernity, and within two main contexts: 1) official 'corruption' flourishing at the interface of imperial bureaucratic institutions and society; and 2) exchange of 'tribute' items in the diplomatic and trade system with foreign countries and other tributary peoples. Gift-giving in late imperial China was a refined art that had developed over centuries of ritualized exchanges among aristocrats, elites, and commoners, and it obeyed clear rules codified in custom but also in manuals and law codes. Gift-giving was part and parcel of the daily routine of Chinese officials in career, under the rubric of 'civilities', or *yingchou* 應酬. The term was a euphemism for the web of mutual obligations and the practices of almost coerced gift-giving among members of the officialdom, and between officials and merchants or powerful elites. Gifts were in fact a way to pay back support, and invest in one's future. They were also exacted by superiors from inferiors. Sometimes officials went into heavy debt to pay for 'farewell gifts' (*biejing* 別敬) worth tens of thousands of taels to the 'friends' who had helped them along the way in their career. Conversely, merchants and local elites used gifts to officials and to the emperor himself (for example during the famous Southern Tours of the Qing emperors in Jiangnan) to buy favor with the government, and obtain legal, financial, and fiscal privileges (Park 1997; Will 2008; Chang 2007).

Exchanges of tribute items were a distinct, yet partly similar way for foreigners, be they merchants, Inner Asian tribal chiefs, or representatives of Western and Asian polities, to obtain symbolic and substantial advantages for themselves and their states or polities, and to conduct trade within the tributary system organization, as well as within special arrangements created by the Qing dynasty over the course of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In particular during the Qing period, European powers coached their desire to establish commercial relations and obtain trade privileges in the language of gift-giving and its apparent disinterested nature. While ultimately such economic advantages were gained with great limitations in the local contexts of the southern Chinese ports and especially Canton, visits and receptions in Beijing did not really achieve any of the commercial objectives hoped for (Klekar 2006).

1 Klekar is referring to the work of Derrida and Bordieu, among others.

2 Gifts from the Europeans

Here I will limit myself to examine examples of gift-giving from European Catholic missionaries in Beijing to the emperors and the members of the Ming and Qing courts. This was a kind of gift-giving that occupied a murky space between customary mutual exchanges among Chinese officials, and the offering of tribute by foreign envoys. This sort of gift-giving not only intersected with the world of courtly leisure, which entailed the enjoyment of luxury goods as status symbols, as signifiers of cultural refinement, and as ‘toys’, but also reflected the calculations of European and Chinese actors within the framework of state policies on foreign relations and ‘corruption’. The Jesuits were both part of the Chinese official world, and intermediaries with European foreign powers, and in these two capacities they straddled rigid categories established by custom or ritual. This is what makes the exchanges they recorded interesting, and has the potential to further illuminate the politics and economics of gift-exchange in the Qing period, and the interface between leisure and the state.

First, to understand the dynamics of gift-giving between Europeans and members of the Qing court and officialdom it is necessary to clarify the position of missionaries in Beijing. Although there were changes in their role at court over time, generally speaking missionaries belonged to two ‘professional’ milieus: a minority were officials employed in the Astronomical Bureau, and thus members of the Chinese bureaucracy; the majority were employees of the various workshops managed by the Imperial Household Bureau, and were either considered technical personnel or, in special cases, such as the painter Giuseppe Castiglione (1688-1766), had a more exalted status due to their skills, albeit outside of official recognition. A third milieu complicates the picture. During the Kangxi reign (1661-1723), when Christianity still enjoyed imperial tolerance (official prohibition of Christianity as a religion would come after the death of Kangxi in 1723, under his successor the Yongzheng emperor, r. 1723-1735), a few missionaries did not work at court at all, but rather managed the affairs and the pastoral work of the Beijing mission houses and the adjacent capital region. Among them emerged, in the late Kangxi period, the Portuguese João Mourão (1681-1726), who became a favorite of the emperor thanks to his role as diplomatic intermediary and Chinese and Manchu translator during the visit of a papal legation in 1720. Especially during the Kangxi period, therefore, individual missionaries would enjoy imperial favor thanks to ‘professional’ reasons, but also as a direct consequence of the emperor’s judgment of their personality and service. The still fluid nature of Inner Court institutions at this point allowed some missionaries to find a space within the court world as mediators with European powers and cultures, without a specific role in the bureaucracy or workshops.

To sustain their presence successfully, Westerners in Beijing became

adept in Chinese ritual ways and social conventions, and key to their acceptance was their understanding of the Chinese art of gift-giving to gain favor. The ‘Western’ nature of their gifts became a particularly useful resource at their disposal. Unlike other objects exchanged in China as part of social networking, the kinds of gifts they could deliver to their Chinese and Manchu patrons had the added value of exoticism, as these were objects produced with artistic techniques new to China (e.g. enamel; cloisonné; glassmaking) and technologies (e.g. the escapement mechanism and springs in clocks), and thus more attractive and precious in the eyes of their patrons for their rarity and ingeniousness. Moreover, certain kinds of gifts (especially clocks, watches, musical instruments and other precision instruments) functioned as ‘Trojan horses’, since they required maintenance by European technicians, who could thus become indispensable in Beijing. These special objects, therefore, were not simply a ‘monetary’ reward in exchange for favors and patronage, but actually became a way that Europeans found to infiltrate and ensconce themselves at court and in the Beijing officialdom.

3 Clocks as ‘Trojan horses’

This strategy was consciously adopted since the very beginning of the Catholic mission by Michele Ruggieri (1543-1607) and Matteo Ricci (1552-1610), the first missionaries. Clocks were perhaps the most effective ‘Trojan horses’, and here I will limit myself to this category as a representative example (Jami 2001; Pagani 2001). When the first missionaries arrived in China in the 1580s, they used mechanical Western clocks as precious presents for their official patrons, asking their religious superiors and lay protectors in Europe to supply them. The General of the Society of Jesus sent to Ricci, for example, «four spring clocks, three to hang on the neck, and one for the table of very fine and precious craftsmanship, which tolled the hours and the quarters with three small bells. This surprised all the Chinese, who had never seen, heard or imagined such a thing» (D’Elia 1942-1949, vol. 1, p. 231). In the following years, clocks and watches always appeared on the lists of presents prepared for the China missions, and especially for the imperial court.

When Ricci finally reached Beijing and presented to imperial eunuchs in Tianjin his gifts for the emperor, the most attractive items besides oil paintings seem to have been clocks and musical instruments. Ricci’s *Della entrata della Compagnia di Giesù e Christianità nella Cina* (D’Elia 1942-49) describes how clocks became in fact the conduit to enter the palace on a continuative basis, as true «corteggiani» (courtiers), and to firm up residence in the capital. When the Wanli emperor (r. 1572-1620) noticed in 1601 that one of the clocks donated by the foreign priests needed to be

reset, as it did not ring its bells any longer, he ordered to call the missionaries to palace in a rush. At the time, the priests were still in legal limbo, trying to find a way to obtain 'permanent residence' in Beijing, against the rules of the tribute system that under normal circumstances would have not allowed them to remain after offering their presents (D'Elia 1942-1949, vol. 2, p. 29). This situation created a special status for the missionaries, who were no longer considered tributary envoys, but rather permanent residents. They also started training four eunuchs working at the Astronomical Bureau (Mathematical Tribunal) on how to regulate the clock. Ricci specifies that in fact the clock gave the Europeans much more liberty in Beijing and at court: «Since all the times that the clock needed resetting it had been necessary to ask official permission from the emperor, he finally gave order that we could go inside the palace four times a year for this activity. However, with this pretext, now the deputed fathers go in as many times as they wish, bringing with them other confreres and their domestics with much liberty, as they have developed friendship with the [four] eunuchs [of the Tribunal of Mathematics] and other eunuchs inside the palace. And these eunuchs would also go to the house of the fathers with the same affection and familiarity» (D'Elia, 1942-1949, vol. 2, p. 126).

Testimonies by later generations of Jesuits confirmed the importance of gift-exchanges, and especially clocks, in obtaining a firmer footing for the Jesuits at court. Adam Schall von Bell (1592-1666), for example, offers a classical formulation of the story of Ricci's settling in Beijing. In his Chinese preface to a booklet compiled around 1640 on the occasion of the presentation at court of gifts from the grand duke of Bavaria (including a series of illuminations of the life of Christ), Schall observes:

One may recall that in the past, in the year *gengzi* of the Wanli era [1600] my fellow Matteo Ricci, when he came eastwards explaining the teaching, personally presented [to the Court] a *holy image of the Lord of Heaven, a Western clavichord, a clock and other things*. And when he paid respects and presented them in the imperial palace, he benefited from the Emperor's admiration towards the reverently offered holy image, and subsequently [the Emperor] granted Matteo a banquet. Moreover, while like a high official he was granted provisions when alive, at his death *he was granted a place to be buried*. Truly this was an exceptional gift. That at present the *Solid Meaning of the Lord of Heaven* [i.e. Ricci's catechism] managed to hand down its brightness to our glorious reign, is because a whole generation since Matteo, *one after the other, succeeded each other so as to be commonly involved in explaining and translating*. They wanted together with a large majority of people and scholars to cultivate themselves to the utmost so that they would not go against the ultimate meaning for which the Creator gave life to the human being. (Standaert 2007, p. 99)

Thus the presentation of gifts, the successful petition to the Ministry of Rites for a burial place near the capital to conduct ‘sacrifices’ to the deceased Jesuits, and the useful work of scientific translation of Western materials for the reform of the imperial calendar done by the Jesuits during the Chongzhen period (1627-1644), are the elements identified as key to Jesuit success in earning permanent residence (Standaert 2008).² As to the gifts, in this preface a painted image is given preeminence because on this occasion Schall was presenting a series of religious images to the emperor, but in fact we know from records that clavichords and especially clocks were even more effective ‘Trojan horses’ (Chen 2010).

The illuminations offered by Schall in the 1640s were only a small part of many precious gifts brought to Macao in 1619 by one of his predecessors, the Jesuit procurator Nicolas Trigault (1577-1628). Among them were some precious clocks with automata received from princely patrons in Europe, including Ferdinand of Bavaria (1577-1650), elector and archbishop of Cologne, and Cosimo II de Medici, grand duke of Tuscany (1590-1621) (Pagani 2001, pp. 32-33).

Trigault arrived back in China at an unfavorable moment for the mission, during a temporary anti-Christian movement, and most of the gifts were never delivered to court. But it is once again clear that clocks and automata were thought as the best gifts to gain favor and a footing within the imperial system. A confirmation that this kind of ‘Trojan horses’ continued their function over several decades is the fact that in 1640 Schall was asked to repair the old clavichord donated by Ricci and which had fallen in disrepair. Once again, the mechanical object required the European’s expertise at court. After the Qing conquest, Schall quickly shifted his allegiance to the Manchus, and became an informal preceptor of the Shunzhi emperor (r. 1644-1661). In 1653, Schall gave the emperor a small chiming clock as a gift, and this object so fascinated the teenage emperor that he would always keep it close, day and night (Kangxi 1994; Spence 1975, p. 68).

This pattern would continue during the reign of Kangxi, as we hear from the voice of Kangxi himself. The following passage is contained in the *Tingxun geyan* 庭訓格言, a ‘mirror for the princes’ collecting the ‘lessons’ penned by Kangxi for the education of his sons, and published as a book by the Yongzheng emperor in 1730, both in Manchu and Chinese versions. This is Kangxi’s own perceptions of the value and role of clocks at the Ming and Qing courts:

At the end of the Ming dynasty, the Europeans first arrived in China and built one or two solar gnomons. At the time, the Ming emperors thought

2 Nicolas Standaert has shown that the bestowal of a cemetery and chapel annexed was the most successful Jesuit move in the late Ming to obtain permanent residence.

they were true treasures. In 1653, the Shunzhi Emperor received [as gift from the missionaries] a small self-chiming clock ringing the hours, and he would never part from it. Later on he had some bigger self-chiming clocks made, but even if he was able to have their shape, size and internal mechanisms imitated [by artisans], [these people] would at the most fulfill some of the technical requirements, but without getting the entire method [of clock making], and thus the clocks would not be precise. When I became emperor, I obtained from the Europeans the method to make these mechanisms, and even after making several thousands of these clocks, they keep on being all precise. I even had the clock beloved by the Shunzhi Emperor completely repaired, so that it is now very accurate [...] You, my sons, rely on my benevolence, and, as young as you are, you each have ten or more clocks as toys, is this something to despise? Forever remember the benevolence of your father! (Kangxi 1994, pp. 134-135)³

The passage shows how precious clocks were in the eyes of the emperor and the Ming and Qing courts as symbols of leisure and power, but also that the acquisition of the technical skills transmitted by the missionaries at court, in Kangxi's eyes, could obviate the need for Western experts and their gifts in the long run, by creating a surfeit of precise and China-made clocks. In fact, in spite of the rather egocentric picture broadcasted by the emperor («I obtained from the Europeans the method to make these mechanisms»), the services of Western horologists and the importation of foreign clocks continued to be needed into the late Qianlong period. Fascination with European clocks in fact became a mania during the Qianlong period (1735-1799), and started spreading more widely among elites in Beijing and elsewhere in the Empire, stimulating the birth of a native clock industry in Canton which produced more affordable but less precise pieces.

The Qianlong emperor greatly enlarged his grandfather's collection of Western clocks to over 4,000 pieces, and also started purchasing and commissioning ingenious automata of all kinds (mechanical walking dogs and lions, moving birds in cages, etc.). Besides acquiring European products imported from England, Switzerland and France through the intermediation of European rulers and diplomats, the court missionaries, and the merchants associated with the various East India companies and the Canton trading system, Qianlong also established within the palace a Clock Department under the purview of the Imperial Household Bureau to produce and care for clocks, watches and automata. Many of the clocks produced there were used as rewards, and among the recipients were imperial concubines,

3 On *Tingxun geyan*, see Menegon 2011.

the brothers of the emperor, members of the court, and other officials and individuals. European missionaries continued to be charged with the horological tasks they had traditionally held since the days of the Ming, and were in fact formally put in charge of this new office. Jesuit Brothers who had received training in the craft were specifically recruited from Switzerland and Germany for those positions. When the Society of Jesus was suppressed in 1773 (1775 in China), the Qianlong emperor expressed anxiety over the lack of Western experts by issuing two edicts in 1778 and 1781 asking for new men to be sent from Europe, including new horologists (Pagani 2001, pp. 47 and 84).

Clocks, thus, rather than losing their importance as ‘Trojan horses’ for the missionaries due to the creation of Chinese centers of production and commodification, continued to function as a way for both court missionaries and Europeans in general to elicit interest at court, and to continue their residence in Beijing into the Qianlong period.

4 Kangxi’s imperial confidant and Portugal’s agent at court: the case of João Mourão

Clocks were not the only items that could be given as gifts at court, but were among the most curious and precious. The most elaborate ones would invariably be destined to the emperor, but court missionaries had to rely on a diffused network of supporters in the capital to sustain their presence, and distributing gifts at all levels of the aristocratic and bureaucratic hierarchy was thus a rather common occurrence. A note left by the Portuguese missionary Carlos de Rezende in 1723 to thank the visiting Portuguese ambassador for a gift received shows how European missionaries in residence at the Qing court had by necessity to become conversant with the conventions of gift-exchange of Late Imperial China:

Since we are in China, where religious poverty is dispensed with to a degree, and we behave like mandarins, I accept all with due respect and gratitude. I only send back some satin silk and tea (*setim e xá*), according to Chinese courtesies, which is [the kind of things] that inferiors always have with them in some quantity when they have to accept presents (Ramos 1996, p. 84).

Gifts, including precious luxury products like clocks, increasingly became a common way for Europeans to lubricate their relations with aristocrats beyond the emperor. Some of the clearest examples of the use of gifts to gain political favor date to the late Kangxi period, when missionaries became enmeshed in court politics to an unprecedented degree. The Jesuit João Mourão (1681-1726) was probably the most successful among

the court Jesuits to engage in favor peddling through gifts offered to the emperor and to the court aristocracy.⁴ According to his superiors, he did so «to insinuate himself more easily in the intimate circles of princes and magnates» cultivating courtly friendship («amicitia palatina») within an environment that sources do not hesitate to define «deceitful and inconstant» (D'Elia 1963, p. 59).⁵ He eventually paid a high price for his politicking, as he was condemned to death by strangulation by order of the Yongzheng emperor, for being too close to one of the princes rivaling the future monarch. Nevertheless, for almost two decades (1706-1723) Mourão thrived at court, becoming a confidant of the aging Kangxi in the last few years of his life.

Mourão lived in the Beijing Jesuit College at the Eastern Church, seat of the Portuguese fathers, and was in charge of the Christian community of the city and of its finances, not properly of court affairs. He was a practical man, with good managerial skills, as his superiors acknowledged: «This father is capable in economic matters, and has ingenious energy which he employs in caring for the income of the college, and also for the other new incomes of the Vice-province which he has recently extended» (D'Elia 1963, p. 51).⁶ He quickly acquired proficiency in Manchu, and cultivated mathematics (D'Elia 1963, p. 53).⁷ His progress in these disciplines helped him to advance from a position of mere administrator of the mission, to that of confidant in court circles, as testified by another report in 1716: «Fr. Mourão is conducting himself excellently and religiously, and at this moment he is *the only one* [among us] who is well accepted and in the grace of the emperor, the imperial princes, [their] sons, and the court officials» (D'Elia 1963, p. 54).⁸ It seems then that Mourão at this date had penetrated the inner circles of the imperial court, maybe offering tutoring in mathematics to the sons of the imperial princes. He was chosen by Kangxi as Qing envoy to Rome in 1712, yet another sign of the imperial trust and favor.⁹

4 Biographical details on Mourão in D'Elia 1963 and Dehergne 1973, p. 183.

5 Letter of Fr. Ignaz Kögler, to the General of the Society, 9 November 1725, in ARSI, *Jap. Sin.*, 180, f. 99r.

6 Letter of Fr. Antonio da Sylva, Vice-Provincial of China, to the General of the Society, October 31, 1711, in ARSI, *Jap. Sin.*, 174, ff. 106v-107r. Also Brother Giuseppe Bandino wrote on Nov. 13, 1713 to General Tamburini about the effective administration of Mourão, ARSI *Jap. Sin.*, 175, f. 62r. Translations from Latin are mine.

7 On his skills, see letter by Fr. Giovan Paolo Gozani, Nov. 16, 1713, ARSI *Jap. Sin.*, 175, f. 79v: «He is a good and docile religious man, well-endowed in talent and dexterity, he is studying mathematics with profit, and helps his confreres in the administration of the numerous Christianity. »

8 Letter of Fr. Gozani, superior of the College of Beijing, ARSI, *Jap. Sin.*, 177, f. 224r.

9 The trip to Europe should have been through Russia, but war there prevented it.

Mourão became also a close associate of one of the imperial princes, Yintang, and we can imagine that the business-minded priest could get along well with this Manchu lord, described in sources as a gourmand and a rather venial man. The motivations of the Jesuit to attach himself to the household of Yintang, and to the political faction of another powerful imperial prince, Yinsi, must have been various. He probably was drawn by character to intrigue, desired to better protect the mission from a position of influence, and, most important, he acted as a semi-official agent of the King of Portugal at the court. A 1722 Jesuit letter reports that Mourão was looked upon as a sort of Portuguese agent, and that, as he himself admitted, he spent 2,000 taels in «extraordinary expenses every year out of *his own money*» (*de proprio peculio*) (D'Elia 1963, p. 55).¹⁰ Further research is needed to understand where this 'personal money' was coming from: probably from his Manchu protectors; perhaps also in part from the merchants and government of Macao (although the colony was in dire straits at the time). Moreover, what did «extraordinary expenses» mean? In all likelihood, it included the distribution of gifts and the wherewithal to maintain the necessary pomp to visit officials.

Gifts as social lubricant had always been a passion of Mourão. Already in 1706, when he was still in Macao on his way to the court, Mourão's «mania to buy small presents for his friends» had been noticed, and «the expenses for his presents, together with those of another Portuguese [i.e. António Magalhães], had already reached the considerable sum of 200 taels. Both used to leave the Jesuit house too often, visiting lay people, for example a general in charge of the army, and entrusting themselves with the business of secular people» (D'Elia 1963, p. 54).¹¹ Once at court, Mourão became involved in transactions of luxury products. The Manchu aristocracy, for example, particularly prized leather pouches of Western production and in 1721 Yintang asked Mourão to supply the famous General Nian Gengyao with a casket of thirty or forty pouches. This quite certainly was considered a 'gift', rather than a regular purchase. Yongzheng used also to send Western pouches to Nian as a sign of gratitude for his military success, and it would be interesting to know through further research if they were supplied as 'gifts' to the emperor by missionaries and their European patrons (*Wenxian congbian* 1964, pp. 1-2). Mourão's remarkable financial means are confirmed by his purchase in Macao in 1722 of presents for Kangxi worth more than 10,000 *taels*. Such a large sum could not come from the Jesuit Vice-Province, but only from personal funds, as sources

10 Letter by Fr. François X. D'Entrecolles, 5 October 1722, ARSI, *Jap. Sin.*, 179, f. 187v: «hic pater agat in Aula pekinensi partes Agentis pro Lusitaniae Rege, is enim, ut fatetur, de proprio peculio duo millia taelium quot annis in extraordinarias expensas absumit».

11 Letter by Fr. Antonio Dantas SJ, missionary attached to the Japanese vice-province, 20 August 1706, ARSI, *Jap. Sin.*, 169, f. 216r-v.

seem to imply (D'Elia 1963, p. 56).¹² Among the most precious items in the lot was a «a large clock with repetition springs, and an eleven-minute bell carillon» of European manufacture, that reached Beijing with Mourão in 1723, but that remained in the Jesuit residence of San José and was not offered to the newly enthroned emperor (who probably would have refused it), following Mourão's sudden fall from grace and his condemnation to death. The precious curio itself was valued at 200,000 réis (Russo 2007, p. 60). By cultivating princely patronage in the waning years of the Kangxi reign, and using funds of mysterious provenance to buy and distribute gifts, including prized clocks, Mourão had thus hoped to become the confidant of a future emperor and benefit his country, the enclave of Macao, and the mission (Ramos 1991).¹³

5 Conclusion

As research on late-eighteenth-century British attempts to establish diplomatic and commercial relations with China has shown, gift-giving of European luxury items and technical instruments, including clocks, became part and parcel of the British strategy to awe the Qing court with the accomplishments of England's industrial manufactures, while trying to show through these objects the possibility of commercial advantages for both imperial states (Hevia 1995; Klekar 2006). The British government, and especially the East India Company, invested heavily in the purchase of gifts for the Qing court (including a planetarium, globes, clocks etc.), and their transportation and assemblage in China on the occasion of the 1793 Macartney embassy to the Qianlong court. These gifts and their complex assemblage were so central to the entire embassy, that they created several crises in communication between Qing officials and the ambassador, irritating the aging Qianlong emperor. The embassy was in the end a failure from the point of view of the British, and ambassador Macartney realized upon inspection that the imperial palaces were filled with so many «spheres, orreries, clocks, and musical automatons of such exquisite workmanship, and in such profusion, that our presents must shrink from the comparison and 'hide their diminished head'» (Hevia 1995, p. 108). As Cynthia Klekar observes, «the insistence on sending an envoy

12 Carlo de Resende SJ from Canton, letter of 31 October 1723, ARSI, *Jap. Sin.*, 179, f. 283v, referring to that purchase said it had been done «in the usual, exorbitant way of behaving of Fr. Mourão, who, doubtless, must have relied on some sort of permission from the General.» According to Manuel Teixeira, the presents had been «offered by the Portuguese of Macao» (Teixeira 1984, p. 287).

13 António Magalhães was another Portuguese Jesuit agent at court, who traveled to Europe as imperial envoy of the Kangxi emperor.

to China with a separate ship just to transport presents, and under the guise of friendly birthday wishes [for the emperor], demonstrates that the English believed that their gifts would obligate the Chinese to make at least some [commercial] concessions» (2006). She continues observing that this was a form of «symbolic violence» as defined by Pierre Bourdieu, a move to force the Chinese to give in to their demands.

The English gifts failed to impress also because the Qing court had been receiving and imitating European «spheres, orreries, clocks, and musical automatons» for over a century, thanks to Western missionaries. Together with those objects, the Qing emperor had also acquired the European personnel to fix mechanical devices like clocks, and to produce artistic objects using European techniques. Seen from their own point of view, the missionaries' strategy had worked remarkably well (albeit at a great human cost, in terms of personal freedom and time investment): they had obtained residence in Beijing, and the capability to work within the imperial system, leveraging the prevailing Chinese gift-giving culture and the leisurely pursuits of the emperor and aristocracy. Precisely because of the ultimately informal nature of imperial and aristocratic protection granted to the missionaries, and thanks to these foreigners' understanding of Chinese ritual ways, social conventions, and the politics of gift-giving, the Qing court never found the acceptance of their gifts and skills problematic as in the case of Macartney.

The missionaries' gifts, for the most part, were exchanged and perceived within the customary economy of gift-exchanges of late imperial China, addressing both the 'civilities' expected among officials, and the court's pursuit of exotic items. These objects usually did not figure within the highly-charged symbolic economy of tribute offering, which entailed a Qing imperial counter-offering of gifts.¹⁴ These gifts, therefore, were in the final analysis a way for missionaries to position themselves within existing hierarchies of power and to try to exploit them to their own advantage.

The Ming emperors Wanli and Chongzhen (r. 1627-1644), and the Qing emperors Shunzhi, Kangxi, Yongzheng and Qianlong, all displayed different attitudes towards the missionaries and their gifts and skills. Kangxi, in par-

14 The complexity of the topic of tribute gifts deserves more investigation. In his book on Dutch and Portuguese envoys to Kangxi in the 1660s-1680s, John Wills observed the importance given in Chinese official compilations to the presentation of the Qing court's gifts to the ruler who had sent the embassy, the ambassador, and his suite: «Lists of these gifts take up a great deal of space in the compilations of regulations for embassies, and it would be useful if someone would go through more of this materials and see if there are any patterns in it»; see Wills 1984, pp. 33-34. I am not aware of any comprehensive comparison of lists contained in both European and Chinese sources (such as those available in *Qing zhong qianqi* 2003, e.g., pp. 72-73); however, cfr. Russo 2006 for examples of Portuguese lists of diplomatic gifts. I have explored eighteenth-century Portuguese embassies as occasions of Qing representation of power towards Catholic Europe in Menegon 2001.

ticular, prized simplicity and, generally speaking, distinguished between scientific objects and techniques of strategic importance to the state, and curious luxury items enhancing imperial grandeur and belonging to the sphere of courtly leisure. The distinction became more blurred under his successor Qianlong, who employed the missionaries more and more as artisans glorifying his reign and pleasing him and his court. Erik Zürcher observed that in the Yongzheng and Qianlong periods the role of the missionaries was «‘reduced’ to that of ‘foreign experts’». Qianlong in particular «used the technical skills of the foreign experts for his own luxury and leisure purposes. To a certain extent, they became ‘indispensable’ for him» (Zürcher 2001, pp. 499-500). The slippage in Zürcher’s words (the missionaries ‘reduced’ to artisans, but becoming ‘indispensable’) seems to confirm the intuition that leisurely activities, although usually perceived as marginal, in fact occupy a central position, and can offer a privileged window to understand the workings of power at the highest level, but also how such power is subtly undermined. Were the emperor and the court using the missionaries, or were the missionaries using the emperor, the court, and the officialdom?

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