

## FORUM ARTICLE

# *Telescope and Microscope. A micro-historical approach to global China in the eighteenth century\**

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### Abstract

One of the challenges of global history is to bridge the particularities of individual lives and trajectories with the macro-historical patterns that develop over space and time. Italian micro-history, particularly popular in the 1980s–1990s, has excavated the lives of small communities or individuals to test the findings of serial history and macro-historical approaches. Micro-history in the Anglophone world has instead focused more on narrative itself, and has shown, with some exceptions, less interest for ampler historiographical conclusions.

Sino-Western interactions in the early modern period offer a particularly fruitful field of investigation, ripe for a synthesis of the global and the micro-historical. Cultural, social, and economic phenomena can be traced in economic and statistical series, unpublished correspondence, and other non-institutional sources, in part thanks to the survival of detailed records of the activities of East India companies and missionary agencies in China. Recent scholarship has started to

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offer new conclusions, based on such Western records and matching records in the Chinese historical archive.

In this article, I offer a methodological reflection on ‘global micro-history’, followed by four micro-historical ‘vignettes’ that focus on the economic and socio-religious activities of the Roman Catholic mission in Beijing in the long eighteenth century. These fragments uncover unexplored facets of Chinese life in global contexts from the point of view of European missionaries and Chinese Christians in the Qing capital—‘end users’ of the local and global networks of commerce and religion bridging Europe, Asia, Africa, and South and Central America.

### **Introduction: telescope and microscope**

The Master passed by the erudite Lin’s home. They came to talk about the strange instruments from the West.

Lin said:

‘Some time ago, I visited you . . . , and you showed me a telescope. It made me see distant things as they were near, and nearby things as if they were far away. When I came home I told people about it, but nobody believed me.’

The Master asked:

‘What is the distance between your town and Taoyuan [where we met]?’

Lin replied:

‘Only one station.’ [= 35 li, *circa* 20 kilometres]

The Master continued:

‘So the distance is only one station. You are known to be a serious man, and you were telling relatives and friends about something you had seen with your own eyes—and yet they still had their doubts. How much more does that apply to us who have come from the Great West, sailing the seas to the East, making a journey of 90,000 li that lasts three years, to propagate things never seen and never heard about from time immemorial? How could people become believers and followers right away?’

Lin sighed and said:

‘Well said, Master!’<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Kouduo richao* 口鐸日抄 (Diary of Oral Admonitions), juan 3, pp. 19a–b, in E. Zürcher (trans.), *Kouduo Richao. Li Jiubiao’s Diary of Oral Admonitions: A Late Ming Christian Journal*, Steyler Verlag, Nettetal, 2007, pp. 354–55.

This striking dialogue reportedly occurred in the Chinese city of Dehua 德化, southern Fujian, on 7 July 1632, and will be familiar to those who study early modern travel literature and ethnographic accounts. Travellers were often accused of telling tall tales and faced strong scepticism. Here, however, erudite Lin was not by any stretch of the imagination a long-distance traveller, having walked a mere 35 li from home. It was his master's wise retort that elevated this circumscribed episode to a general commentary on cultural-religious contact and innovation. Let us reconstruct the context. The 'Master' was the Italian Jesuit missionary Giulio Aleni (Chinese name Ai Rulüe 艾儒略, 1582–1649). When he met the scholar Lin 林 in late-Ming Fujian province, he showed him a telescope, one of the newest European inventions, as he had done several times with other literati. Aleni actually used it as a prop for evangelizing and as a moral metaphor, rather than as an instrument for precise observation of celestial phenomena. In another part of the same text, the telescope was indeed explicitly mentioned in metaphorical terms: 'You should use one side of the telescope to look at others and the other side to look at yourself ... When looking at others make them large; when looking at your own person make it small',<sup>2</sup> that is, be merciful to others and humble in your own demeanour. In this particular story, however, it was not the moral metaphor signified by the object that mattered most, although it lurked there too, but rather the universal condition of innovators (including cultural and religious innovators) and travellers: they are not believed even by their closest associates, because what they are reporting is out of the ordinary and foreign: 'It made me see distant things as they were near, and nearby things as if they were far away... but nobody believed me.'

If we pause for a moment and think of the place where this dialogue happened, suddenly the connection between what is near and what is far takes an unexpected turn. Dehua was the production area for the famous porcelain known in the West as *blanc de Chine*. Since the Song dynasty, kilns in Dehua had been producing ceramics for the export market, but it was only in the late Ming period, roughly around the time Lin and Aleni had their chat about telescopes, that the much-admired *blanc de Chine* wares began being manufactured at industrial levels and reaching the world market as never before. Numerous large cargoes of this ware, as well as of cheaper Dehua white-and-blue, a less noble imitation of Jingdezhen 景德鎮 prototypes, reached the markets of Japan, Southeast Asia, and Europe in the Ming

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 264.

and Qing periods. Several shipwrecks filled with Dehua cups, teapots, figurines, and plates have been found along the coasts of Java, Vietnam, and the Philippines, among the wreckage of native ships sailing to the Indonesian archipelago, Indochina, and beyond. The Dutch East India Company and the Manila Galleon transported Dehua ware in the seventeenth century to Europe and Mexico, but it was especially in the eighteenth century that European royalty and nobility became enamoured of this kind of porcelain and started importing it, so much so that potters would modify their designs to suit the foreign market. Augustus the Strong, elector of Saxony and king of Poland-Lithuania, who established the manufacture of Meissen and cracked the secret of porcelain production outside of China in the early 1700s, gathered together a collection of 400 Dehua *blanc de Chine* pieces in Dresden. Many other collections of *blanc de Chine* are to be found today in Singapore, Hong Kong, Japan, France, Sweden, the Netherlands, the United States, and so on. The Victoria and Albert Museum in London houses an impressive collection of over 170 pieces of Dehua porcelain, dating from the seventeenth to the twentieth centuries.<sup>3</sup>

This porcelain is renowned for its luminous white glaze and the beauty and exquisite detail of its human and animal figurines. *Blanc de Chine* is known in Chinese by the less elegant name of *zhuyou bai* 豬油白 ‘lard’ white, but also as *xiangya bai* 象牙白 ‘elephant tusk’ or ‘ivory’ white. In this last name, we find a reference to the fascination in the Chinese luxury market for ivory, especially prized if African, an appetite undiminished since at least the days of the maritime expeditions of Zheng He to Africa in the early fifteenth century. In the porcelain they found a way to reproduce the beauty of the ivory in almost serial fashion.

A telescope made in Europe and admired in Fujian by a local literatus. *Blanc de Chine* wares manufactured in Dehua and collected by a German king. African elephant tusks transported across the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea to the ports of southern China to please the taste of collectors of the Ming and Qing empires. These disparate objects speak of the global connections of the early modern era between China and other parts of the world. In our reading of the sources, what is far and what is near come together through the commercial maritime

<sup>3</sup> See J. Ayers, *Blanc de Chine: History and Connoisseurship Reviewed*, Routledge, London, 2013. The modification of design in ceramic and porcelain production for the foreign market has a long history in China: see, for example, Timothy Brook, *Vermeer's Hat: The Seventeenth Century and the Dawn of the Global World*, Bloomsbury Press, New York, 2008, pp. 61–62.

routes of the early modern world. However, if the historian today *can* piece together the routes and the connections that made the movement of commodities, people, and ideas possible, historical actors at the time would have been only rarely in a position to realize the magnitude and extension of those same networks: ‘... But nobody believed me,’ said Lin. This reveals a rupture between individual consciousness on the one hand—that is, the perception held by the actors at the time—and our own historical awareness—how we reconstruct the past from our removed position as historians, attempting to master multiple archives, never simultaneously accessible to contemporaries. It is as if, at the centre of the global panopticon, the historian commandeers statistics, maps, objects, and documents to reconstruct worldwide circuits and the dynamics of early globalization. The individual agency of those who lived in the past, however, can become lost in a web of *longue durée* phenomena, in serial events and statistics, and in our predisposition to paint as a fact the inevitability of globalization, with its economic and political logics, and its teleology of progress.<sup>4</sup>

What if we too had the opportunity to use a metaphorical historical telescope ‘to see distant things as they were near, and nearby things as if they were far away’? Would that be a way to restore agency to individuals? Would we still believe those stories as having paradigmatic value? Good historical practice is like a telescope—used from both ends, of course! That is, in fact, what is exciting about history: we become familiar with what is distant in time and space, as Ming-Qing China is to us. And yet, what seems closest to us, to our own human condition, dictated as it is by the need to eat, sleep, reproduce, survive, and thrive through our labour, be it physical or mental, might look deceptively near to our own experience. In fact, an astute reading of the sources also makes us aware that the human condition we capture in documents from the past is different from ours and that nearby things should be looked at as if they were far away. It is in this vein that this article discusses the relationship between micro-history and global history, two approaches to historical analysis that have been increasingly linked in recent years, in spite of the almost paradoxical divergence in scale between them.

<sup>4</sup> On global historical consciousness and its limits, see, most recently, the Chinese case explored in Dominic Sachsenmaier, *Global Entanglements of a Man who Never Traveled: A Seventeenth-Century Chinese Christian and his Conflicted Worlds*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2018, pp. 11, 30.

In the coming pages, I first discuss the relationship between the global and micro scales as reflected in recent historiographical debates. I then offer a concrete example of how these two scales can be analytically combined to examine early modern Chinese-European relations. Finally, I sketch four vignettes based on my research about the European residents in Beijing during the long eighteenth century. Through these episodes I aim to show micro-history's potential to capture global issues, but also to further encourage engagement with a form of narrative history accessible to a broad readership. Ultimately, I hope this effort, to which many historians have been contributing for some time now, convincingly highlights the role of individuals in building connections and effecting change across global space and time, and may indicate a road map for future research.

### **Methodological considerations: global history and micro-history**

Our metaphorical telescope can help us understand the nature of micro-history and its relationship with global history.<sup>5</sup> Micro-history has the power to 'make one see distant things as they were near, and nearby things as if they were far away', as Lin put it. We can, in other words, feel intimacy with individuals long gone, while still perceiving the chasm of time. We can also appreciate the local, while zooming out to encompass the global and its connections to the local. In this respect, micro-history offers important methodological insights, through the thick description of a small sample of individuals, a community, even the life of one individual.<sup>6</sup> The methodology of *microstoria* was first developed in

<sup>5</sup> The terms 'global history' and 'world history' reflect different approaches to the study of the past, the first more concerned with simultaneity, the latter with interaction. However, the methodological debate on what each exactly means remains open. Given the relatively contemporaneous and worldwide nature of the connections I discuss in this article (obviously within early modern institutional, technological, and communicative limits), I find that 'global' captures well the nature of these experiences. For recent discussions of relevant historiography, see, for example, D. Sachsenmaier, *Global Perspectives on Global History: Theories and Approaches in a Connected World*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2011; S. Conrad, *What is Global History?*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2016.

<sup>6</sup> The following summary is based on the reading of selected historiographical essays published in the last two decades, which discuss the relationship between micro-history, macro-history, and world/global history, and where reference to further literature can

Italy by a cluster of scholars with a specific programme in mind. Italian micro-historians expressed dissatisfaction with grand narratives and the dominance of quantitative and serial social history, which they saw as obliterating individual agency. By bringing to the fore the issue of human agency, by selecting cases that were at the same time thickly documented but also on the margins of traditional narratives, and by dramatically changing the scale of observation from the telescopic to the microscopic, micro-history challenged the dominant paradigms of social and political history. Yet, micro-history remained, to a large extent, an offshoot of progressive social history and the 'important questions' of that historiography remained central. Social mobility, the relationship between state power and the individual, class relations, gender relations, and labour relations were some of the central topics in many early *microstorie*. Even when scaling down to a manageable microscopic sample, and exploring the sources in minute detail, micro-historians still seemed intent on offering a 'total history', an ambition that had animated the Annales School, with its attention for serial history and gathering of enormous amounts of archival data over long spans of time. Moreover, the knowledge accumulated by social and cultural historians over generations of research remained the basis from which to contextualize micro-cases within the national and international historiographies of a given period and to test big questions. The revolution was, to a large extent, in method and in focus. Italian *microstoria* entered into dialogue

be found: M. Peltonen, 'Clues, Margins, and Monads: The Micro-Macro Link in Historical Research'. *History and Theory*, vol. 40, 2001, pp. 347–59; J. Brewer, 'Microhistory and the Histories of Everyday Life'. *Cultural and Social History*, vol. 7.1, 2010, pp. 87–109; F. de Vivo, 'Prospect or Refuge? Microhistory, History on the Large Scale: A Response'. *Cultural and Social History*, vol. 7.3, 2010, pp. 387–97; P. Hudson, 'Closeness and Distance: A Response to Brewer'. *Cultural and Social History*, vol. 7.3, 2010, pp. 375–85; T. Andrade, 'A Chinese Farmer, Two African Boys, and a Warlord: Toward a Global Microhistory'. *Journal of World History*, vol. 21.4, 2010, pp. 573–91; F. Trivellato, 'Is there a Future for Italian Microhistory in the Age of Global History?'. *California Italian Studies*, vol. 2.1, 2011, online journal [no pagination]; S. D. Aslanian, J. E. Chaplin, A. McGrath and K. Mann, 'AHR Conversation. How Size Matters: The Question of Scale in History'. *The American Historical Review*, vol. 118.5, 2013, pp. 1431–72; F. Trivellato, 'Microstoria/Microhistoire/Microhistory'. *French Politics, Culture and Society*, vol. 33.1, 2015, pp. 122–34. A recent methodological reflection is S. G. Magnússon and I. Sziójártó, *What is Microhistory? Theory and Practice*, Routledge, London, 2013, continued in S. G. Magnússon, 'Far-Reaching Microhistory: The Use of Microhistorical Perspective in a Globalized World'. *Rethinking History*, vol. 21.3, 2017, pp. 312–41. Updates on recent developments in the field can be found on the website of the Microhistory Network at <http://www.microhistory.eu/>, [accessed 12 September 2019].

with French cultural history and the history of mentality, with German *Alltagsgeschichte* (history of daily life, interested in understanding, especially, daily life under the Nazi regime), and Anglophone narrative history, à la Natalie Zemon Davis or Jonathan Spence. Through the analysis of individuals, communities, or, increasingly, in French and American cultural history, through ‘incident analyses’ (like the famous ‘cat massacre’ probed by Robert Darnton), the insights of cultural anthropology and literary criticism, and the tried methods of art history and traditional history were applied in novel ways.<sup>7</sup>

There are advantages in micro-analyses. Micro-histories ultimately unveil the agency of individuals and illuminate the ‘great historical questions’ from the point of view of the individuals. This is based on the micro-historian’s conviction that the structures of history are human creations and that human beings, no matter how low in the social scale, have the power to change and even destroy them. This is true in spite of the limited awareness of broader phenomena that historical actors may have experienced: someone always avidly looked for the exotic, the heterodox, or simply the new and different beyond the boundaries of life as usual, and pieced together his or her version of the world, leaving us with traces to decipher. Micro-historians are not naive idealists, of course. The power of social, political, and economic structures, as well as the power of ideological and gender discourses, continue to have a central role in understanding past reality for them too. But focusing on individuals and their personal stories is a way both to detail how those large structures and discourses impinge on daily life, and how we, as humans, in fact have the power to interpret structures and discourses, and challenge their allegedly disembodied hegemony.

Micro-historians work slowly. They use the contextual knowledge they derive from their general historical training and years of reading in order to select in the archive the pieces of the puzzle they deem most useful. Finally, after meeting scores of individuals in the archives, they might recognize in one case ‘the features of a whole age or the complete problem they are studying’.<sup>8</sup> In some cases, generalizations are confirmed. More often, individual cases challenge received knowledge, especially when the marginal is brought to the centre. This

<sup>7</sup> On Italian *microstoria*, its academic pedigree, and its influence in Europe and North America, see, most recently, Magnússon and Szijártó, *What is Microhistory?*; Trivellato, ‘Microstoria/Microhistoire/Microhistory’; and S. La Malfa, ‘La Collana Einaudi “Microstorie” (1981–1991)’. *Storiografia*, vol. 20, 2016, pp. 197–214.

<sup>8</sup> Magnússon and Szijártó, *What is Microhistory?*, p. 64.

process is in fact the implicit response to the recurring critique against micro-history—its lack of representativity. Is Ginzburg's *Menocchio* or Davis's *Martin Guerre* 'representative' of a society, a class, an issue? In fact, that is not the point. The most sophisticated micro-histories are explicit about the limits and diversity of their sources and 'multiscopic' in their arrangement of various representations of the same subject according to different points of view, without the need to necessarily come to a unified, homogenous version. Moreover, the micro can indeed illuminate the macro: the 'exceptional normal', as it has been called, reveals and highlights features of the so-called normal in unexpected ways, confirming but also challenging received knowledge.<sup>9</sup>

Scholars have recently suggested that the methodological insights of micro-history could be applied to global history.<sup>10</sup> Long ago, Giovanni Levi observed how 'even the apparently minute action of somebody going to buy a loaf of bread actually encompasses the far wider system of the whole world's grain markets'.<sup>11</sup> As Richard White put it, 'it is impossible to look at one scale without encountering others'.<sup>12</sup> To write accessible global history, however, can be a daunting task. The risk is to produce indigestible prose and grand narratives of progress or oppression. While there is a diffuse desire to unseat Europe from the centre of our global imagination, global historians, by focusing on economic, military, and environmental change, still risk presenting the

<sup>9</sup> Here reference is to the protagonists in C. Ginzburg, *The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-Century Miller*, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1980 (original Italian edn, 1976); and N. Zemon Davis, *The Return of Martin Guerre*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 1983. 'Exceptional normal' is an expression coined by historian Carlo Poni. For an appraisal of micro-history's methodological insights by one of the founders of Italian *microstoria*, see G. Levi, 'Microhistory and Recovery of Complexity', in *Historical Knowledge: In Quest of Theory, Method and Evidence*, S. Fellman and M. Rahikainen (eds), Cambridge Scholars Publishing, Newcastle upon Tyne, 2012, pp. 121–32.

<sup>10</sup> A lucid presentation of this possible dialectics is Trivellato, 'Is there a Future'. Others have challenged the wisdom of a global contextualization and advocated for the 'singularization' of history, even when it is 'far-reaching' (that is, to focus on the unicity of each phenomenon in its materiality and avoid historical generalizations at all costs); see Magnússon, 'Far-Reaching Microhistory'.

<sup>11</sup> G. Levi, 'On Microhistory', in *New Perspectives on Historical Writing*, P. Burke (ed.), Pennsylvania State University Press, University Park, 1992, pp. 93–113 (p. 96).

<sup>12</sup> R. White, 'The Nationalization of Nature'. *The Journal of American History*, vol. 86.3, 1999, pp. 976–86 (p. 979). He also adds: 'There are scales appropriate to problems—there are better and worse choices—but there are no absolutely right or wrong scales, no automatically dominant scale, per se. Each scale reveals some things while masking others. The social space of each scale focuses attention on a set of relationships between people and things.'

West as the true engine of globalization and its benchmarks, be they positive or negative, as the gold standard against which all global phenomena are measured. Capitalism, colonization, Christian missions, science, maritime commerce—all seem, in the end, to be Western phenomena adopted, imitated, or resisted by the rest. Zheng He's expeditions into the Indian Ocean, for example, are customarily compared to the enterprises of Columbus and Vasco de Gama, and have become part of the new narrative of maritime expansion embraced by the historical establishment and the government of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in its challenge to Western hegemony.<sup>13</sup>

Micro-history can offer a corrective to these risks. By reconstructing the life of individuals or small groups who acted as intermediaries in global circuits, we have a chance to uncover the minute web of connections across cultures and groups from the point of view of the actors themselves. These actors used global institutions as vectors for their desires and projects, and their testimonies often offer us clues as to an empirical historical reality that questions or, at the very least, humanizes the claims of grand narratives. Doing so does not mean that we forget or make more palatable the oppression of colonial systems. Rather, we recognize that brokers living 'in-between' the interstices of the global systems may help us to challenge and complicate established histories.<sup>14</sup> As well put by Francesca Trivellato,

macro-analysis often leads to generalizations that were once associated with that very Eurocentrism global history purports to undo ... Microhistory offers neither a panacea nor a unified theory, but can provide a device (or at least a prod) to balance abstraction and detail, to pause on apparent inconsistencies and detect parallelisms that a hasty emphasis on structural breaks would dismiss unjustly, to think creatively outside of the box of 'civilizations' about the ways in which cultural forms evolve in relation to political and economic structures.<sup>15</sup>

In the end, the lesson of micro-history is indeed mainly methodological. In the second part of this article, I will focus on China and present some examples from the history of Sino-Western relations in eighteenth-century China as a modest illustration of what might be possible.

<sup>13</sup> See E. Dreyer, *Zheng He: China and the Oceans in the Early Ming Dynasty, 1405–1433*, Pearson Longman, New York, 2007.

<sup>14</sup> See N. Standaert, 'Don't Mind the Gap: Sinology as an Art of In-Betweenness', *Philosophy Compass*, vol. 10.2, 2015, pp. 91–103.

<sup>15</sup> Trivellato, 'Is there a Future'.

## Sino-European encounters as case studies in 'global micro-history'

Micro-histories have been written on the basis of ego-documents, inquisitorial church and state records, correspondence, and serial materials, including land surveys, religious records, statistics, wills, and property records. Ego-documents, especially diaries and travelogues, as well as ethnographies might be the best sources from which to extract meaning from slippages and thick descriptions, in the vein of micro-historical methods. In the China field, the work of Jonathan Spence is probably one of the best examples of the Anglophone narrative approach to micro-history. More recently, Tonio Andrade, a China specialist with a global bent, has challenged the readership of the *Journal of World History* to engage in the writing of accessible narratives that employ archival fragments and life stories of marginal individuals to address cross-cultural contexts.<sup>16</sup> In China itself, there is today a growing interest in the historiographical insights of Western micro-history (*weiguan shixue* 微观史学). Given the passion among Chinese historians for broad narratives and questions, aversion to wholesale adoption of foreign methodologies, and the novelty of the micro-historical approach in China, however, it appears that the discussion there has remained mainly theoretical. Most activity is seen in the recent Chinese translations of famous books and historiographical essays by Western 'micro-historians'.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>16</sup> J. Spence, *Emperor of China. Self-Portrait of K'ang-Hsi*, Vintage Books—Random House, New York, 1975; J. Spence, *The Death of Woman Wang*, Viking Press, New York, 1978; J. Spence, *The Question of Hu*, Vintage Books, New York, 1988; Andrade, 'A Chinese Farmer'.

<sup>17</sup> Historians in Taiwan and Hong Kong trained in the United States or Europe have been aware of micro-history for a longer time than PRC historians, but the approach there has not been followed in any sustained way either. Recent historiographical discussions in Chinese (PRC) are, for example: Chen Qineng 陈启能, 'Lüe lun weiguan shixue 略论微观史学' (Brief Discussion of the Historiography of Microhistory). *Shixue lilun yanjiu* 史学理论研究 *Historiography Quarterly*, vol. 1, 2002, pp. 21–29; Zhou Bing 周兵, 'Dangdai Yidali weiguan shixue pai 当代意大利微观史学派' (The Contemporary Italian Microhistory School). *Xueshu yanjiu* 学术研究 *Academic Research*, vol. 3, 2005, pp. 93–98. Recent PRC translations of 'micro-historical' works are, for example, Shi Jingqian 史景迁 (= J. Spence), *Wangshi zhi si: Da lishi beihou de xiao renwu mingyun* 王氏之死: 大历史背后的小人物命运 (The Death of Woman Wang: The Destiny of a Small Character in the Background of Grand History), Guangxi shifan daxue chubanshe, Guilin, 2011; Na-da-li Ze-meng Dai-wei-si 娜塔莉·泽蒙·戴维斯 [= N. Zemon Davis], *Ma-ding Gai-er guilai* 马丁·盖尔归来 (The Return of Martin Guerre), Beijing daxue chubanshe,

Macro-histories, on the other hand, usually rely on the synthesis of a vast body of secondary literature, the use of quantitative data, and institutional records. Recent English-language macro-histories in the China field have focused, for example, on the so-called ‘great divergence’ between China and Europe, on the Qing expansion into Central Asia, on the circulation of global commodities, and on the maritime dimension of the Chinese late imperial and modern economy, seen through the prisms of the Canton System or the Maritime Customs Service. These studies have all shown the global connections of China to the rest of world.<sup>18</sup>

Is it possible to combine micro and macro, then? The very best micro-history has succeeded in doing so for early modern Europe, as in Giovanni Levi’s *Inheriting Power*, my personal favourite work in this tradition.<sup>19</sup> Can something similar be done in the field of Chinese and global history? The study of cultural and economic relations between China and Europe from 1500 to 1850 is a promising arena for this new ‘micro-global’ approach, and the operations of the Catholic mission offer an ideal example of early global connections.<sup>20</sup> The *actual*

Beijing, 2015; Chen Yuan 陈恒 and Wang Liuchun 王刘纯 (eds), *Xin shixue. Ka-luo Jin-zi-bao de lunshuo: weiguanshi, xijie, bianyuan* 新史学. 卡罗·金兹堡的论说: 微观史、细节、边缘 (New Historiography. Essays by Carlo Ginzburg: Microhistory, Clues, Margins), Daxiang chubanshe, Beijing, 2017.

<sup>18</sup> See, for example, B. Wong, *China Transformed. Historical Change and the Limits of European Experience*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 1997; K. Pomeranz, *The Great Divergence: China, Europe and the Making of the Modern World Economy*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2000; P. Perdue, *China Marches West: The Qing Conquest of Central Eurasia*, Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 2005; P. Van Dyke, *The Canton Trade: Life and Enterprise on the China Coast, 1700–1845*, Hong Kong University Press, Hong Kong, 2005; H. van de Ven, *Breaking with the Past: The Maritime Customs Service and the Global Origins of Modernity in China*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2014; A. Gerritsen, ‘From Long-Distance Trade to the Global Lives of Things: Writing the History of Early Modern Trade and Material Culture’. *Journal of Early Modern History*, vol. 20, 2016, pp. 526–44.

<sup>19</sup> G. Levi, *Inheriting Power: The Story of an Exorcist*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1988 (original Italian edn, 1985).

<sup>20</sup> Recent examples are: L. Clossey, *Salvation and Globalization in the Early Jesuit Missions*, Cambridge University Press, New York, 2008; E. Menegon, *Ancestors, Virgins, and Friars: Christianity as a Local Religion in Late Imperial China*, Harvard University Asia Center, Cambridge, MA, 2009; H. Harrison, *The Missionary’s Curse and Other Tales from a Chinese Catholic Village*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 2013; L. Brockey, *The Visitor: André Palmeiro and the Jesuits in Asia*, Belknap Press, Cambridge, MA, 2014; and the extensive work of N. Standaert in Leuven (more on the Chinese and Sinological side) and D. Sachsenmaier in Göttingen (more on the global and historiographical side).

encounters of individuals who have left copious written testimonies of both their intellectual and social experiences offer the chance to marry micro and macro, and to observe the ‘in-betweenness’ of those encounters and the features of Chinese society that are often hidden, taken for granted, and naturalized in traditional sources.<sup>21</sup>

Exciting research on Sino-Western encounters in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries continues unabated. However, I have decided to concentrate on the period *after* 1724, when Christianity was officially prohibited in China, less explored perhaps because it is perceived as a time of a relative decline in the European presence at the Qing imperial court and of dwindling Christian activities in the provinces. In past years, I have focused on liminal individuals and, in particular, briefly reconstructed the career of a cultural broker, the Chinese priest Peter Cai Ruoxiang (蔡若祥, 1739–1806), a native of southern Fujian who trained at the Chinese College of Naples in Italy. After returning to China, Cai quietly worked there for over a decade as an underground missionary, but in 1784 became ‘number one’ on the list of wanted criminals in an empire-wide anti-Christian campaign launched by the Qianlong emperor and his governors. Cai was able to avoid imperial wrath by sailing to Goa in India. From there he travelled back to southern China under a new name, Giovanni Maria Ly, passing through Siam, Malaysia, Batavia, and Tonkin. He spent the rest of his life working again in central China. He continued to communicate with his superiors in Naples and Rome, and participated

<sup>21</sup> Standaert, ‘Don’t Mind the Gap’. A pioneer in this respect was the late Buddhologist Erik Zürcher (1928–2008) at Leiden University. I opened this article with a passage from the *Diary of Oral Instructions*, a collection of dialogues between European missionaries and Chinese literati in the late Ming, translated into English by Zürcher. His students Nicolas Standaert and Ad Dudink, as well as historians of Chinese science, have closely scrutinized Sino-Western sources of the late Ming and early Qing periods, and in recent years, several Chinese scholars have probed the same texts and subjects, focusing on intellectual and scientific linkages. For further bibliography on recent trends in the field of Chinese-Western relations (1500–1800) in Western languages and Chinese, see A. Dudink and N. Standaert (eds), *Chinese Christian Texts Database*, <https://www.arts.kuleuven.be/sinologie/english/cct>; Center for the Study of Religion and Chinese Society, Shanghai University (ed.), *Hanyu Jidujiao yanjiu wan* 汉语基督教研究网 *Chinese Christian Studies*, <http://www.chineseccs.cn/>, [both sites accessed 12 September 2019].

in a global network extending from Italy to China, well illustrated by his personal story.<sup>22</sup>

A more recent focus of my research is the community of Europeans who lived in Beijing during the reigns of the Yongzheng, Qianlong, and Jiaqing emperors (1720s–1820s). Numbering no more than 20 to 30 men at any given time in four main residences in the capital, these were Catholic missionaries working as scientists and artists for the Qing emperors in the imperial palaces, allowed to continue their activities even after the Yongzheng emperor forbade missionary proselytization in the provinces in 1724. In fact, underground Christian communities persisted in the provinces, and the Beijing residences and churches became the lifeline for the illegal operation of the Church elsewhere.<sup>23</sup>

Over the course of the long eighteenth century, European permanent residents in Beijing—excluding the Russians—thus amounted to no more than 120 individuals of various nationalities: Portuguese, French, Italian, Flemish, German, and Central Europeans. Living in the same quarters were also Chinese priests, catechists, and domestics. In the larger residences, the service staff alone could amount to 60 individuals. This is a limited sample, manageable, yet rich because of the wealth of sources produced in several languages and genres. Through this limited group, we can enlarge the analysis to a larger network of individuals and institutions, which extends into the Qing court, the city of Beijing, several illegal underground Catholic missions in the provinces, the Pearl River delta and the cities of Canton and Macao, the maritime networks of Asia, the Americas and Europe, all the way to the various courts, commercial nodes, and religious centres in the colonies and Europe. The individual experiences of this close-knit community, gossipy and litigious, yet generous and occasionally gifted with outstanding intellects, but also dominated by inflated egos and excruciatingly petty interactions, offer a veritable crucible for micro-historical analysis of Chinese history in global perspective. What at first sight could appear

<sup>22</sup> See E. Menegon, ‘Wanted: An Eighteenth-Century Chinese Catholic Priest in China, Italy, India, and Southeast Asia’. *Journal of Modern Italian Studies*, vol. 15.4, 2010, pp. 502–18.

<sup>23</sup> See Menegon, *Ancestors, Virgins, and Friars*; E. Menegon, ‘Yongzheng’s Conundrum. The Emperor on Christianity, Religions, and Heterodoxy/Der Rätselhafte Yongzheng. Der Kaiser über Christentum, Religionen und Heterodoxie’, in *Rooted in Hope/In der Hoffnung Verwurzelt. Festschrift in Honor of Roman Malek S.V.D. on the Occasion of his 65th Birthday/Festschrift für Roman Malek S.V.D. zu Seinem 65. Geburtstag*, B. Hoster, D. Kuhlmann and Z. Wesolowski (eds), Routledge—Monumenta Serica Institute, London, 2017, pp. 311–35, 430.

as a trivial, even pathetic, set of human characters, once put under the historian's microscope, reveals the complexity of daily imperial politics and of the strategies of resistance adopted by subordinate actors at court. From the margins of the palace world, and within a common milieu of eunuchs, artisans, domestics, and bondservants, the missionaries continued to pursue their interests and stubbornly resisted bureaucratic control. In their language, we find theatrical metaphors—*play, role, act*—to describe their life at court and in the capital, suggesting that they felt they were 'staging' a play, as in a public theatre. In a letter to his brother in 1763, the papal missionary Sigismondo Meinardi said quite candidly:

I am occupied in the usual activities, that is, engaged in a continuous *theatre play*. First I take up the *role* of missionary, and then I am at the palace serving the emperor. Once I leave the palace, the *act* changes again, and I have to attend to and confess Christians, and administer the sacraments to the sick. *New act*: dealing with gentiles, refuting their doctrines, explaining to them our doctrine. In sum, time goes by so fast, and often I have to wait until evening to eat something.<sup>24</sup>

He also admitted that under the cover (*sotto questa coperta*) of his professional identity as clockmaker at court he was able to 'manage his own business'.<sup>25</sup> Not unlike eunuchs, who during the Qianlong reign garnered more economic and social autonomy—in spite of imperial rhetoric declaring the opposite—the missionaries in the capital used their proximity to the throne, the interplay among existing court factions, their knowledge of technology and the arts, and their role as intermediaries with European powers and mercantile interests to protect their illegal religious enterprise in Beijing and the provinces, offering material and symbolic support to their court allies in exchange for patronage. The missionary reports provide, in sum, traces of the 'hidden transcripts' of this subordinate group within the palace and offer glimpses of the workings of power behind the public façade and of its global implications.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>24</sup> S. Meinardi, *Epistolario. Parte prima. Lettere originali inviate a Torino*, Edizioni 'Vinculum', Roma, 1964: letter LXI, 26 July 1763, p. 87; cf. also similar language in *ibid.*, letter LXX, 29 September 1765, p. 96: 'the life I lead is ridiculous, I seem like an actor who changes his role at every scene'.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, letter XVIII, 1 November 1741, p. 24.

<sup>26</sup> Evelyn Rawski refers to rare cracks in the Qing institutional record as 'hidden transcripts' and 'narratives of resistance' by palace servants, in reference to the classic by J. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1990. Scott observes that most forms of domination require display and public theatre to be effective, but also that 'each form of rule will have not only its characteristic stage setting but also its characteristic dirty linen' (*ibid.*, p. 12). This 'dirty' linen is often

Now, through four vignettes, I want to give you a sense of the global potential of micro-historical analysis, by connecting individual stories with both local and global social and economic networks.

### **First vignette: the clockmaker and his ‘skill capital’<sup>27</sup>**

In his miscellaneous jottings on administrative matters and life in the imperial capital, Grand Councillor Zhao Yi 趙翼 (1727–1814), one of the protagonists of political life in the second half of the eighteenth century, included a fascinating and comic entry on European ‘clocks and watches’ (*zhong biao* 鐘表) employed in Beijing during his lifetime:

Clocks and watches often must be repaired. Otherwise the gold thread inside will break, or they go a little too fast or too slow. Therefore, among the court officials those who own watches time and again are late for court audiences while all those who are on time do not own watches ... [Grand Councilor] Fu Wenzhong’s house was full of clocks and watches, so much so that there was none among his servants who did not have one hanging on his body. As they could compare to check the time, they never should have been off the mark. One day, at the time of a formal imperial audience, Fu’s watch did not indicate that the time had come and when he leisurely strolled in to wait on the emperor, the emperor had already been seated for some time. Beyond himself with alarm, he then kowtowed at the foot of the throne and for days on end, he could not get over this shock.<sup>28</sup>

difficult to recover, as the public transcripts of power (institutional histories, legal documents, celebratory art) fill the records, and alternative narratives are obscured or lost; cf. E. Rawski, *The Last Emperors. A Social History of Qing Imperial Institutions*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1998, Chapter 5, ‘Palace servants’, pp. 160–78.

<sup>27</sup> This vignette summarizes some of my research which appears in two separate but overlapping articles: E. Menegon [Mei Oujin 梅欧金], ‘Shei zai liyong shei? Qingdai Beijing de Ouzhouren, zhuiqiu yule he zhengzhixing kuizeng 谁在利用谁? 清代北京的欧洲人、追求逸乐和政治性馈赠’ (Who Was Using Whom? Europeans, Leisurely Pursuits, and the Politics of Gift-Giving in Qing Beijing). *法国汉学 Faguo Hanxue, Sinologie française*, 2016, pp. 117–39; and E. Menegon, ‘*Quid pro quo*. Europeans, Leisure, and their “Skill Capital” in Qing Beijing’, in *Testing the Margins of Leisure*, R. Wagner, C. Yeh, E. Menegon and R. Weller (eds), Heidelberg Studies on Transculturality, Heidelberg University Publishing, Heidelberg, forthcoming.

<sup>28</sup> Quoted from Zhao Yi, *Yanpu zaji* 簞曝雜記 (Notes from the Sunny Awning), ce 29, juan 2, 15a–b in Zhao Yi, *Oubei quanji* 甌北全集 (Oubei Collected Works), Diannan Tang shi, n.p., 1877. The passage is also discussed in Beatrice Bartlett, *Monarchs and Ministers. The Grand Council in Mid-Ch’ing China, 1723–1820*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1991, pp. 209–10; cf. also Catherine Pagani, *Eastern Magnificence and European Ingenuity: Clocks of Late Imperial China*, University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, 2001, p. 94.

Zhao Yi's bemused attitude towards the Manchu Senior Grand Councillor Fuheng 傅恒 (1720–1770; Fu Wenzhong 傅文忠 was his posthumous name)<sup>29</sup> derived from his realization that fashionable gentlemen were held hostage by the vagaries of their clocks, and were equally at the mercy of their own servants and the technicians fixing their timepieces. In Qing Beijing, these technicians were European court missionaries. Who was, in fact, the very mechanic repairing Fuheng's clocks and watches? Chinese sources do not contain any clue. But missionary correspondence does: none other than the missionary Sigismondo, the one who candidly admitted that under the cover of his professional identity as clockmaker at court he was able to 'manage his own business'.<sup>30</sup>

Reports, memorials, letters, and economic ledgers, both in Western languages and Chinese, offer a unique micro-historical picture of the workings of luxury object commissions by the emperor and the Qing elite, minute descriptions of the skills deployed by European artisans at court, and their use of gift-giving strategies to obtain favours. Although Sigismondo's life has been consigned to obscurity so far, his testimony is well worth examining for its quality and the intimacy he developed with court circles over a period of three decades of the Qianlong reign.

The Discalced Augustinian Sigismondo da San Nicola Meinardi (Xi Chengyuan 席澄源 /元; 1713–1767) was a member of the papal Propaganda Fide mission in Beijing from 1738 to his death in 1767.<sup>31</sup> He was just one of several missionary-technicians, including the Jesuits, who leveraged imperial appreciation for their artistic and technical contributions to forge personal connections within the Inner Court bureaucracy and support their daily material and spiritual operations. Personal relationships between Europeans and members of the court created technically illegal, but perfectly functional, arrangements that, in fact, protected underground missionaries and native Christian communities in the provinces, and facilitated the open continuation of

<sup>29</sup> Fuheng was the most important Qing statesman (truly a 'prime minister') in the 1760s; for a biography, see A. Hummel (ed.), *Eminent Chinese of the Ch'ing Period*, Government Printing Office, Washington, DC, 1943, pp. 251–52.

<sup>30</sup> Meinardi, *Epistolario*, letter XVIII, 1 November 1741, p. 24.

<sup>31</sup> The papal Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith (Sacra Congregatio de Propaganda Fide, best known as 'Propaganda Fide' or 'Propaganda'), founded in 1622, was one of the dicasteries (that is, ministries) of the Holy See in Rome. It tried to direct all global missionary activities of the Catholic Church, often in conflict with the Portuguese and Spanish crowns over their ancient rights of missionary patronage in the colonies.

religious activities in the imperial capital and its environs. Production of European luxury items on commission and gifting them to important dignitaries, like Fuheng, were key elements in sustaining these dynamics. Thus, the 'spiritual' ends of proselytizing had a very material basis, sustained by global commercial circuits. Beijing missionaries exploited the leisurely pursuits of their Qing overlords to gain influence and continue covert religious activities both in the city and the empire, and to support the daily economic and logistical operations of their mission.

The role of clockmaker was just one aspect of Sigismondo's daily routine. He was also the economic administrator of the northern missionary stations in Shandong and Shanxi-Gansu, technically all illegal according to imperial laws. He was the Beijing liaison and intelligence officer of Propaganda Fide, corresponding with the economic procurator in Macao and directly with Rome. He was also, of course, a Catholic priest, shuttling to confess local Christians and celebrate masses between his chapel in Haidian district near the Summer Palace and one near the Xizhi Gate within the Beijing city walls, as well as in rural villages in the hinterland of the capital, one or two days' travel away. Sigismondo was also a home owner and builder, improvising roles as architect and mason.

To support all these activities, he cultivated a network of extensive contacts in Beijing, Guangzhou, and across Asia and Europe. In Beijing, while Manchu princes, officials, and eunuchs would collaborate with him at the palace in his official capacity as imperial craftsman, native Christians and other commoners, both in the capital and its hinterland, would assist him in the mundane and religious parts of his life. To navigate the complexity of daily life and meet its economic demands required good linguistic skills and cultural fluency to make the right connections, and Sigismondo's spoken Chinese was excellent, as he had reached Beijing at the age of 24 and learned it fast. His fluency, in turn, enabled easy communication with different networks of support, both within the Christian community of Beijing and the court and its entourage. But this linguistic advantage was not sufficient to obtain protection for the mission and economic favours and exemptions. Specialized skills in the production of luxury objects became a crucial currency of negotiation with the imperial court and officialdom. Sigismondo's experience shows how his skills could be deployed as cultural capital—what I would call 'skill capital'—in connecting with the emperor, nobles, officials, eunuchs, and even, indirectly, palace women. As Bordieu observed, 'the cultural capital of

the courtier ... can yield only ill-defined profits, of fluctuating value, in the market of high-society exchanges'.<sup>32</sup> Sigismondo was not a courtier, but his position as court artisan placed him squarely within the courtly economy and its capricious constraints. Yet his unique skills also conferred on him some degree of autonomy. In spite of his low status as a 'mechanic', Sigismondo was able to quietly use his technical abilities to create connections that were to the mission's advantage.

In particular, he nurtured a close relationship with Fuheng, or Count Prime Minister Fu, as he called him. Fuheng routinely employed Europeans, including the Jesuit painter Ferdinando Bonaventura Moggi (Li Boming 利博明, 1684–1761) who went to his palace daily to paint in 1749.<sup>33</sup> The Manchu grandee also frequently solicited and received gifts from Sigismondo, including clocks and high-quality Brazilian tobacco, and Sigismondo used to offer labour and parts for free to the count in exchange for patronage and favours. This relationship indeed produced results, and Fuheng extended his favour by intervening at court on behalf of the missionaries. In 1762, for example, some newly arrived missionaries were granted an audience by the Qianlong emperor through his intercession, something that had not happened before. Sigismondo recognized the importance of the minister's sponsorship but also its price: 'It is true that [Fuheng] favours me much, but it is also very true that I have to spend much effort to please him, and the reimbursement for the clocks given to him does not compensate for all my labour and effort.'<sup>34</sup>

In spite of his complaints, however, these industries helped Sigismondo dodge urban planning regulations in 1762. The facade of the church and residence he lived in were located along the avenue connecting the imperial palace to the summer palace and, like all the house- and shopfronts along that road, needed to be rebuilt for the decorum of the empress dowager's birthday procession. Sigismondo feared that this might cost him up to 10,000 taels in repairs. However, he obtained an exemption by donating some clocks and tobacco to the important

<sup>32</sup> See Pierre Bourdieu, 'The Forms of Capital', in *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, J. Richardson (ed.), Greenwood Press, New York, 1986 (original edn, 1983), pp. 241–58 (pp. 247–48).

<sup>33</sup> Archivio Storico della Congregazione per l'Evangelizzazione dei Popoli o *de Propaganda Fide* (Historical Archives of the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples, or *de Propaganda Fide*), Vatican City (hereafter APF), section *Procura Cina*, box 15, letter of Sigismondo to A. Miralta, 26 July 1749.

<sup>34</sup> APF, *Procura Cina*, box 15, letter of Sigismondo to Emiliano Palladini, 21 September 1762, f. iv.

ministers Necin and Fuheng, and dutifully reported the cost of the gifts to Emiliano Palladini, Propaganda procurator in Macao, who footed the bill as follows:

- To the Count Generalissimo [Necin], who blocked [for us] the first design of the [new] buildings: a [pocket] watch and tobacco, 82.5 taels;
- To Count Fu, Prime Minister, a table clock [ringing] hours and quarters, and tobacco, 224 taels;
- To the Mandarin of the Count [Prime Minister] who was engaged in this affair, a [pocket] watch, 20 taels.<sup>35</sup>

This precise accounting shows that clocks and tobacco—among the most coveted Western and ‘global’ items among the Qing elites—were readily used as payment for favours to high officials, and that these amounts were part of the normal costs of ‘doing business’ in Beijing, not unlike modern-day political lobbying or ‘corruption’. An investment of a few hundred taels thus saved the mission thousands more in possible expenses. Moreover, this note also shows the importance of lower-level agents, easier to contact for a palace craftsman like Sigismondo. Indeed, the missionary did not approach Fuheng directly but through the intermediation of a subordinate official in his entourage, possibly a Grand Council clerk, who was duly rewarded with a pocket watch for his ‘engagement in the affair’ (*... fu impegnato per tal'affare*).<sup>36</sup>

Sigismondo’s daily ‘micro-transactions’ with powerful Qing figures highlight his role as ‘connective tissue’ between the global and the local, the macro and the micro. It shows how global commodities circulated among Qing elites, whose taste for exotic luxuries in turn indirectly enabled the circulation of a global religion—Christianity—in Beijing, its hinterland, and the inland communities. They also reveal that lower-level players in the Neiwufu and the palace were indispensable go-betweens, as was the Grand Council clerk in this case. The next vignette further illustrates the importance of the circulation of objects as signifiers of global connections, and how alliances with the eunuchs, that special group of palace servants, mattered as much as those with bureaucrats and Manchu elites.

<sup>35</sup> APF, *Scritture originali della Congregazione particolare dell’Indie Orientali e Cina* (SOCP), vol. 52 (1760–63), ‘Note a’ conti dell’amministrazione della Procura della Sacra Congregazione di Propaganda Fide in Macao per l’anno 1762’, December 1762, f. 666v. Necin was the most powerful Manchu grand councillor until his fall from grace and execution in the wake of his defeat in the Jinchuan War, which propelled Fuheng to the highest position.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

## Second vignette: the ‘rabid dog’ eunuch and help from within

In 1741, at the beginning of his career at the court, Sigismondo reported an astonishing story about the influence that eunuchs could have in the Qianlong era. His unpublished report describes the interaction of an elderly eunuch with the young emperor, which I find so engrossing and remarkable that I will quote it here in its entirety:

The emperor, according to custom, has been selecting and admiring his beautiful pieces [from the imperial collections]. One day they brought him the papal document [i.e. the breve by Pope Benedict XIII sent to Yongzheng in 1727], to admire its golden bag, and another one, all beautifully embroidered. [...] On this occasion, some imperial grandees asked why the popes were no longer sending legates and presents as with previous emperors. This emperor has never been friendlier to us as he currently is. [...]

A certain eunuch called Voei ciu [= Wei Zhu 魏珠], the first eunuch of the presence of Kangxi, dauntless and unforgiving even toward the emperor himself, and who was beaten countless times by order of the old Kangxi and Yongzheng for this reason, but who is a respectable, righteous man, full of spirit, and already old, knelt and said:

‘Your Majesty is surprised about this [lack of papal diplomatic exchanges]. This is nothing. If you were a bit more courteous with the Europeans, you would get other better objects, but you never meet with them, you never send them rewards. Now nobody knows the Europeans who at the time of your grandfather were so esteemed, and nobody can inform Your Majesty about who they are, except for me, who, during the reigns of your grandfather and father have seen what they did, how many papal legates came, how many imperial ambassadors [to the popes] were sent to Europe, and returned with gifts that are some of the best objects Your Majesty possesses. But now, there is nobody to reward them even with a cup of tea. On the contrary, even the name of Your Majesty is unknown in Europe, and European kings do not want to allow [their envoys] to come here to be treated so badly.’

This speech lasted a half hour and the emperor stood silent, at a loss for a response. On the same day, the emperor sent someone to inquire about the health of the Europeans at the [workshops of the] Yangxindian 養心殿 (Hall of Mental Cultivation), since he had heard that three of them were ill. *This we have learned from other eunuchs who were present, and from Wei Zhu himself.*<sup>37</sup>

<sup>37</sup> APF, *Procura Cina*, box 15, letter of Sigismondo to Procurator A. Miralta, [Haidian], no date [probably 21 September 1742], f. 2r–v.

Who was Wei Zhu, this outspoken ally of the missionaries and fearsome palace servant? His activities and life straddled the reigns of the Kangxi, Yongzheng, and Qianlong emperors, and missionary sources call him ‘First Eunuch of the Presence’ of Kangxi, which closely corresponds to his Chinese title of *yuqian taijian* 御前太監, one of the personal imperial attendants. Wei was also one of the eunuchs who transmitted edicts, supervised theatrical performances at the palace in the department known as *Nanfu* 南府 during the Kangxi reign, and became supervisory eunuch (*zongguan taijian* 總管太監) in charge of other eunuchs. Kangxi also gave him special tasks, especially when he needed information from outside the usual government channels. Wei thus became rather influential and powerful, and participated in the accession struggle as a partisan of Yinsi 胤禩, an imperial prince vying with the future emperor for the throne. Yongzheng, once enthroned, attacked Wei personally and had him demoted, likening him to a ‘rabid dog’ (*fenggou* 瘋狗). Nevertheless, the monarch did not have him executed, but rather beaten for being insolent and transferred him to guard the suburban imperial tombs. After Yongzheng’s death, Wei was back at the palace. Qianlong kept him under watch and ordered him to stay within the Forbidden City without ever exiting. However, we know that he disobeyed and went out horse-riding and to practise archery. This defiant and rebellious behaviour was not uncommon among eunuchs, as Melissa Dale and Norman Kutcher have illustrated.<sup>38</sup> The episode recorded by Sigismondo could have been embellished by the eunuchs and Wei himself for self-aggrandisement, but Wei’s career seems to confirm that the man had courage and frequently paid for his insolence. The young and still impressionable emperor might have been intimidated by Wei’s age and fame, since, after all, he had been a favourite of his grandfather and was greatly respected within the palace.

<sup>38</sup> I base my information on Wei’s career on Chang Jianhua 常建华, ‘Yongzheng di daji taijian Wei Zhu yuanyin xin tan: Wei Zhu qi ren qi shi kao 雍正帝打击太監魏珠原因新探: 魏珠其人其事考’ (A New Discussion of the Reasons for the Yongzheng Emperor’s Attacks on the Eunuch Wei Zhu: An Examination of Wei Zhu’s Life and Deeds). *Qingshi yanjiu* 清史研究, vol. 3, August 2013, pp. 17–26; cf. also X. Ye, *Ascendant Peace in the Four Seas: Drama and the Qing Imperial Court*, Chinese University Press, Hong Kong, 2012, on Wei’s role in court drama during the Kangxi period. On Qing eunuchs and their insubordination in general, see (in English) M. Dale, ‘With the Cut of a Knife: A Social History of Eunuchs during the Qing Dynasty (1644–1911) and Republican Periods (1912–1949)’, PhD thesis, Georgetown University, 2000, p. 26; N. Kutcher, ‘Unspoken Collusions. The Empowerment of Yuanming Yuan Eunuchs in the Qianlong Period’. *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, vol. 70.2, 2010, pp. 449–95.

Wei's tirade, in fact, immediately alerted the emperor to the importance of sending gifts and taking better care of the court Europeans, a gesture that also displayed filiality towards the past policies of the deceased Kangxi.

This vignette illustrates at least two points. First, Chinese institutional sources are simply the tip of a historical iceberg. The intimate workings of the Qing palace in the mid-Qing remain a black box with an insufficient documentary trail, especially for the Inner Court and the imperial household. A micro-historical approach, based on the painstaking reading of alternative archival sources—Kutcher's Yuanmingyuan records or these missionary reports, for example—unveils the role of individuals beyond the emperor and the most well-known key players, and offers us clues as to the existence of larger, submerged phenomena. Second, it confirms the importance of gifts and 'global' luxury items as a way to sustain diplomatic relationships, and in this case, in particular, to allow missionaries a material entry into the palace world. As was the case for Sigismondo's 'skill capital', gifts and collectibles could be used to lubricate relations. As the next vignette shows, however, the *lack* of skills and insufficient lubrication of social relations through adequate gifts could become a liability at the palace.

### Third vignette: office politics and palace networks

A cryptic Chinese source from the Registers of the Imperial Household Bureau (*Neiwufu* 內務府) informs us that on 8 March 1773, Hu Shijie 胡世傑, the eunuch in charge of transmitting imperial commands (*chuanzhi taijian* 傳旨太監), passed on an order from the emperor to the Bureau's director, Li Wenzhao 李文照. The command simply stated: 'The painter, Westerner An Deyi, and the horologist, Westerner Li Hengliang, do not need to come to the Ruyiguan (如意館) to serve in their positions.'<sup>39</sup>

<sup>39</sup> The Ruyiguan (Hall of Fulfilled Desire) compound was the seat of the imperial workshops at the Yuanmingyuan 圓明園 (Garden of Perfect Brightness), the sprawling suburban palace and park preferred by Qianlong as his main residence outside Beijing. This entry comes from the Registers of the Imperial Household Bureau (*Neiwufu huoji dang* 內務府活計檔), and is published in Zhongguo di yi lishi dang'anguan 中國第一歷史檔案館 (ed.), *Qing zhong qianqi Xiyang Tianzhujiao zai Hua huodong dang'an shiliao* 清中前期西洋天主教在華活動檔案史料 (Historical Materials on Catholic Activities in China in the Early to Mid-Qing), 4 vols, Zhonghua shuju, Beijing, 2003, Vol. 4, doc. no. 448, p. 362; dated Qianlong 38.3.9 (31 March 1773).

If all we had left was this note, we could conclude that these two Europeans, An Deyi (安德義), the Discalced Augustinian Giovanni Damasceno della Concezione Salusti (1727–81) from Rome, and Li Hengliang (李恆良), the Discalced Carmelite Arcangelo Maria di S. Anna Bellotti (1729–84) from Milan, were simply asked to stay home on that day. Whether this was temporary or permanent, whether they would continue to work at home, and what the reasons for Qianlong's command were, we would never know. Fortunately, some of the dramatis personae in this episode have left manuscript reports in Italian, preserved in Rome, where the backstory of this apparently dispassionate bureaucratic document is revealed in all its drama: they had been fired.

The two missionaries involved and Joseph Maria Pruggmayr (Na Yongfu 那永福, 1713–1791), a third member of the Propaganda mission in Beijing, secretly sent separate reports on the affair to Rome. In other accounts, the Jesuits also weighed in, giving their version of the facts to their own procurator Louis-Joseph Lefèvre in Canton, who then forwarded this information through the supercargo of the French East India Company to the Propaganda procurator in Macao, Nicola Simonetti.

Pruggmayr offered a summary of the situation as he understood it. He observed that the imperial command was cryptic. No reason for the dismissal was given. He heard rumours that Qianlong was displeased with the quality of Damasceno's paintings and with Arcangelo's slow progress on commissioned clocks. Pruggmayr dismissed both rumours as fabrications. Rather, he learned from direct witnesses at the palace that two Neiwufu officials and some eunuchs had plotted to expel the two missionaries from the Ruyiguan. Why so? Arcangelo had complained to his supervisors that imperial commissions were delayed because those two same officials had asked him to do other work for them. Damasceno, well known for his fiery temperament, moreover, had loudly accused the eunuchs of embezzling food and fuel earmarked for the artists at the palace.<sup>40</sup>

This was a typical case of 'office politics' gone awry. Those in supervisory positions who have the ear of the powerful can always

<sup>40</sup> APF, *Procura Cina*, box 17, letter of Pruggmayr to Simonetti, Beijing, 27 November 1773, f. iv. Pruggmayr offered this version of the imperial command: 'Good news! The Cy [zhi 旨], or mandate of the Emperor is that they stay home, and that it is no longer necessary for them to come to the palace.'

malign others and obtain their dismissal or demotion. The arrival on 12 January 1773 of two new Jesuits at court, the French horologist Hubert Cousin de Méricourt (Li Junxian 李俊賢, 1729–1774) and the Italian painter Giuseppe Panzi (Pan Tingzhang 潘廷章, 1734–1812?), with exactly the right skills, made it easier to execute the plan. The fact that the newly arrived Jesuits completed some satisfactory artistic samples and presented a number of gifts to the emperor, including a new model of telescope that attracted imperial praise, certainly helped them obtain positions at the Qixianggong 啟祥宮 (also known as Taijidian 太極殿) in the Forbidden City.<sup>41</sup>

According to Simonetti and Pruggmayr, the Jesuits were not completely innocent and indirectly participated in the Neiwufu officials' plot. Pruggmayr mentions that the Jesuit superior Michel Benoist (Jiang Youren 蔣友仁, 1715–1774) presented a memorial praising the newly arrived Jesuits and denigrating the two Propagandists eventually fired. In fact, denigrating them was not even necessary, given the circumstances, and Benoist's existing court memorials do not confirm this suspicion. The Jesuit procurator Lefèvre reported to Simonetti that 'the fault lied all with the two Propagandists' due to their own behaviour. What Damasceno wrote, or rather did *not* write to Rome, seems to indicate that he felt guilty about his outbursts, which had precipitated the situation. Arcangelo, on the other hand, pointed to the long-standing Jesuit policy of offering rich gifts and adulation to the Neiwufu officials and the eunuchs as the determining factors in the incident.<sup>42</sup>

Procurator Simonetti in faraway Macao simply concluded in his report that, 'Whatever the facts, there is no doubt that the Jesuits had something

<sup>41</sup> Zhongguo di yi lishi dang'anguan, *Qing zhong qianqi Xiyang Tianzhujiào*, Vol. 4, doc. nos. 437–439, pp. 354–57.

<sup>42</sup> APF, SOCP, vol. 60 (1775–76), letter of Damasceno to Propaganda Fide in Rome, Haidian, 13 August 1773, ff. 30r–v: 'Fr. Arcangelo Maria and I have been fired from the service of the Emperor, and how this happened, which plots were hatched, and to whom this evil should be attributed, *I do not deem necessary to write about* [*italics mine*], nor would this be useful to us once people in Beijing were to know that I stirred up such unpleasant matter [with you]'; cf. *ibid.*, letter of Arcangelo to Propaganda Fide in Rome, Beijing, 15 October 1773, ff. 96r–v: '... this was not the spontaneous will of the Emperor, but rather a plot by eunuchs and mandarins of that place, as I learned from a eunuch my friend. These people received gifts from the other Europeans at the palace [i.e. the Jesuits], [such as] tobacco, handkerchiefs etc. several times every year, would receive anything they asked for, and be adulated, unlike with us two, who would not give them gifts as they pretended, or only rather small ones.'

to do with this incident.’ A vague statement that, in its ambiguity, leaves interpretations open. For him, however, what mattered were the long-term consequences. This episode had ended Propaganda’s direct contact with the court: ‘If the mandarins and eunuchs ... will continue ... to keep the gates of the Imperial Palace closed to us, also the gates of Beijing will slowly close to all future missionaries of Propaganda.’ In the same report, however, he suggested some solutions, observing that changes in Neiwufu personnel would probably allow Propaganda to petition again to have missionary artists accepted at court. Simonetti was prophetic, and probably aware of the inertia in any bureaucracy as well as the bottomless appetite of Qianlong for personnel to staff his workshops.<sup>43</sup>

The official involved in the firing was soon promoted, but got into great trouble shortly thereafter. ‘Office politics’ can be lethal in unexpected ways indeed. Li Wenzhao was promoted to the important and lucrative post of *hoppo* in Canton (which is what Westerners called the Guangdong maritime customs intendant, *Yue haiguan jiandu* 粵海關監督) in April 1774, a year after our episode. He had barely reached the south when disaster struck, and he became involved in the notorious case of the eunuch Gao Yuncong 高雲從. Gao was accused of pilfering secret information from imperial memorials and involving himself in forbidden business relations with palace officials. Missionary sources clearly detail the nexus between Neiwufu officials and eunuchs, and it is no surprise that what got Li Wenzhao into trouble was precisely his business connection with Gao. Li agreed to hire Gao’s brother as one of his subordinate agents in Canton. When eunuch Gao was investigated by direct order of the emperor, Li was also punished for his involvement with Gao and lost his *hoppship*.<sup>44</sup>

This episode, and many references in missionary letters to ‘friends’ at the palace and exchanges of gifts with them, show, again and again, the crucial importance of bonds with Neiwufu officials and eunuchs. This was not an isolated occurrence. Lubricating social relations with

<sup>43</sup> APF, SOCP, vol. 60 (1775–76), N. Simonetti, ‘Memorie per le missioni dell’Indie Orientali ... per l’anno 1773’, Macao, 31 December 1773, ff. 124r–134r.

<sup>44</sup> We read in Qianlong’s edict at the time: ‘Li Wenzhao is a Neiwufu official. I have just been kind enough to appoint him to the Guangdong Customs Bureau and yet he dares to communicate with eunuchs and accept their requests. This is outrageous. Have Li dismissed, and have him come to the capital to be interrogated by the Neiwufu managers.’ On this case, see (in English) P. Torbert, *The Ch’ing Imperial Household Department. A Study of its Organization and Principal Functions, 1662–1796*, Council on East Asian Studies—Harvard University, Cambridge, MA, 1977, pp. 131–36.

European gifts, and averting one's eyes from embezzlement and corruption, to the point of being complicit in the system, guaranteed the status quo. This vignette has shown how a mere clue in a Chinese source, once its micro-historical richness is exploded, reveals facts so far unknown and allows us to connect them to other incidents and broader trends, linking Beijing with Canton and the global network of commerce that extended from there around the globe.

The final vignette below shares some of the same protagonists from the other three stories. In a most explicit manner it displays the entanglements of global financial and religious networks, reaching all the way from Europe to China, in a truly global embrace.

#### **Fourth vignette: 'Pasticcio' in Beijing and global networks**

In an angry letter dated 17 September 1768, Damasceno Salusti described in detail to his direct superior, the procurator of Propaganda Fide Emiliano Palladini in Macao, a recent mishap in the reception of the annual funds for the small contingent of Propaganda Fide in Beijing. As was customary, a Christian courier and servant of the Beijing missionaries, called Agostino Pao, had been sent on the long journey to Canton and Macao, which usually lasted two months. Once in Macao, Agostino received from the hands of the procurator the annual subsidy in Spanish pesos for the Beijing mission, which came from Rome across the oceans via the commercial networks of various East India companies. Agostino then travelled to Canton and, as had become customary, left almost all the money with a Chinese Christian merchant, Antonio Lieu, who issued him a letter of exchange for that amount. Once in Beijing, Agostino would track down yet another Christian merchant, a certain Ignatio Li, who would release the amount back to the mission upon presentation of the document. This mechanism, very common in China and Europe at the time, was put in place for safety reasons, so that accidents or robberies would not endanger the precious silver coins and also to allow the Chinese lay intermediaries to earn some profit. Christian couriers did receive some wages, but the opportunity to invest the mission's annual subsidy until the time it was due in Beijing was a nice way for them to supplement their income and be rewarded for an arduous and time-consuming journey.

This time, however, something went really wrong. Agostino did not turn in the entire amount to the Canton Chinese agent of the mission. He kept around 200 Spanish pesos, the portion of the subsidy destined for the

clockmaker Sigismondo, the most senior of the Beijing missionaries, who had recently died in December 1767. Agostino invested the amount in merchandise and loaded it onto the tribute ships travelling to the capital on the Grand Canal. Then he journeyed, separately and more rapidly by land, back to his home in Beijing. However, as Damasceno put it, a big *pasticcio* (mess) happened. Due to a drought, the rivers had little water and before getting to Beijing, the customs officer in charge of the expedition decided to transfer the annual Canton 'tribute' goods for the imperial palace and all the merchandise of private individuals from the boats onto carts for the last stretch towards the capital so as to avoid further delays. Agostino was of course unaware of this change in plans.

The imperial caravan eventually reached the Chongwen Gate (崇文門 lit. 'Gate of Respectful Civility'). This was the busiest in Beijing due to its proximity to the Tonghui River, where entry and departure taxes were charged. Customs officers started calculating levies on the private merchandise, including Agostino's, and soon curses began to fly between the guards and the merchants crowding the scene, who felt they were being overcharged. The superintendent of the customs, in Damasceno's words, 'as a good Chinese, i.e. an excellent thief, realised this was a good moment to earn something, and had all the merchandise seized. He then informed the emperor that the Cantonese who had brought the tribute to His Majesty were also transporting, under that pretext, a lot of private merchandise, and that they wanted to defraud the customs.' An order was issued to confiscate all private merchandise and to beat the boatmen responsible. Agostino was unable to retrieve anything and ran to Damasceno to explain the incident. While he did return the subsidy for the living missionaries, he had to finally admit that the amount of Sigismondo's subsidy he had invested had been lost, together with an additional investment of 500 taels in personal funds. Damasceno and the Carmelite Arcangelo di S. Anna decided to pull some strings to recoup the loss to the mission and to help Agostino as well. They first contacted an official, who promised to intercede with the customs superintendent. When he ultimately did not deliver on his promise, the missionaries decided to write a memorial directly to the 'Conte Primo Ministro', once again Fuheng, with whom they were familiar as his suppliers of Western luxury items. But since the property of Agostino and that of the missionaries was mixed up with that of others, Count Fu declared that he could not help. Moreover, as Damasceno observed 'the Count himself had lost more than anybody else in this accident, and he could not insist on this

matter with the Custom Superintendent, as he feared that he would be denounced to the emperor for having secretly received presents [from Canton]'. All was lost. When Agostino learned this, made desperate from his financial disaster, he started a violent argument with Damasceno. The fiery Roman, easy to explode with anger, admitted that 'thankfully God tied my hands so that I would not do something excessive, even if I had the impulse to jump on him three or four times. To think of it, I believe it was the devil who was pushing me to kill him.' Damasceno ended up firing Agostino from his job at the mission and chasing him from the church as a 'dishonest Christian' (*iniquo Cristiano*). Soon after, Damasceno dramatically renounced his charge as vice-procurator of Propaganda in Beijing and asked another senior missionary to take over.<sup>45</sup>

Silver coins; letters of exchange; European and Chinese merchandise; long-distance investments; transportation by sea, river, and land; postal connections; networking among Chinese Christians, missionaries, and Qing officials: these are the ingredients we see in Agostino Pao's business scheme gone wrong. Such richness of references in a single incident makes this episode, equally tragic and funny, a good example of the economic and structural mechanisms that supported the Catholic mission at the imperial court, and of the global networks that transferred information, funding, and commodities between Europe and China and vice versa.

## Conclusion

Through these vignettes, I have tried to 'make you see distant things as they were near'—the spiritual world of missionaries, under cover and ready for martyrdom, or the travel distances of the age of sail and the slowness of land and river transportation, true gulfs hard to grasp for many of us, so used to instant global communication—and 'nearby things as if they were far away'—the clocks of Fuheng or the silver pesos of Agostino Pao, so deceptively close to our experiences of corruption and financial bankruptcy. The tragicomic Beijing episodes I narrated, while micro-historical in scope, suggest global dimensions as well. These vignettes show the rich texture of sources left by 'marginal'

<sup>45</sup> APF, *Procura Cina*, box 18, letter of Salusti to Palladini, Beijing, 17 September 1768, f. 1r.

actors. Exploiting the recent literature on Chinese late imperial and global history, and the stimulating micro-historical methodological approaches I summarized at the outset, the stories of these marginal actors can be woven into narratives that can be both readable and significant. The impressionistic approach I adopt in this article can be further systematized and enriched through many more similar sources and broad questions can be addressed. How did the global infrastructure of commerce and state power, in Europe, in the long-distance maritime world of the East India Companies, and in the native polities of China and Asia sustain the daily needs of a far-flung Beijing Catholic outpost and its men? What can we learn from individual lives and artefacts about the power of personal networking across cultures and political and economic systems, at the Qing court, between Beijing and Canton, and with the rest of the globe? Can the point of view of individuals, rather than those of institutions alone—be they foreign experts in Beijing, Manchu officials, Chinese Christian agents in Canton, or bureaucrats and clergymen in European capitals—challenge our assumptions about the shapes of ‘globalization’ and return some agency to historical actors? By combining narrative and analysis, by alternating in the use of the microscope and the telescope, of micro-history and global history, I hope we can accomplish a synthesis that will make our story complex and rich, but also accessible outside academia’s ivory tower.