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Quid pro quo: Leisure, Europeans, and their "Skill Capital" in Eighteenth-Century Beijing

Abstract In the eighteenth century around thirty European Catholic missionaries lived in Beijing, partly employed in technical and artistic services at the imperial palace and at the Directorate of Astronomy, and partly engaged in religious work. Starting in 1724, however, the Yongzheng Emperor forbade Christianity in the provinces. Yet the foreigners, with semi-official permission, continued missionizing in the capital and its environs, employed Chinese personnel, purchased residences and other real estate, and built churches in the Imperial City, the "Tartar City," and the Haidian suburb.

The emperor and the Qing court (Manchu nobles, eunuchs, and other officials) allowed these Europeans to remain in Beijing and tolerated their religious activities in exchange for their exotic commodities and their services. The missionaries, on the other hand, used their skills and a relentless gift-giving strategy to create a network of support in the capital and beyond.

Using documents in Chinese and European archives, this chapter explores as a case study the figure of the missionary and clockmaker Sigismondo Meinardi, and his *'quid pro quo'* artisanal activities at the Qianlong court.

Technical skills, luxury articles and commodities became currencies of negotiation between divergent interests, contributing to weaken Qing imperial prohibitions, and to create *ad hoc* arrangements, tolerated by the emperor and benefiting the palace personnel, the missionaries, and their communities. Thus, spaces and objects of 'leisure' became grounds to rebalance traditionally asymmetrical relations of power, and shape social relations.

Keywords Qing dynasty, Qianlong emperor, clocks, Jesuits, Propaganda Fide

The prime minister's clocks[1]

In his miscellaneous jottings on administrative matters and life in the imperial capital, poet, historian, and former Grand Council secretary Zhao Yi 趙翼 (1727–1814) included gossipy commentary on Western luxury items circulating in Beijing. In an entry simply titled "clocks and watches," Zhao praised the high precision of Western time machines, and also Western astronomical methods. In his estimation, these methods were far superior to their Chinese counterparts, showing that talent and innovation could emerge outside China:

> [T]he imperial astronomers nowadays [. . .] all employ Westerners [. . .] and the Westerners' calculations may be said to be finer than the old methods used in China [. . .]. As the Westerners' lands are more than ten thousand [Chinese] miles away from us, but as their methods are superior, we can know that in this vast world no matter where you go, there are sages who come up with innovations, and there definitely were not only a Fuxi, Yellow Emperor, Youchao, and Sui [. . .].[2]

This high praise of European techniques, however, was immediately tempered and in fact reversed by a humorous reflection on the limits of foreign technology and the negative consequences for those who relied too much on exotic machines:

> 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

1 My gratitude goes to my co-conspirators, Catherine V. Yeh and Robert P. Weller, and our indefatigable "editor-in-chief" Rudolf G. Wagner, as well as all other members of the Leisure Project for their camaraderie and insights. I also would like to thank the Boston University Humanities Center, the Cluster of Excellence "Asia and Europe" at Heidelberg University, and the Chiang Ching-kuo Foundation, for their support of our project. The CCK Foundation also funded part of my sabbatical in 2014–2015, and so did the School of Historical Studies at the Institute of Advanced Study in Princeton, and the Institute for Advanced Jesuit Studies at Boston College. While at IAS, I presented my work to the congenial crowd of the East Asia Seminar led by Nicola di Cosmo, and I worked remotely with Luca Gabbiani (EFEO/EHESS) and Guan Xiaojing 関笑晶 (Beijing Academy of Social Sciences, Manchu Studies Institute) on a preliminary Chinese version of this essay, published as Eugenio Menegon (Mei Oujin 梅歐金), "Shei zai liyong shei? Qingdai Beijing de Ouzhouren, zhuiqiu yule he zhengzhixing kuizeng 誰在利用誰？清代北京的歐洲人、追求娛樂和政治性饋贈," eds. Luca Gabbiani (Lu Kang 陸康) and Zhang Wei 張巍, *Faguo Hanxue* 法國漢學 [*Sinologie française*] (thematic issue: *Quanli yu zhanbu* 權力與占卜 [*Divination et pouvoir*]) 17 (December 2016): 117–139. Allison Rottmann helped with editing. Thanks to all!

2 All four are mythical cultural heroes of Chinese antiquity, credited with inventions and improvements in human life. Quoted from Zhao Yi, *Yanpu zaji* 簷曝雜記 [Notes from the sunny awning], *ce* 29, j. 2, 15a–b, in Zhao Yi, *Oubei quanji* 甌北全集 [Oubei collected works] (Diannan Tang shi, 1877).

> again are late for court audiences while all those who are on time do not own watches . . . [Grand Councilor] Fu Wenzhong's [Fuheng 傅恒 1720–1770] 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.[3]

Zhao Yi's bemused attitude towards court officials like this Manchu Senior Grand Councilor, with his fumbling late arrival at the imperial audience, was based on Zhao's realization that these fashionable gentlemen with their latest Western gadgets—true symbolic markers of sophistication, wealth, and luxury—were in fact held hostage by the vagaries of their clocks (Figs. 1 and 2). Moreover, as he seems to observe in jest while referring to Fuheng's household, these high ministers were in fact also at the mercy of their own servants and secretaries checking the passing of time for them. These household personnel were in charge of winding the clocks but could not repair them. Those enamored with their timepieces became dependent on technicians who knew how to handle the mechanisms. In Qing Beijing, these technicians were European court missionaries.

These amusing jottings uncover the nexus between Western luxury commodities, the elite patrons who had the means and desire to acquire them or the status to receive them as gifts, and the non-elite agents—household servants and European technicians—who managed them on behalf of their masters. For Fuheng, having all his servants sporting watches was a way to show his own wealth and power to his guests and acquaintances, projecting his prestige at court and flaunting his far-flung contacts both outside and inside his household, while also rewarding his personnel with costly marks of distinction.

Zhao Yi's jottings are no exception. The famous mid-eighteenth-century novel *Honglou meng* [*Dream of the Red Chamber*], for example, mentions many Western objects and commodities as indicators of distinction and sophistication for Qing elites: imported handkerchiefs, towels, cloth, furs, a great quantity of clocks and watches, silver scissors, glassware, lenses, mirrors, automata, illusionistic paintings, enamels, snuff tobacco, and

3 Ibid.; the passage is also discussed in Beatrice Bartlett, *Monarchs and Ministers. The Grand Council in Mid-Ch'ing China, 1723–1820* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 209–210; and Catherine Pagani, *Eastern Magnificence and European Ingenuity: Clocks of Late Imperial China* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001), 94.

Figure 1: Zhao Yi mentioned two categories of timepieces coming from the West that were fashionable in his day. The first was called 自鳴鐘 *zimingzhong* (self-chiming clock). This is a woodblock print rendering of the famous *Da zimingzhong* 大自鳴鐘 still preserved in the Jiaotaidian 交泰殿 in the Palace Museum 故宮博物院 in Beijing.

Figure 2: The second type of timepiece mentioned by Zhao Yi is called 時辰表 *shizhenbiao* (hourly watch). Several of these pocket watches dating from the Qianlong reign are still preserved at the Palace Museum.

European medicines and balms.[4] Watches, in particular, might also have had a "scientific" appeal, as miniature astronomical bureaus to master time in one's pocket. Zhao Yi, indeed, praised the accuracy of Western watches and clocks, only lampooning Fuheng's inability to properly manage these foreign devices.

Zhao Yi's tone, however, also seemed to imply a critique of the inappropriate use of wealth and craving for luxury by Fuheng and his peers. A generation later, especially after the death of the Qianlong Emperor in 1799, we will find explicit moral critiques of clocks as wasteful markers of distinction and dissipated leisure. In the 1820s Prince Zhaolian (1780–1833), for example, denounced self-chiming clocks made in the West and imported via Canton as "producing crafty treachery,"[5] which literati still vied to buy as "toys" for their families, for obvious non-utilitarian and leisurely use. He even suggested that the Qianlong Emperor had loathed their "wicked craft" (*yinqiao* 淫巧), and had forbidden their importation as tribute, but that up to his own days it had proven impossible to fully implement this ban.[6] This claim is amazing given the well-known pursuit of the latest and trendiest European timepieces by this emperor. Zhaolian's voice reflects the less affluent and more troubled times of Qianlong's successor, the Jiaqing Emperor, which were characterized by social crises and economic decline, but also the stance of a new generation of Manchu elites, which was highly critical of the corruption of the late years of the Qianlong reign.[7] By this time, what the "Theoretical Essay" concluding this volume refers to as the "anomic" potential of leisure and its products had become a

4 See [Maurus] Fang Hao 方豪, "Cong *Honglou meng* suoji Xiyang wupin kao gushi de beijing 從《紅樓夢》所記西洋物品考故事的背景 [An analysis of the background of the story of the *Honglou meng* based on analysis of Western objects referred to in this novel]," in *Fang Hao liushi ziding gao* 方豪六十自定稿 [The Collected Works of Maurus Fang Hao, revised and edited by the author on his sixtieth birthday], 413–496 (Taibei: Xuesheng shuju, 1969); for references to European objects in Qing literature, see also Wilt Idema, "Cannon, Clocks and Clever Monkeys: Europeana, Europeans and Europe in some early Ch'ing Novels," in *Development and Decline of Fukien Province in the 17th and 18th Centuries*, ed. Eduard Vermeer, 459–488 (Leiden: Brill, 1990). On Western or "Westernizing" objects as symbols of prestige among Chinese elites in the Qianlong period, see most recently Kristina Kleutghen, "Chinese Occidenterie: The Diversity of 'Western' Objects in Eighteenth-Century China," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 47, no. 2 (Winter 2014): 117–135; on architectural Western exotica, see Ellen Uitzinger, "For the Man Who Has Everything: Western-Style Exotica in Birthday Celebrations at the Court of Ch'ien-Lung," in *Conflict and Accommodation in Early Modern East Asia*, eds. Leonard Blussé and Harriet T. Zurndorfer, 216–239 (Leiden: Brill, 1993).

5 *Zhizao qixie* 製造奇邪.

6 Zhaolian 昭槤, *Xiaoting xulu* 嘯亭續錄 [Miscellaneous notes from the Whistling Bamboo Pavilion, sequel], Qing manuscript copy (text originally compiled in 1817–1826) (Beijing: Beijing Airusheng shuzihua jishu yanjiu zhongxin – Erudition Digital Research Center, 2009), *juan* 3, unpaginated. This entry was written after Qianlong's death in 1799 as Zhao uses the late emperor's posthumous name, i.e. *Chun Huangdi* (純皇帝).

7 On Zhaolian's political views, see Kent R. Guy, *Qing Governors and Their Provinces: The Evolution of Territorial Administration in China, 1644–1796* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2010), 141–142.

concern, while Zhao Yi's words still mirror the splendor and self-assurance of the Qianlong reign and the fascination that era had for clocks.

Zhao Yi's jottings offer a window into the complexity of power relations during the High Qing period between elite owners/consumers and those who provided, maintained, and serviced their foreign leisure objects. In general, luxury objects were made of special and rare materials and required hard-to-find technical knowledge and skilled labor to produce and service. Possessing such objects, especially for the most powerful elites like the emperor, imperial princes, and members of the Grand Council, often meant privileged access to the best artisans on the market.

Court missionary artisans and Western artifacts were components in an elite luxury market that had been developing in China since the late Ming dynasty (1368–1644). Discussions on frugality and luxury had often occupied literati after Lu Ji 陸楫 (1515–1552) criticized plans to ban luxury production.[8] Lu had advocated state support of luxury industries and consumption as an engine to sustain the commercialization of the economy and to increase employment.

The fall of the Ming had provoked a rethinking of these issues, and important figures like Huang Zongxi 黃宗羲 (1610–1695), Gu Yanwu 顧炎武 (1613–1682), and Wang Fuzhi 王夫之 (1619–1692) blamed the end of the Ming dynasty on commercialization and corruption, and accused merchants of having allied themselves with the "barbarian" Manchus who then set up the Qing dynasty to exploit the population and enrich themselves. Not all early Qing thinkers agreed, though. Tang Zhen (唐甄, 1630–1704), for example, thought that, while agriculture should remain the basis of the economy, luxury production and commerce were positive elements that generated wealth and jobs.

Frugality was a moral obligation for the ruler and the government, but when it came to society, a luxury market was a natural part of the economy. The Qianlong emperor himself, who embraced the Confucian moral high ground of frugality in theory, if not in practice, agreed with Tang Zhen's position when it came to "societal" luxury. No decree banning luxury consumption was ever issued by him, and in 1768 the emperor chastised the "empty notions of frugality" (*jian zhi xuming* 儉之虛名) of a commissioner inspecting the Lower Yangzi region, who had suggested anti-luxury measures against local salt merchants. The government should rather follow the principle of "using what is plentiful to supply for what is scarce," and refrain from any anti-luxury measures, especially in Jiangnan, where luxury goods were one of the backbones of the local economy.[9] This position was reflected in Qianlong's personal relationship with the southern salt

8 Lu Ji 陸楫, *Jianjiatang gao* 蒹葭堂稿 [Drafts from the Reed Hall], in *Xuxiu siku quanshu* 續修四庫全書 [Continuation to the *Siku quanshu*] (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1995–1999), vol. 1354.

9 A recent summary of scholarly literature in Chinese and English about luxury and frugality in Ming-Qing China is Margherita Zanasi, "Frugality and Luxury: Morality, Market, and Consumption in Late Imperial China," *Frontiers of History*

merchants, and the massive employment of resources from across the imperial domains and beyond for the court's luxury consumption, accompanied by the emergence of new cosmopolitan tastes connected to imperial expansion in Inner Asia and to global commercial relations. All of this occurred in spite of the dominant rhetoric of frugality among contemporary economic thinkers. Rich merchants provided skilled labor and funding to the court, gaining influence with the emperor and his entourage while patronizing and promoting individual artists and artisans. These found employment in the imperial workshops after having proven their worthiness in the art market of Jiangnan. European missionaries were also participants in similar dynamics.[10]

Western luxury objects had the added cachet of exoticism, and could be sought for pleasure, enjoyment with others (the household's women or male friends), and as miniature scientific miracles or artistic marvels that could be privately owned. They were both physical objects and symbolic signifiers. Clocks, for example, as Zhao Yi mentioned, were symbols of precision and of an imported form of knowledge that he saw as equal or even superior to Chinese inventions. These Western luxury goods became part of already existing leisurely times, spaces, and tastes, but also represented a novelty in those spheres, thanks to their foreign pedigree. Moreover, because of their rarity, cost, and association with imperial taste, they were tangible expressions of wealth and status for the elites who purchased or commissioned them, exchanged them among themselves, or bestowed them on dependents.

At the same time, they were also bargaining chips in the hands of the artisans and technicians producing and maintaining them, and of the intermediaries in the circle of production and maintenance. They were not just commodities exchanged for their economic value—and these objects were indeed expensive to procure or produce—but actually acted as foci within multi-directional webs of influence. The final owner might have desired an object as status symbol and wished to use it to display his aesthetic refinement, enhance his social prestige, and impress his peers and subordinates. Given the complexity of the transaction dictated by the rarity of the objects and their need for maintenance, however, the producers and

in China 10.3 (2015): 457–485; on Qianlong's pronouncements about luxury, see 473–474.

10 For new scholarship exploring luxury in the early and mid-Qing, see Dorothy Ko, *The Social Life of Inkstones. Artisans and Scholars in Early Qing China* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2016); and Yulian Wu, *Luxurious Networks: Salt Merchants, Status, and Statecraft in Eighteenth-Century China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2017). On Inner Asia's luxury products and the High Qing political economy, see Kwangmin Kim, *Borderland Capitalism: Turkestan Produce, Qing Silver, and the Birth of an Eastern Market* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2016); Jonathan Schlesinger, *A World Trimmed with Fur: Wild Things, Pristine Places, and the Natural Fringes of Qing Rule* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2016). For the impact of Qianlong's southern tours on material culture, see Michael G. Chang, *A Court on Horseback: Imperial Touring and the Construction of Qing Rule, 1680–1785* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2007).

managers of the object could obtain not only immediate material rewards or cash in exchange for their unique and irreplaceable labor and skills, but, more importantly, long-term access and patronage, which were not quantifiable in commercial terms but provided other sizeable benefits. Only very few specialized missionary artists and technicians could produce the very best Western-style paintings, or repair and maintain mechanical clocks and watches. The missionaries, however, provided leisure goods and services not to attain financial gain, as is common among regular providers of leisure content, but to secure religious toleration within the dynamics of a gift economy.

On clocks, missionaries, and leisure

The emperor and his court acted as arbiters of taste and as the supreme sources of commissions of luxury objects within courtly circles. Especially during the Qianlong reign (1736–1795), imperial appreciation of such objects offered a benchmark against which Beijing's elites measured their own desires and projected their prestige. In particular, as Catherine Pagani has observed, European clocks and watches were regarded by these elites "as status symbols, as decorative pieces, and as personal adornments, but not as timepieces."[11] While perceptive, this characterization is perhaps too categorical. Even as decorative objects, clocks and watches still had to function properly as timepieces to justify their existence, and this presupposed availability of maintenance staff, mainly European artisans and technicians.

The enjoyment of the luxury products the Europeans provided was reserved for leisure hours and took place in spaces specifically dedicated to leisure. The missionaries' role, however, differed from that of other entertainment providers in several respects. They did not offer performances in leisure spaces and times, but rather the pleasure derived from the rarity of their objects and the skills needed to make them; they did not engage with these clients through the money economy, but through the gift economy; and they did so with the aim to advance their missionary work elsewhere rather than to secure their livelihood. However, while other providers of entertainment did not object to entertainment and considered this their livelihood, the missionaries engaged in a field—leisure—which they considered highly objectionable so as to be able to do the work of saving souls for which they actually had come.

What was the nature of the Europeans' standing at court? The older, Eurocentric assumption was that the missionaries rose from their subordinate roles by gaining "influence" in China and on the imperial throne through the introduction of superior technical knowledge. Recent scholarly work, however, has highlighted how Qing emperors, while the prime

11 Pagani, *Eastern Magnificence*, 6.

addressees of the missionaries' display of knowledge and artistic skills, shrewdly and autocratically controlled the labor of those engaged at court.[12] Still, during the Kangxi era, especially between 1670 and 1700, the Jesuits gained an unprecedented level of protection for their missionary enterprise by being on intimate terms with the emperor. A dramatic change occurred in 1724, when the Yongzheng Emperor decided to ban Christianity in the provinces, allowing only a handful of missionaries to reside as technicians and artists in Beijing, and to discreetly keep their churches in the capital open to local Christians.

While continuing this restrictive policy, his son, the Qianlong Emperor, became more appreciative of the artistic and technical services of the missionaries than his father had been, and therefore was much less antagonistic towards them.[13] However, imperial patronage under Qianlong remained ambiguous and relations never became as familiar as they had been under Kangxi. Due to their uncertain and weaker standing, the missionaries increasingly used personal connections in the Inner Court bureaucracy to support their material and spiritual operations. They leveraged imperial praise for their artistic and technical contributions, as well as personal gift relationships between Europeans and members of the court, to create technically illegal but perfectly functional arrangements. This situation in fact protected underground missionaries in the provinces while facilitating the open continuation of religious activities in the capital and its environs.[14] Such a complex relationship between providers of leisure and those engaged in its pursuits is not unusual, as the studies of Nancy Smith-Hefner, Sarah Frederick, and Rudolf Wagner in this volume show.

The European artisans and technicians considered here are a very small number of individuals, probably no more than five or six out of around thirty European residents in the capital at any time. I am not arguing for their importance in the political culture of the time. Rather I am interested in exploring the dynamics of the power relations that allowed them to rise from their subordinate position through their involvement in the economy of leisure. Manuscript records in European archives about their daily

12 See Han Qi, "Patronage scientifique et carrière politique: Li Guangdi entre Kangxi et Mei Wending," *Études Chinoises* 16, no. 2 (Fall 1997): 7–37; Catherine Jami, "Imperial Control and Western Learning: The Kangxi Emperor's Performance," *Late Imperial China* 23, no. 1 (June 2002): 28–49; Catherine Jami, *The Emperor's New Mathematics: Western Learning and Imperial Authority during the Kangxi Reign (1662–1722)* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

13 On Yongzheng's attitude towards the court missionaries see Eugenio Menegon, "Yongzheng's Conundrum. The Emperor on Christianity, Religions, and Heterodoxy," in *Rooted in Hope. China – Religion – Christianity. Festschrift in Honor of Dr. Prof. Roman Malek SVD*, eds. Zbigniew Wesolowski, Barbara Hoster, and Dirk Kuhlman, 1:311–335 (Abingdon: Routledge, 2017).

14 On anti-Christian policies in the mid-Qing period, see Menegon, "Yongzheng's Conundrum," 318–320; Pierre-Emmanuel Roux, "La trinité antichrétienne: essai sur la proscription du catholicisme en Chine, en Corée et au Japon (XVIIe–XIXe siècles)" (Doctorat Histoire et Civilisations, École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, 2013), 192–237.

interactions with the court and the capital city offer a level of detail rarely available in institutional Qing sources, and in the following pages I will make use of these materials for a case study.

Daily life, luxury consumption, and networks of power in Beijing: The case of Sigismondo Meinardi

Most scholars in China and the West have concentrated their attention on well-known court Jesuits residing in Beijing, such as the astronomers Adam Schall von Bell (Tang Ruowang 湯若望, 1592–1666) and Ferdinand Verbiest (Nan Huairen 南懷仁, 1623–1688), or the painter Giuseppe Castiglione (Lang Shining 郎世寧, 1688–1766). In recent years, Italian scholars have also published primary sources and biographical materials on the secular priest and artist Matteo Ripa (Ma Guoxian 馬國賢, 1682–1746) and his companion, the Lazarist priest and musician Teodorico Pedrini (De Lige 德理格, 1671–1746). Both were sent to the Qing court by the papal Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith (*Sacra Congregatio de Propaganda Fide*), commonly referred to as "Propaganda," one of the central dicasteries (ministries) of the government of the Holy See, the Roman Curia.[15] Propaganda also sent a handful of other missionaries to Beijing in the course of the eighteenth century. They belonged to several orders and congregations, including the Discalced Carmelites and the Discalced Augustinians.

Inspired by the successful Jesuit use of technical skills to win favor, and following the advice given by its own missionaries in China, Propaganda selected its men based on their manual skills, "to easily obtain introduction to Court, and thereafter, reopen the way for our [Propaganda] missionaries to attend the imperial audiences as well, [like the Jesuits,] so as to better establish our mission there."[16] These words illustrate that Rome's ecclesiastical authorities and the missionaries themselves realized from the very beginning the importance of a presence at court. Some worked at the palace as artisans, others engaged in religious work in Beijing even if they might have arrived in the capital presenting themselves as craftsmen. Testimonies of their lives and interactions with Qing elites have so far been ignored by historians of China and are virtually unknown even to specialists in the history of Christianity in China. The Propaganda materials offer tantalizing glimpses of professional tensions among the Europeans (including those between different national groups of Jesuits), who were competing

15 Details on Ripa and Pedrini's activities in Beijing in Michele Fatica ed., *Matteo Ripa. Giornale (1711–1716),* vol. 2 (Napoli: Istituto Universitario Orientale, 1996); and Teodorico Pedrini, *Son mandato à Cina, à Cina vado – Lettere dalla missione, 1702–1744*, eds. Fabio G. Galeffi and Gabriele Tarsetti (Macerata: Quodlibet, 2018).

16 Fortunato Margiotti, "Il P. Sigismondo Meinardi e la messa in cinese nel sec. XVIII," *Neue Zeitschrift für Missionswissenschaft* 22 (1966): 33, note 5, quoting the Procurator Arcangelo Miralta to Teodorico Pedrini.

for imperial and elite patronage by peddling their skills in luxury production and technical assistance, and by offering gifts of imported luxury goods.

I focus here on one individual court missionary as an exemplar of the type of skilled European artisans who, I would argue, fit within the emerging eighteenth-century luxury production system described above. This was the Italian Discalced Augustinian Sigismondo Meinardi (also spelled as Meynardi and Mainardi), better known under his religious name of Sigismondo da San Nicola and the Chinese name of Xi Chengyuan 席澄源 (元). He worked in Beijing from 1738 to his death in 1767—around the time described by Zhao Yi in his jottings—as a musical instrument maker, horologist, and automaton maker, both at court and among capital-based elites. Sigismondo's testimony clearly highlights the importance of luxury commodity production in structuring power relationships at the level of the individual artist-artisan, beyond the networks of affluent aristocratic and mercantile patronage associated with the imperial house.[17]

Sigismondo was born on February 21, 1713 in Turin, then capital of the Dukedom of Savoy, in what is today Piedmont, Italy. Given that his father was a physician and his brother would later become a lawyer, we can socially place him as belonging to the city's bourgeoisie. At age 16, he officially entered the order of the Discalced Augustinians, receiving the religious name of Sigismondo da San Nicola.[18]

The Discalced Augustinians were a reformed branch of the older Augustinian order. Established in 1592, the order developed quickly, especially in Italy, attracting many to an austere life of begging and popular missions among the poor and illiterate. Detachment from the world was signaled by the adoption of a religious name, inspired by a saint (in this case, San Nicola), and abandonment of the original family surname. The missionary spirit of the order soon led to the creations of missions outside Europe, including one in northern Vietnam.[19]

Sigismondo went on to study in Turin in the Convent of San Carlo Borromeo, and in November 1735, two months before becoming a priest, sent a request to Cardinal Vincenzo Petra (1662–1747), Prefect of Propaganda Fide in Rome, to be assigned to the missions of the Discalced Augustinians in Eastern Tonkin.[20] He left for Rome on February 15, 1736,

17 On Sigismondo's life, see Margiotti, "Il P. Sigismondo"; Sigismondo Meinardi da S. Nicola OAD, *Epistolario. Parte prima. Lettere originali inviate a Torino*, (Roma: Edizioni di *Vinculum*, 1964); on his work as a horologist, see Guo Fuxiang 郭福祥, "Qing gong zaobanchu li de Xiyang zhongbiao jiangshi" 清宫造班處裏的西洋鐘錶匠師 [Western clockmakers in the Qing imperial workshops], *Gugong xuekan* 故宫學刊 1 (2012): 187–190; and Guo Fuxiang, *Shijian de lishi yingxiang: Zhongguo zhongbiao shi lunji* 時間的歷史映像: 中國鐘錶史論集 [Historical images of time: essays on the history of Chinese clocks] (Beijing: Gugong chubanshe, 2013), 215–218.

18 Margiotti, "Il P. Sigismondo," 32–33.

19 Marcella Campanelli, *Gli agostiniani scalzi* (Napoli: La Città del Sole, 2001), especially 21–60, on the Order's Province of Genua, where Sigismondo was educated.

20 Archivio Storico della Congregazione per l'Evangelizzazione dei Popoli o *de Propaganda Fide* (hereafter APF), *Scritture riferite nei Congressi* (SC), *Indie Orientali e Cina*, 21:1733–1736, f. 705r, n.d.

to await his dispatch to the Asian missions in the Convent of Gesù e Maria al Corso. The Beijing missionary Teodorico Pedrini, however, through the Procurator of Propaganda in Macao, had recently asked the Congregation to send two missionaries to the Chinese capital to work at the court as artisans and artists, with the purpose both of strengthening papal influence within the Qing government, and of continued protection for missionary undercover activities. In response, the Congregation had issued an order to find appropriate candidates.

Soon, the Procurator for the Missions of the Discalced Augustinians, Ildefonso da Santa Maria, responded by proposing Sigismondo together with three other confrères for the Chinese missions. He accompanied this with a glowing introduction of the young priest: "Fr. Sigismondo da San Nicola, Piedmontese, priest, around twenty-four years old, excellent in letters, and trained in making keyboard instruments, maps, clocks, and skilled in any manual work, be it [painted] miniatures or enameled [objects]."[21] Together with an older confrère, the Milanese Serafino da San Giovanni Battista (Zhang Chunyi 張純一 or Zhongyi 張中一, 1692–1742), Sigismondo spent around six months training in mechanical and decorative arts in Rome.

At the time, the city was still among the great centers of European art, and the papal court and the religious orders sustained a large community of artisans, producing a great variety of artifacts for the numerous ecclesiastical establishments, the diplomatic corps, and the rich members of the pontifical nobility and government. This accelerated preparation may not have yielded accomplished professionals, but it laid the foundations for Sigismondo's artisanal career in China and turned out to be sufficient to gain admittance at the Qing court. Once in Macao, Sigismondo received imperial authorization to proceed to the capital as an organ-maker (*zuo fengqin* 作風琴), traveling with Serafino (accepted as a painter) and the Jesuits Felix da Rocha (astronomer) and Giacomo Antonini (physician). The party reached the capital on April 8, 1738, where Sigismondo would spend the rest of his life, dying there on December 29, 1767 at age 54.[22]

Sigismondo's experience has been consigned to obscurity, but his testimony is well worth examining for its quality and the intimacy he developed with court circles during three decades of the Qianlong reign. In his Italian-language letters to family members and his religious superiors in

21 APF, SC, *Indie Orientali e Cina*, vol. 21 (1733–1736), f. 675r; cf. Margiotti, "Il P. Sigismondo": 33.

22 On Sigismondo's Roman sojourn and his journey to China with Serafino, see Eugenio Menegon, "Desire, Truth, and Propaganda: Lay and Ecclesiastical Travelers from Europe to China in the Long Eighteenth Century," in *Illusion and Disillusionment: Travel Writing in the Modern Age*, ed. Roberta Micallef, 20–23 (Boston: Ilex Foundation, 2018); on the initial employment of Sigismondo, see *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 Qing], ed. Zhongguo di yi lishi dang'anguan 中國第一歷史檔案館, 4:150 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2003).

Turin and Rome, Sigismondo related how his workmanship secured him court patronage. Eight Chinese-language entries from the registers of the Imperial Workshops record commands to the "Westerner" Sigismondo to collaborate in making automata, fixing clocks, and preparing sketches between 1748 and 1768 at the Palace of Fulfilment, *Ruyiguan* 如意館, in the old imperial summer park, Yuanmingyuan.[23]

A standard collection of missionary letters from the time contains a lone direct reference to Sigismondo in a 1754 report penned by his friend, the Jesuit Jean Joseph Marie Amiot (Qian Deming 錢德明, 1718–1793) to a confrère in France:

> To capture the favor [of the Qianlong Emperor], the Reverend Father Sigismond, missionary of Propaganda, has started manufacturing [. . .] an automaton that is to be in the shape of a man and has to walk in the ordinary human manner. If the reverend Father is going to succeed, as is to be expected given his skills and talent for this kind of thing, it is very likely that the emperor will order him to endow his automaton with other live faculties: "You made him walk, he is going to tell him, now make him talk!"[24]

This joke by Amiot only refers to Sigismondo's professional persona at the Qing court. But the role of the weary and abused clockmaker was only one aspect of Sigismondo's daily routine. He was also the economic administrator of the northern missionary stations in Shandong, Shanxi, Shaanxi, and Gansu, technically all illegal according to imperial laws. He was the Beijing liaison and intelligence officer of Propaganda Fide, keeping correspondence with the general economic procurator in Macao, and directly with Rome. He was, of course, a Catholic priest as well, shuttling to confess local Christians and celebrate masses between his chapel in Haidian village near the Summer Palace and the one near the Xizhi Gate in the Beijing walled city, as well as in rural villages in the hinterland of the capital, one- or two-day travel away. Sigismondo was also a housekeeper and a builder, improvising as an architect, a mason, and a mechanic. To support all these roles, he nurtured a network of extensive contacts in Beijing, Canton, and across Asia and Europe. While Manchu princes, officials, and eunuchs in Beijing engaged with him at the palace in his official capacity as an imperial craftsman, Christians and other commoners, both in the capital and its hinterland, assisted him in the mundane and religious parts of his life. In a letter to his brother in 1763, Sigismondo offered an ironic sketch of the different jobs he performed in rapid succession:

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23 See *Qing zhong qianqi Xiyang Tianzhujiao,* 4:150 (year 1748), 195 (1753), 203 (1754), 296 (1762), 321 (1765), 325 (1766), 332 (1767), and 335 (1768).

24 "Lettre du Père Amiot au Père de la Tour," Peking October 17, 1754, in *Lettres édifiantes et curieuses concernant l'Asie, l'Afrique et l'Amérique, avec quelques relations nouvelles des missions, et des notes géographiques et historiques*, ed. Louis Aimé-Martin (Paris: Société du Panthéon Littéraire, 1843), 4:56.

> I am occupied in the usual activities, that is, engaged in a continuous theater 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. Thus, I eat only once a day as I have been doing for many years, and sometimes my belly is empty for forty or more hours, but this does not bother me, since in this fashion I employ my time always to some good end, or at least some hope of a spiritual good end.[25]

This busy life eventually took its toll. "Producing leisure goods" was in fact no leisure at all, but an extremely time-consuming and stressful activity, continuously monitored by the emperor in person, who often ordered changes and added new demands to ongoing work. Jesuit Brother Jean Denis Attiret (Wang Zhicheng 王致誠, 1702–1768) revealed in a 1743 letter the ambivalent attitude of missionaries towards the emperor, tinted by resentment for the long hours of work, but also by pride in having access to all parts of the imperial precincts:

> I have not a moment to spare; and am forced to borrow time in which I now write to you, from my hours of rest . . . There is but one man here; and that is the Emperor. All pleasures are made for him alone. This charming place [i.e. the Imperial Summer Park] is scarce[ly] ever seen by anybody but himself, his women, and his eunuchs. The princes, and other chief men of the country, are rarely admitted any farther than the audience-chambers. Of all the Europeans that are here, none ever enter'd this inclosure, except the clock-makers and painters; whose employments make it necessary that they should be admitted everywhere. The place usually assign'd us to paint in, is in one of those little palaces above-mentioned; where the Emperor comes to see us work, almost every day: so that we can never be absent. [. . .] I have gone through, and seen, all this beautiful garden; and enter'd into all the apartments.[26]

Missionary clockmakers and painters often complained about being overworked. But besides exploitation, there were other reasons to feel

25 Sigismondo, *Epistolario,* letter LXI, July 26, 1763, 87; see also similar language in ibid., letter LXX, September 29, 1765, 96: "the life I lead is ridiculous, I seem like an actor who changes his role at every scene."

26 Jean Denis Attiret, *A Letter from F. Attiret, a French Missionary, now employ'd by that Emperor to Paint the Apartments in those Gardens, to his Friend at Paris. Translated from the French, by Sir Harry Beaumont (1749)* (London: R. Dodsley in Pallmall, 1752), 46–48.

uneasy. On the one hand, working for the emperor and his officials occupied most of the time that should have been devoted to proselytizing. Missionaries' letters are replete with a sense of psychological anguish and regret for being forced to neglect the spiritual goal, which had been the primary purpose of their coming to China. Following superiors' orders and working for the greater glory of God thus often became the only justifications to make the daily routine at the palace religiously acceptable.

On the other hand, missionaries also felt that there was a morally objectionable aspect intrinsic to the leisure-related objects they produced. Clocks, automata, music boxes, paintings, miniatures, and architectural structures were in fact manufactured for a pagan emperor and his court. Moreover, these products would be used in worldly activities such as social games and receptions, theatricals, and even non-Christian religious rituals (as in the case of Qianlong's Tantric Buddhist portraits, which were partly produced with missionary help).[27] Worse, they were potentially immoral, as they often involved concubines (Fig. 3).

Yet, in spite of frequent complaints about the "profane" activities they had to engage in to please the emperor and the Qing elites, missionaries conceded that they had to be prepared to do anything demanded, and "be ever on . . . guard not to be taken at a disadvantage," as we read in a famous letter by Sigismondo's friend, the Jesuit Amiot:

> One has to be in China, and be there for the glory of God, to endure the kind of toil we experience for all the activities we do here. Those of our able artists in Europe who have their whims, who wish to work only in this manner and at that time as it pleases themselves, should come and spend some time here. They would soon be radically cured of all their whims after a few months of a novitiate at the court of Beijing. Since the missionaries were established here, no Emperor has profited more by their services than the present occupant of the throne, [Qianlong]. And there is no one who has more harshly treated them or who has fulminated more crushing decrees against the holy religion they profess. . . . The tastes of this prince vary, so to speak, like the seasons. Before, he has been all for music and for fountains, today he is all for machines and constructions. There is scarcely anything for which his inclination has not changed except for painting. The same whims can come back to him, and *we must be ever on our guard not to be taken at a disadvantage.*[28]

27 On Castiglione's portraits of Qianlong in Buddhist attire, see Patricia Ann Berger, *Empire of Emptiness: Buddhist Art and Political Authority in Qing China* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2003), 55.

28 "Lettre du Père Amiot au Père de la Tour," 56. The English translation with my modifications follows W. Devine, *The Four Churches of Peking* (London: Burns, Oates & Washbourne Ltd., 1930), 17–18.

Figure 3: Sigismondo entered the inner apartments of imperial consorts to set up automata and clocks; in this depiction of an idealized consort in the inner chambers, probably dating to the Yonzgheng period, notice the clock near the window.

In other words, offering their skills to provide goods for the capricious world of courtly leisure was a necessary middle ground for missionaries, where their religious rules and moral judgment had to be suspended to avoid major "disadvantages" for their mission. Ordinarily, for example, priests were not allowed to attend profane opera and comedies. However, when the emperor invited them, they could not refuse. In 1738, for example, the Jesuit painter Castiglione was recovering from illness and the emperor was so delighted that his beloved painter was feeling better, that he received him in audience and then invited him to an opera performed at court. The Propagandist Pedrini wryly mocked this invitation in front of other Jesuits at the Southern Church, saying "I am delighted that

Castiglione was admitted to an audience by the Emperor and regaled with four hours of theater."[29]

Pedrini, a member of the papal mission and a critic of the Jesuits, was here obliquely commenting on the breach of religious rules Castiglione had to subject himself to on this occasion. Another important issue was the respect for holy days: the Jesuits were often criticized for entering the palace even on Sundays to perform their courtly duties. When Ignaz Sichelbarth (Ai Qimeng 艾啓蒙, 1708–1780) was given an official rank in 1767 after Castiglione's death and took his place as the main European court painter, Sigismondo observed that the Jesuit had offered no "religious resistance" whatsoever to the new dignity and that, unlike the other priests in the workshop, "this Mandarin Father enters the Palace every single day, even on the most holy day of Christmas, a fact that shows that [to him] religious duty is not something that is to be respected to the letter." When asked about this infringement, Sichelbarth allegedly replied that "he must do whatever could please the emperor, to show his gratitude for the benefit of the official rank he received."[30]

This bantering over religious duty had been common not only between Jesuits and missionaries of other orders, but also within the Society of Jesus, and it dated back to the very beginnings of the mission, when the question of "secular" work at court—in particular the employment of superstitious knowledge in calculating the Chinese calendar by Jesuit astronomers—had created tensions among Jesuits notable enough to reach the Superior General in Rome.[31]

Sigismondo remarked that he and the other Beijing priests, for their part, were keeping Sundays as holy days and dedicated them to performing religious duties in their communities. Still, Sigismondo himself never missed an occasion to ingratiate himself with his patrons, as these interactions resulted in important contacts to protect his mission and support its economic workings. To navigate the complexity of daily life in Beijing and meet its economic demands required good linguistic and cultural fluency to make the right connections, and Sigismondo's spoken Chinese was excellent, as he had reached Beijing at age twenty-four and learned it fast. His fluency, in turn, enabled easy communication with different networks

29 APF, *Scritture originali riferite nella Congregazione Particolare dell'Indie Orientali e Cina* (SOCP), vol. 42 (1739), copy of letter from Serafino to Arcangelo Miralta, September 26, 1738, f. 62r.

30 APF, SOCP, vol. 55 (1765–1769), letter from Sigismondo to Propaganda, Beijing, October 20, 1767, f. 634v.

31 On the conflict between missionary/pastoral roles and scientific roles among the Jesuits in general, see e.g. Antonella Romano, "Multiple Identities, Conflicting Duties and Fragmented Pictures: The Case of the Jesuits," in *Le monde est une peinture: Jesuitische Identität und die Rolle der Bilder*, eds. Elisabeth Oy-Marra, Volker R. Remmert, and Kristin Müller-Bongard 45–69 (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 2011). A large literature on Schall alone, including seminal pieces by Huang Yi-long and other Chinese historians of science, can be traced through the *Chinese Christian Texts Database* (*CCT-Database*), eds. Ad Dudink and Nicolas Standaert, http://www.arts.kuleuven.be/sinology/cct.

of support, both within the Christian community of Beijing and with the court and its entourage. But this linguistic advantage was not sufficient to obtain protection for the mission together with economic favors and exemptions, as I will briefly illustrate below. Specialized skills in the production of luxury objects became in fact a crucial currency for missionaries within the imperial court and officialdom.

Sigismondo's case is particularly striking, as he was not a learned Jesuit Father occupying one of the exalted positions in the Directorate of Astronomy, but a rather modest horologist.[32] Within the Jesuit order, in fact, such "mechanical" positions were reserved for Brothers, technically called "Temporal Coadjutors" (*coadiutores temporales*), i.e. members of the Society of Jesus who were not priests but were employed in practical roles and occupied a subordinate position, as they had not pronounced the perpetual vows. Castiglione, for example, was a Brother. Yet, in spite of his subordination within the formal hierarchy of the Jesuit order, Castiglione achieved a remarkable degree of influence at Qianlong's court through his professional skills. In this case, success at providing art for the emperor's entertainment was resetting the hierarchy of power within the Society of Jesus itself. Even if, according to Jesuit rules, Castiglione always remained a relatively muted presence vis-à-vis the central authorities of the order (we have very few letters by the Italian Brother, who usually left communication to his superiors), his close relationship with the emperor made him a key player among the Europeans of Beijing during the Qianlong reign.[33]

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32 Hieromonk Feodosii Smorzhevskii, a Russian observer in Beijing in 1745–1755 and an acquaintance of Sigismondo, observed that Jesuit "Mathematicians are in high renown [. . .] Painters are well respected now [. . .] Clockmakers are held in moderate regard"; see Feodosii Smorzhevskii, *Notes on the Jesuits in China*, trans. Gregory Afinogenov (Boston: Institute of Jesuit Sources, Boston College, 2016), 27.

33 A perceptive assessment of Castiglione's career is Marco Musillo, "Reconciling Two Careers: The Jesuit Memoir of Giuseppe Castiglione Lay Brother and Qing Imperial Painter," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 42 (2008): 44–59. Qianlong's high esteem for Castiglione is well-known and reflected, for example, in the bestowal of special signs of imperial grace at his death in 1766, posthumously promoting him to the rank of Vice Minister, and granting for his funeral a higher amount than for any other Jesuit official (300 taels). Both were unusual recognitions for a court artist, and we know of only three other court artists who received official ranking (Zhang Zongcang 張宗蒼, Jin Tingbiao 金廷標, and Jin Kunjie 金昆皆); see Ishida Mikinosuke, "A Biographical Study of Giuseppe Castiglione (Lang Shih-ning), a Jesuit Painter in the Court of Peking under the Ch'ing Dynasty," in *Memoirs of the Research Department of the Tōyō Bunkō* 19 (1960): 111; Yang Wanyu 楊婉瑜, "Qing Qianlong gongting huashi—Jin Tingbiao huihua yanjiu 清乾隆宮廷畫師—金廷標繪畫研究 [Research on Jin Tingbiao, court painter in the Qianlong period of the Qing Dynasty]," *Yiyi fenzi* 議藝份子—*Art Symposium* 14 (2010): 31. Castiglione's key role in the eyes of the Europeans at court is confirmed by the assessment of his confrère, the astronomer Hallerstein, in 1741: "We hope that *the grace that this humble artist and brother found in the eyes of the Emperor*, in due course, will favorably influence the general position of our Christian affairs. Perhaps precisely this hope could prompt European artists, especially those from our Society, with their art, which is now *almost the only cause of popularity at the Chinese court*, to serve God's churches and help Castiglione, who is already somewhat exhausted"; see letter no. 675 in *Der Neue Welt-Bott mit allerhand*

The Jesuit calculations of the most effective line of artistic or scientific specialization to present at court for a new arrival confirms the importance of professional identity for obtaining influence with the emperor and the palace bureaucracy. The Propaganda was no stranger to such calculations. When Sigismondo—an antagonist to the entrenched Jesuits—reached Beijing, he presented himself as an organ-maker and initially refused the job of horologist, as the Jesuits would have preferred based on how that role would have probably complemented, rather than competed, with their own positions within the palace's workshops.[34]

Sigismondo's experience shows how skills in the production of luxury objects could be deployed as cultural capital, or as what I would call "skill capital," in connecting with the emperor, nobles, officials, eunuchs, and even, indirectly, palace women. At least two forms in Pierre Bourdieu's well-known definition of cultural capital are applicable to Sigismondo's case. The skills he acquired through education were *embodied* cultural capital ("Cultural capital can exist [. . .] in the *embodied* state, i.e., in the form of long-lasting dispositions of the mind and body"). The luxury objects he produced, on the other hand, were *objectified* cultural capital ("Cultural capital can exist [. . .] in the *objectified* state, in the form of cultural goods—pictures, books, dictionaries, instruments, machines, etc. —which are the trace or realization of theories or critiques of these theories, problematics, etc.").

Sigismondo did not own this second form of objectified cultural capital, but rather provided it to his clients, and derived patronage from it. His embodied cultural capital was primarily in his skills, or competence. They qualify as capital since they were unequally distributed and offered him exclusive advantages, even if the imperial court still set the parameters within which he could operate. As Bourdieu observed, "the cultural capital of the courtier, [. . .] can yield only ill-defined profits, of fluctuating value, in the market of high-society exchanges."[35] Sigismondo was not a courtier, but his position as court artisan put him squarely within the courtly economy and its capricious constraints. Yet his unique skills also conferred 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 Propaganda mission's advantage, and an analysis of his contacts in Beijing reveals the value of his prized "skill capital."

Nachrichten deren Missionarien Soc. Iesu, eds. Joseph Stöcklein et al. (Augspurg und Grätz: In Verlag Philips, Martins, und Joh. Veith seel. Erben, 1758), 34:41–42, as translated in Mitja Saje, ed., *Augustin Hallerstein—Liu Songling: The Multicultural Legacy of Jesuit Wisdom and Piety at the Qing Dynasty Court* (Maribor: Association for Culture and Education Kibla & Arhiv Republike Slovenije, 2009), 300. Italics mine. The Russian ecclesiastic Smorzhevskii also observed that "[. . .] now [the Jesuits . . .] act through the painter Lang, even though he is just an ordinary monk"; see Smorzhevskii, *Notes on the Jesuits in China*, 45.

34 See APF, *Procura Cina*, box 15, Sigismondo to Miralta, June 29, 1738, f. 1r.

35 See Pierre Bourdieu, "The Forms of Capital," (1983), in *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education,* ed. John G. Richardson (New York: Greenwood Press, 1986), 243 and 247–248.

Sigismondo's networks in Beijing and beyond

THE QIANLONG EMPEROR

The most important contacts in terms of prestige were those with the emperor. While occasions for face-to-face meetings were relatively rare, they offered crucial semi-public expressions of imperial satisfaction towards individual artisans and artists. Sometimes eunuchs or employees and supervisors of the Imperial Household Department's workshops mediated imperial appreciation or desires. They would pass on imperial specifications for production of objects and relate back the level of imperial satisfaction. This was partly done through written documents and designs/diagrams (preserved today in the registers of the Imperial Workshops), but much was transmitted orally and has been lost to us, except for what we find in missionary letters.[36]

Soon after his arrival in Beijing in 1738, Sigismondo was introduced at court, but while his companion Serafino, who specialized in painting miniatures, was officially enrolled in the imperial service, Sigismondo was not. He remained mostly at his Haidian residence, occasionally building or repairing musical instruments for the court. Three years later, the palace requested his direct services on an intermittent basis. In 1742 he was enrolled as an imperial artisan, making all kinds of musical instruments (violins, flutes, clavichords, trumpets); and starting in 1748 he had to work almost daily at the imperial workshops. His job was mainly to superintend the construction and repair of musical instruments and clocks and to build automata and automated musical boxes[37] (Fig. 4). To give a sense of the kind of complex devices Sigismondo produced, I offer here his description of a few items:

> [In 1741,] I built a small organ, three palms high and two palms wide, with bellows and a cylinder, all hidden inside a sound box made of Brazilian rare wood and boxwood, so that outside one could not see anything but the sound box and twenty pipes. Inside [the sound box] there were also small bells, which I had also made. [The organ] activated the bellows automatically and made the cylinder rotate, playing three Chinese sonatas. To crown it, with the help of Fr. Serafino, I made a rooster as large as a duck, which, when each sonata ended, would stand up, raise his head, flap his wings, and sing cucùlucu.[38]

36 See for example Sigismondo, *Epistolario*, letter no. XII, 14 November 1738, 12: "[. . .] the emperor *said* that he wanted a clavichord hidden in a small five-palm-long sack that the Tartars use, which should play automatically. I *made a design* and presented it to the emperor and he liked it, so one of the Chief Eunuchs was deputized to procure all parts needed and laborers."

37 See APF, *Procura Cina,* box 15, Sigismondo to Miralta, September 3, 1742, f. 1v; Sigismondo, *Epistolario*, letter XIX, October 19, 1742, 25; *Qing zhong qianqi Xiyang Tianzhujiao,* 4:150, June 5, 1748.

38 Sigismondo*, Epistolario*, letter XVIII, November 1, 1741, 23–24.

Figure 4: This clock was produced by the Palace Workshops between 1743 and 1749, at the time of Sigismondo Meinardi's employment at court.

At the end of February 1743, he presented to the Emperor "a vase containing flowers and a branch, with a sort of sonorous plate used by the Chinese hanging off the branch. When a hammer automatically struck it, inside the vase some small bells played two Chinese songs. (Fig. 5) The whole thing was a foot and a half high and less than one inch deep."[39] In 1752 he described several devices he made for the emperor:

> [. . .] a small five-foot-tall European theater, with a fountain in the middle, and indications of the twelve hours. [It includes] a wooden duck, as big as a small bird, [that] jumps into the water, starts swimming, and marks the hours with its beak. From the sides of the stage, ten one-palm-tall figurines come out, each carrying in one hand a bell and in the other a small hammer, and they strike each other's [instruments] producing a Chinese sonata each hour.
>
> Another device is a four-foot-tall dressed figure, that through a mechanism in the belly moves its arms and hands and plays four sonatas, two European and two Chinese, striking with small hammers in its hands sixteen bells in two lines of eight each, suspended over a table. It moves its eyes and with its head keeps the rhythm of the music.
>
> In another device there are two small figures playing a game of chess in the European way.
>
> The last device, which I have almost finished, is made up of two roosters [standing] on a stone. When they get close to a pomegranate, it opens up to let you see the current hour and minute. The bigger rooster stands up, raises its head, flaps its wings, opens its mouth, and sings as many times as the hour. The smaller rooster does the same with the number of quarters of an hour.[40]

A year later, Sigismondo described his interactions with Qianlong at the workshops of the Summer Park, using a dismissive tone: "[T]his emperor has gotten into the habit of having me make devices for his pleasure. . . so that every day (except on feasts and Sundays) I have to go inside the Imperial Summer Park, where the artisans, as many as needed, do their work under my direction. [. . .] Almost every day, *once finished with the business of the empire*, [the emperor] immediately comes to the building where I work with three Jesuit painters. The eunuchs announce his arrival, so that the other artisans leave, and only we [Europeans] remain with the eunuchs."[41] The emperor's visit to the workshops was undoubtedly part of his leisure time. Having finished a long morning's work, he then took the time to indulge in his artistic pursuits and, as Sigismondo put it, "enjoy himself, since he owns his personal Paradise

39 Sigismondo, *Epistolario*, letter XXII, October 15, 1743, 30–31.
40 Sigismondo, *Epistolario*, letter XXXIX, November 24, 1752, 51–52.
41 Italics mine. Sigismondo, *Epistolario*, letter XL, November 10, 1753, 53.

Figure 5: This eighteenth-century automaton with clock was produced by the Imperial Workshops and resembles some of the Beijing-produced automata-clocks described by Sigismondo in his correspondence.

in this world," a reference to the gardens of the Imperial Summer Park, where he would divert himself after inspecting the progress made with the artwork.[42]

Qianlong's schedule was usually packed with official activities from early morning (Qing emperors started work at 5 am) until 3 pm, when he would take his midday lunch. It was after this afternoon meal that the emperor set aside some time to enjoy painting or calligraphy, write poetry, and relish his art collection. The visits to the workshops fit within that routine.[43] We know how proficient the Qianlong emperor was at projecting his image as an art connoisseur and patron, especially on public occasions like his Southern Tours to the Lower Yangzi region, his hunting expeditions north of the Great Wall, or his meetings with tribal leaders in Chengde in Manchuria, for which he commissioned celebratory paintings that were supervised by European painters.

In his visits to the workshops at the end of a day's work, however, we see him truly at play. This is a more private sphere of leisure, where he

42 Sigismondo, *Epistolario*, letter XL, November 10, 1753, 53.
43 On Qianlong's schedule, see e.g. Mark Elliott, *Emperor Qianlong: Son of Heaven, Man of the World* (New York: Longman, 2009), 23–25.

inspected his commissions with only a few select artist-craftsmen and eunuchs in attendance. Simple laborers, assistants, or apprentices had to leave the room. The intimacy that Sigismondo and other European artists and artisans gained from participation in the creative process personally supervised by the emperor offered them a lever to gain favor directly tied to the monarch's private leisure sphere. By pleasing the emperor, they indirectly obtained imperial tolerance for their religious enterprise and warded off attacks by Chinese officials: "The Chinese, who see the Emperor busy with [us] Europeans, are more reluctant to make accusations [against our Christians]."[44]

Sigismondo's experience confirms that positive feedback from the emperor and the inner imperial circle delivered the desired results for the missions. Occasionally the missionary artisan would learn about the level of his patron's satisfaction from the eunuchs he had befriended: "While the emperor was in Tartary, I completed a four-foot-tall figurine which played two Chinese and two European sonatas with tiny bells on top of a small table. *The emperor enjoyed it very much when he saw it*, and the following day he ordered me to have it transported to the room where he spends the night, so that he could show it to his Queens. I went and had it transported to the place designated by the emperor. *The eunuchs later told me that he amused himself with it until midnight*!"[45] Out of this imperial satisfaction, relayed by the eunuchs, came tolerance, as the missionary observed in 1742: "[T]he emperor does not allow [Christianity], but tolerates [it] because he enjoys very much what we Europeans make for him here in Beijing."[46] A decade later, Sigismondo observed that paintings made by other Europeans, and *bagatelle* (trifles) he manufactured, "somewhat obliged the emperor to dissimulate and permit that we do what we will never renounce doing [= proselytizing], unless they kill us or we are exiled from China."[47]

The direct relationship with the imperial patron was obviously very important: "[S]ince he talks to us every day, the enemies of the Holy Law [of Christianity] don't dare to persecute it, and when some persecution arises, the emperor fails to listen to all accusations hurled at us. *This is the outcome of our efforts, and the five Europeans who work at the Palace help all the others who are only missionaries*."[48] Sigismondo here most clearly attributed the successful shielding of the entire mission from repression by overzealous officials to the five craftsmen and artists at court and their personal links to the emperor. This did not mean that the emperor was unaware of this

44 Sigismondo, *Epistolario*, letter XXXIX, November 24, 1752, 52.
45 Italics mine. APF, *Procura Cina*, box 15, letter from Sigismondo to Francesco Maria Guglielmi, Beijing, November 12, 1752, f. 1r.
46 Sigismondo, *Epistolario*, letter XIX, October 19, 1742, 25.
47 Sigismondo, *Epistolario*, letter XXXIX, November 24, 1752, 52.
48 Italics mine. Sigismondo, *Epistolario*, letter XLVI, November 1, 1755, 65. A similar observation can be found in "Lettre du Père Amiot au Père Allart," Peking October 20, 1752, in *Lettres édifiantes et curieuses*, 3:838.

ambiguous situation. Sigismondo recognized that even when cognizant of internal conflicts within the missionary community, Qianlong preferred to dissimulate: "[T]he emperor is informed of everything, but as a great politician he has never shown himself to know anything, either with the Jesuits or me."[49]

Qianlong was also concerned about the continued flow of European skilled artisans to Beijing, asking both the missionaries and his officials in Guangdong to inform him of the arrival of missionary artists for the court. After the sudden death of Brother Gilles Thebault (Yang Zixin 楊自新, 1706–1766), the French Jesuit maker of automata and clocks, who was poisoned by the fumes of a coal stove at night, Qianlong met Sigismondo at the palace workshops and talked at length with him about the loss of that precious technician, telling him that he, Sigismondo, was now his only clockmaker and mechanic left. The emperor encouraged him to call someone else to the palace, and the priest seized the opportunity to introduce the Discalced Carmelite Father Arcangelo Maria Bellotti di Sant'Anna (Li Hengliang 李衡良, 1729–1784) of the Propaganda mission, even though he was not fully qualified. Qianlong agreed nonetheless, suggesting that under Sigismondo's training, Arcangelo would learn the needed skills.[50]

The emperor also showed concern for the health of those whose luxury production he enjoyed, Castiglione being a prime example but not the only one. In 1766, for instance, when he heard that Sigismondo was ill at home, he asked several times how the priest was doing, "the greatest honor for a Chinese subject"—Sigismondo dismissively wrote to his brother in Turin—"but not for me, as long as [the emperor] stays quiet and does not molest us in the exercise of our Holy Religion."[51] Qianlong's leisurely pursuits thus created a "need" for Western objects, and, in turn, the necessity to maintain a pipeline of skilled European artisans, so specialized that they could not be substituted by locally trained craftsmen. Once the need for certain products and skilled labor had emerged, it could not be easily suppressed as long as the emperor maintained an interest or whim for such imported arts, crafts, and luxury items.

"Leisure" here was clearly an area of exchange where subordinates would acquire particular rights not normally granted as long as the commodities and services furnished were considered highly desirable markers of status, taste, and pleasure. The missionaries accrued from their specialized expertise a certain "skill capital" with the emperor and believed that their standing with him as providers of leisure objects had successfully shielded their missionary enterprise from the imperial rules against Christianity. Conversely, we can speculate that the emperor believed he had created the conditions for their stay with minimal political cost.

49 Sigismondo*, Epistolario*, letter LXI, July 26, 1763, 87.
50 APF, *Procura Cina*, box 15, letter from Sigismondo to Emiliano Palladini, June 3, 1766, f. 1v. On Arcangelo, see Fortunato Margiotti, "La Confraternita del Carmine in Cina (1728–1838)," *Ephemerides Carmeliticae* 14, no. 1 (1963): 112, note 65.
51 Sigismondo*, Epistolario*, letter LXXI, October 4, 1766, 98.

For him, this situation was the result of a sober calculation: leaving the churches open in Beijing kept the missionaries under imperial control, while also forcing them to remain at his service with their desired skills. Qianlong retained the upper hand, but within their subordinate positions the Europeans also made good use of the system, as the following example illustrates.

In one instance, Qianlong's benevolence directly helped Sigismondo in a building project. For the occasion of the visit of the Portuguese Ambassador to the court in 1753, Sigismondo engaged in a major project to restore and enlarge the tiny Western Church in Beijing (Fig. 6). The project had not been approved by the authorities and faced Jesuit opposition. The church was located along the imperial processional route to the Imperial Summer Park on the outskirts of old Beijing, and Sigismondo exploited the political opportunity and his own prestige as court artisan, as we read below:

> The emperor was happy about the upcoming [Portuguese] embassy and delighted with us Europeans [at court]. In particular, he was satisfied with the objects I had manufactured [for him], and I had the opportunity to talk to him every day if needed. So I mustered the courage to start this building project. Both the other Europeans and the Chinese Christians were surprised that without asking for permission I would start building a church in a public place, where the emperor passes by all the time. However, confiding in God, given the circumstances and the opportunity to talk in case of opposition, I went ahead. As soon as I had started, the emperor returned [from the Park] to Beijing, and passing by, asked [his courtiers] what that construction site was, as he did not know that there had been a church there before. The Grand Ministers in the imperial train told him it was the house of some European. The emperor sent someone to ask who lived there and what was being built. *I had already foreseen that this would happen,* and thus I had stationed two people at the door ready to reply, instructing them on what to say. They told them that I lived in that place, that there was an old church there, and that I was rebuilding it taller since it was rather low and in ruins. This was reported to the emperor, who laughed and said: "He wants to complete it before the arrival of the ambassador, but he will not do it in time." After three days he passed by again, and after seeing the old wooden beams, he said "[I]t is a church in the shape of a cross, with old wooden beams." Thank God, *the church has been completed without any hindrance,* as had instead been experienced with the restoration of the other [Jesuit] churches, and it has been made known to the public.[52]

52 Italics mine. APF, *Procura Cina*, box 15, letter from Sigismondo to Francesco Maria Guglielmi, August 10, 1753, f. 2r; cf. the same story in Sigismondo*, Epistolario*, letter no. XL, November 10, 1753, 54.

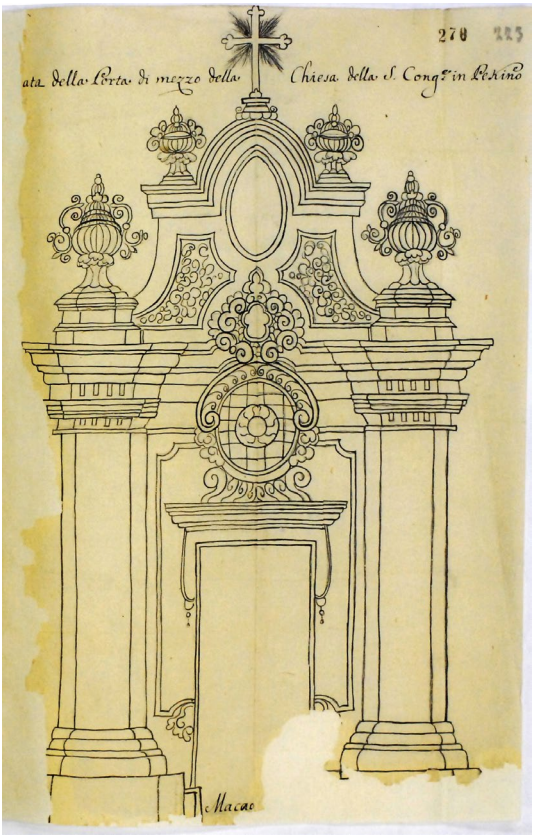

Figure 6: Facade of the Xitang 西堂 Catholic Church, near Xizhimen 西直門 in Beijing, around 1763; Sigismondo Meinardi rebuilt the facade and interior of the pre-existing church in 1753, and continued to improve it in the following decade.

Here the emperor displayed a paternalistic and tolerant attitude toward Sigismondo, a demonstration that intimacy with the monarch ("the opportunity to talk to him every day if needed [. . .] in case of opposition") and his satisfaction with "the objects [. . .] manufactured for him" created empathy. Sigismondo was shrewd enough to predict an imperial query on his project and to manipulate the communication to his advantage, obtaining a lighthearted nod from the monarch. The imperial smile was enough to show that Sigismondo was under Qianlong's protection, and it publicly indicated to officials how far they could go in opposing the missionary's activities. Within a courtly environment, this was a public pronouncement: someone in the imperial train, perhaps a friendly eunuch, might have informed Sigismondo of the imperial words, but many more eyes witnessed the exchange. When the emperor uttered a sentence, or just made a nod, all took notice.

The emperor's function as arbiter of taste, however, also had another consequence: by making Western luxury objects fashionable through his

collecting and commissioning, he promoted a craze for European exotica that spread to the upper echelons of the court and beyond. This phenomenon would ultimately play into the hands of people like Sigismondo, whose technical skills became sought after beyond the imperial palace, in the mansions of princes and other officials, as illustrated below. By creating aesthetic empathies and desires, leisurely pursuits and objects linked to those pursuits had the power to create patronage links more effectively than other interactions.

Relations with imperial princes

Sigismondo's companion and superior, Serafino, explicitly commented in 1740 on the crucial importance of cultivating the friendship of imperial princes whenever access to the emperor was difficult: "When it is impossible to have reasonable access to the monarch, we can only try to obtain the affection of persons who are well liked by the emperor, so that at least we will have someone who will talk positively about us and protect us when needed." He continued stating that he had endeavored to ingratiate himself and Sigismondo with the "Fifth Prince, brother of the Emperor" since "all that pertains to us missionaries is assigned [to him] to decide," and that the uncle of the emperor, the Twenty-Third Prince, was also their protector (on both, see below).[53] Sigismondo's correspondence confirms this pattern of patronage, as he reports meeting with several imperial princes, mostly uncles, brothers, and children of the Qianlong emperor. With some he had more continuous relationships, with others only occasional encounters. In 1739, when Sigismondo was living in the Propaganda's Haidian residence, near the Imperial Summer Park, Yinlu 胤祿 (1695–1767), the sixteenth son of the Kangxi emperor and one of the few brothers the Yongzheng Emperor had trusted, visited him twice.[54] Yinlu had studied some mathematics and music under Teodorico Pedrini and had been ordered by Yongzheng to complete the editing of the compilations on music coordinated by his brother, Yinzhi 胤祉 (1677–1732), after the latter had fallen from grace. Sigismondo had arrived in Beijing two years earlier, presenting himself as an organ-maker. Yinlu must have had some interest in Sigismondo's musical skills to visit him, but allegedly spent one of those visits (three hours) in his room, interrogating him about Christianity. Apparently, the prince later became very inimical (*inimicissimo*) to the missionaries and did not

53 APF, SOCP, vol. 43 (1740–1741), copy of letter by Serafino to Miralta, Beijing, October 18, 1740, f. 556v.

54 Yinlu's biography in Arthur W. Hummel ed., *Eminent Chinese of the Ch'ing Period* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1943), 925–926; Han Qi, "Emperor, Prince and Literati: Role of the Princes in the Organization of Scientific Activities in Early Qing Period," in *Current Perspectives in the History of Science in East Asia*, eds. Yung Sik Kim and Francesca Bray (Seoul: Seoul National University Press, 1999), 209–216.

play any positive role in protecting them, a sign that arts and crafts did not necessarily open all doors.[55]

More often than not, however, the missionaries' efforts paid off. They frequently engaged with their highest-ranking counterparts in exchanges typical of a gift economy, offering the rarity of their skills and the exquisite quality of their products as beyond financial remuneration. Luxury items were presented in the hope of reciprocity in a different domain—protection for their missionary work. But, being gifted, these products were neither subject to negotiation, nor articulated as a request. Rewards were granted at the patron's discretion, and the missionaries could not retaliate by lowering the quality of their goods, even when denied compensation.

Commodities and gifts are situated along a continuum, rather than being entities governed by different economic principles, but different routines govern different forms of exchange, as discussed in the "Theoretical Essay" concluding this volume. The commodity purchase in a modern state creates a legal obligation between seller and purchaser guaranteed by state laws, while a gift exchange creates a social obligation secured by the social relations encoded in custom.[56]

Several examples in missionary sources confirm these dynamics. Another imperial uncle, the twenty-third son of the Kangxi Emperor, Yinqi 胤祁 (1713–1785), also started visiting the Propaganda Fathers in Haidian, offering gifts (including bolts of silk, a common form of currency) in exchange for paintings by Serafino, that is as partial payment. But, as Sigismondo drily observed, "gifts here in Beijing are in part restitution for what has been given."[57] This sentence clearly implies that the gifts were a form of payment, although they also required reciprocation. Court painters, including both Chinese and Jesuit masters, were regularly paid in silver according to a three-tiered ranking, but also bestowed with gifts of silk, clothing, and fur. Artisans like Sigismondo probably only received this sort of payment in kind, which supplemented the annual stipend missionaries received from Europe. Such commodities did not have a fixed monetary value but could be easily sold at market price, as missionaries often did.[58]

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55 Sigismondo*, Epistolario*, Letter no. XV, October 20, 1739, 17–18.

56 Arjun Appadurai, "Introduction: Commodities and the Politics of Value," in *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 3–63; and Eugenio Menegon, "*Amicitia Palatina*: The Jesuits and the Politics of Gift-Giving at the Qing Court," in *Il liuto e i libri: Studi in onore di Mario Sabattini*, eds. Magda Abbiati and Federico Greselin (Venice: Edizioni Ca' Foscari, 2014), 547–561.

57 APF, *Procura Cina*, box 15, letter from Sigismondo to Arcangelo Miralta, July 8, 1740, f. 1r.

58 On the court painters' ranking and salaries, see Nie Chongzheng 聶崇正, "Qingdai gongting huihua zhidu tanwei 清代宮廷繪畫制度探微 [An exploration of the Qing court painting system]," *Meishu guancha* 美術觀察 4 (2001): 53–55; several entries scattered in the following collection record the salaries of painters: *Qing gong Neiwufu zaobanchu dang'an zonghui* 清宮內務府造辦處檔案總匯 [Archival collection of the Imperial Household Department's workshops in the Qing palace], edited by Zhongguo diyi lishi dang'an guan, Xianggang zhongwen daxue

Yinqi later became a regular acquaintance of Sigismondo and appears several times in his letters. In 1743, for example, the prince gave two bolts of silk to Sigismondo, probably in exchange for some clockwork, and the following year he anxiously asked Sigismondo about several objects that a friend of the Augustinians, Carlo Uslenghi, Pro-Secretary of Propaganda in Rome and member of the famous Accademia dell'Arcadia, had sent for the prince from Italy.[59] In 1744, Yinqi interceded with the Jesuit Visitor and Director of the Imperial Astronomical Directorate Ignaz Kögler (Dai Jinxian 戴進賢, 1680–1746), assuring him that a new Propaganda missionary coming from Macao and recommended by Sigismondo was a legitimate addition to the corps of court artisans. This missionary was the Discalced Carmelite Giuseppe Maria Pruggmayr (Na Yongfu 那永福, 1713–1791), who in fact turned out to be unqualified as a court artist (he only occasionally taught music at court), but spent several decades in Beijing as missionary (1745–1791), simply relying on bureaucratic inertia and on the protection of his confrères who could muster the necessary skills.[60]

Among the brothers of the emperor, Sigismondo had most contact with Hongzhou 弘晝 (1712–1770), fifth son of the Yongzheng Emperor, and one of the wealthiest princes of his day. In 1740, Hongzhou asked Serafino for several European landscape paintings in exchange for bolts of silk, and Sigismondo defined this as the beginning of a fruitful *amicizia* (friendship) with the Propaganda Fathers. The prince later asked Sigismondo to make a "small organ that plays by itself" and sent both workers and materials to assist him.[61] Once the prince saw one of the automated clocks made by Sigismondo for the emperor, in emulation of his august brother he "wanted to have an identical one made for him, which I have finished and given him; but he also sent the workers and materials, and gave me three bolts of damask. But I did not include in that piece the final cuculucù [sound]."[62]

Perhaps the missionary would have gotten in trouble producing an exact replica of a piece made expressly for the emperor. This might indicate that emulation of imperial tastes was the norm among high nobles at court, and that leisure was indeed an area of powerful social demarcation, especially when associated with unusual, rare, and exotic objects and practices. Possibly, the prince intended to show his own prestige within

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wenwuguan 中國第一歷史檔案館、香港中文大學文物館, (Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 2005), 55 volumes (see e.g. vols. 2 and 6 for salaries in the Yongzheng reign).

59 Sigismondo referred to a now-lost list of the objects sent from Italy, in part for this prince, in APF, *Procura Cina*, box 15, letter from Sigismondo to A. Miralta, May 12, 1744, f. 2r. On Uslenghi, see Josef Metzler, ed., *Sacrae Congregationis de Propaganda Fide Memoria Rerum. 350 Years in the Service of the Missions, 1622–1972*, vol. 2 (Rome: Herder, 1971–1976), 35 and 75; Michel Giuseppe Morei, *Memorie istoriche dell'adunanza degli Arcadi* (Roma: Stamperia Rossi, 1761), 97.

60 APF, *Procura Cina*, box 15, letter from Sigismondo to A. Miralta, October 11, 1744, f. 1r; see Margiotti, "La Confraternita del Carmine in Cina," 104, note 47.

61 APF, *Procura Cina*, box 15, letter from Sigismondo to A. Miralta, July 8, 1740, on Serafino; *Epistolario*, letter no. XVII, September 1740, 21, on the small organ.

62 Sigismondo*, Epistolario*, letter XVIII, November 1, 1741, 24.

the imperial clan by commissioning a piece as similar as possible to that manufactured for his brother the emperor, unwittingly revealing a hunger for greater status recognition.

The missionaries were also attentive to ceremonial gifts for the princes: in 1743, Sigismondo gave Hongzhou for his birthday "a grottesco with pedestal, and over the grottesco a rooster with a singing mechanism. The gift was liked, and he gave me back a bolt of damask, whose value, however, is not even half of what I spent. The Jesuits of the three other churches also offered him presents, but they did not receive anything back."[63] Sigismondo may have hinted at the fact that in this instance his superior manual skills had pleased the prince's taste more than the wealth of the Jesuits, whose presents, no matter how lavish, had failed to equally impress. He also showed great awareness of the mechanisms of the gift economy in which he was engaged, commenting on the value of commodities, and acknowledging that the prince had in fact reciprocated, even if cheaply.

The mention of another imperial brother in a 1755 letter is in all likelihood a reference to Hongyan 弘曕, Prince Guo 果 (1733–1765), the sixth son of the Yongzheng Emperor (Fig. 7). Although only twenty-two that year, Hongyan had been supervisor of the Imperial Workshops since 1752, during the main phase of construction of the Western Pavilions (*Xiyang lou* 西洋樓) of the Imperial Summer Park. He apparently enjoyed the exotic look of the European-style architecture prominent there, and besides having himself painted against a Baroque gate in a portrait, he had such gates built for his princely mansion in Beijing. The letter mentions that "the brother of the emperor told me several times that he wished to send two young men to my church to learn something from me."[64] Hongyan was probably trying to get native youths to learn some of Sigismondo's skills for use in the imperial workshops. For the missionaries, this was a dangerous move because it would undermine their standing and create local competitors. Given the volume of work requested from them, the Europeans were willing to cede some lower form of knowledge, a fact confirmed by their mention of local "laborers" under their direction. They were, however, reluctant to hand down their core skills in manufacturing complex clocks and automata. Their monopoly, to a large extent, remained unbroken.

63 APF, *Procura Cina*, box 15, letter from Sigismondo to Arcangelo Miralta, December 26, 1742.

64 This probable reference to Hongyan is in Sigismondo*, Epistolario*, letter no. XLVII, November 1, 1755, 67. See Hongyan's biographical note in Hummel, *Eminent Chinese of the Ch'ing Period*, 919; his portrait with a European baroque architectural background in the collection of the Sackler Museum is reproduced and discussed in *Worshiping the Ancestors: Chinese Commemorative Portraits,* eds. Jan Stuart and Evelyn S. Rawski (Washington: Smithsonian Institution, 2001), 122; see also Laurie Barnes, *Forever Twenty-One: A Portrait of Yinli, Prince Guo, 1717* (Palm Beach, FL: Norton Museum of Art, 2013), where the portrait of Hongyan (son of Yinli) is also discussed.

Figure 7: Portrait of Prince Hongyan 弘曕 (1733–1765) with European architectural background, 1750s.

Relations with capital officials and personnel

If Sigismondo's relationship with imperial princes was mostly friendly, this was not necessarily the case with other officials. The missionaries were supervised by grandees, deputized by the emperor to control them while also managing the production of luxury items for the court. The relationship was symbiotic and fraught with ambiguity, since some of these officials (especially those supervising the Imperial Household Department's workshops) did not wish to be accused of mismanaging and alienating the skilled Europeans, thus antagonizing the emperor. They preferred to avoid serious conflicts, and tried to avert any crisis.

A name that appears frequently in Sigismondo's early correspondence is *Hai Tajin* (= Hai *daren* 海大人) i.e. Grand Official or Grand Minister Hai. This is a reference to the Manchu official Haiwang 海望 (?–1755), a member of the Plain Yellow Banner who hailed from the Uya clan. Haiwang was for many years Supervisor General of the Imperial Household Department, carrying the titles of Grand Minister in the Inner Court and Secretary of the Board of Revenue. He became a member of the Grand Council in the last year of the Yongzheng reign (1735), remaining in that position for the first decade of the Qianlong reign until 1745.[65] Sigismondo knew Haiwang personally, as this official had been managing the production of luxury items for the court in his capacity as head of the Imperial Household Department since 1724. In fact, Haiwang had personally selected Sigismondo as an official imperial clockmaker in 1748.[66]

In the 1740s, when Sigismondo's letters start mentioning his name with some frequency, Haiwang was at the height of his career and a very busy man with considerable influence. He was not a close friend of the missionaries, and was actually trying to control them tightly. He had learned, however, how to manage the foreigners to the advantage of his imperial master and would often receive them, including Sigismondo, to accept their memorials and forward their requests to the emperor, including matters such as palace personnel assignments or diplomatic contacts with European rulers and the pope.

After his power waned, younger Manchu magnates took his place in 1746. That year, however, an anti-Christian incident in the capital region implicating the Beijing missionaries offered Haiwang a last chance to shield the Westerners, while also saving himself from accusations of laxity. At the time of this incident, he first asked to be relieved from his supervisory position over the foreigners, and then informed the emperor that the

65 See *Faguo guojia tushuguan Ming Qing Tianzhujiao wenxian* 法國國家圖書館明清天主教文獻 [Ming-Qing Chinese Christian texts from the National Library of France], eds. Nicolas Standaert, Ad Dudink, and Nathalie Monnet (Taipei: Taipei Ricci Institute, 2009), 16:432–33; Qian Shifu 錢實甫, ed. *Qingdai zhiguan nianbiao* 清代職官年表 [Chronological tables of Qing officials] (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1980), 1:137.

66 Zhongguo diyi lishi dang'an guan, *Qing gong Neiwufu*, 16:269–270.

new favorite ministers would be the best candidates to defuse the crisis. By informing Qianlong in this manner that Chinese subjects had been "bullying" (*qifu* 欺負) the Beijing Christians—his words—he probably hoped to redirect any responsibility for possible troubles onto the new ministers, and also protect the missionaries. And, indeed, the matter was soon put to rest through imperial intervention. These circumstances show the fragility of the missionaries' position, but also the co-dependence that linked Qing officials and Europeans within the court system.[67]

Later on, Sigismondo mentions that the *Primo Ministro Conte Generalissimo* (Prime Minister Count Supreme General) "Ne Cum" (i.e. Ne gong[ye] 訥公[爺]) or "Ne Zinkung" (i.e. Ne-qin gong 訥親公) was chosen by the emperor as supervisor of the missionaries instead of Haiwang. This was Niuhuru Necin (Ne-qin 訥親, d. 1749), the presiding senior member of the Grand Council in the 1740s, a man quite hostile to the Europeans, and despised by them in return. Sigismondo drily remarked that "he was called 'the little emperor' by all, but he fell from favor quickly"—a reference to his precipitous fall from grace and public execution following his defeat in the first Jinchuan war campaign in 1748.[68]

In spite of this antagonism, however, an incident in 1747 involving Necin seems to show that Sigismondo's patronage network worked its magic once again. When a European priest was arrested in Jiangxi and revealed to have been a guest of Sigismondo in Beijing at an earlier date, secret memorials reached the Board of Rites, and then Necin himself took over the matter at the Grand Council. Sigismondo quickly learned about it, showing that there was little secrecy if one was sufficiently well-connected. While he feared that he might be called to testify and possibly be implicated in hiding a clandestine priest, he was suddenly drafted for three days to fix a musical organ within the palace, and Necin never got back to him. This sudden call to the palace might have been a way for the emperor or some other well-placed prince to save him from prosecution, although we have no evidence to prove it. Sigismondo's skills might have saved him once again.[69]

A few years later another major political figure of the time appears in Sigismondo's letters. This is someone whom we already met in the opening pages of this essay, i.e. Fuheng, a member of the Fuca clan, superintendent of the Imperial Summer Park in 1742, and chief councilor between 1749 and 1770 (Fig. 8).[70]

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67 See for example Sigismondo's letters to A. Miralta in APF, *Procura Cina*, box 15, dated October 11, November 3, and November 10, 1744; July 18, 1745; and especially September 21, 1746.

68 APF, *Procura Cina*, box 15, letter from Sigismondo to Paolino del Giesù OAD, Beijing, December 18, 1748, f. 1r.

69 APF, *Procura Cina,* box 15, letter from Sigismondo to Arcangelo Miralta, Beijing, June 14, 1747, f. 1r.

70 After Necin's disgrace and execution, Fuheng triumphed as a general in the Jinchuan War and became presiding official of the Grand Council; biography in Hummel, *Eminent Chinese of the Ch'ing Period*, 251–252.

Fuheng routinely employed the Europeans: he had the Jesuit painter Brother Ferdinando Bonaventura Moggi (Li Boming 利博明, 1684–1761) go to his palace daily to paint in 1749, and Sigismondo was in fact the very technician who fixed the clocks in his household![71] The Manchu grandee also frequently solicited and received gifts from Sigismondo, including clocks and high-quality Brazilian tobacco, contradicting the image of incorruptible and aloof Grand Councilors offered by Beatrice Bartlett.[72]

These relationships indeed produced the desired result: Fuheng extended his favor by intervening at court on behalf of the missionaries. In 1762, for example, some newly arrived missionaries were accepted by the emperor in audience through his intercession, something that had not happened before. Sigismondo recognized the importance of this favor but also its price: "It is true that [Fuheng] favors 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 labor and effort."[73] In spite of his complaints, however, gifts to "two Counts and the Generalissimo" helped Sigismondo dodge urban planning regulations once more. As the church and his residence were located along the avenue connecting the imperial palace to the Summer Palace, it had to be renovated like all the house and shop fronts along that road 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 to Necin and Fuheng, and dutifully reported the cost of the gifts to Emiliano Palladini, Propaganda's 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.[74]

71 APF, *Procura Cina*, box 15, letter from Sigismondo to A. Miralta, July 26, 1749.

72 Bartlett, *Monarchs*, 185: "Councilors are reported to have regularly refused to receive gifts, entertain guests, or have any social contact with other officials—even to the point of committing the discourtesy of not returning calls. In this way they kept apart and avoided the slightest appearance of any questionable involvement."

73 APF, *Procura Cina*, box 15, letter from Sigismondo to Emiliano Palladini, September 21, 1762, f. 1v.

74 APF, SOCP, vol. 52 (1760–63), f. 666v. Palladini summed up the amount at 326.5 taels, corresponding to ca. 453 Spanish pesos, and asked Sigismondo to get a "written release" from Fuheng to avoid future problems (666r). It is doubtful that Sigismondo would dare to ask for such a document, and even more doubtful that Fuheng would issue it, as it could be used by his enemies as proof of petty corruption.

Figure 8: Portrait of Fuheng (大學士一等忠勇公傅恆) produced by order of Qianlong for display in the Ziguang Ge (Hall of Purple Light) at Zhongnanhai 中南海紫光閣, 1760, jointly painted by Jin Tingbiao 金廷標, Ignaz Sichelbarth SJ (Ai Qimeng 艾啟蒙), and painters from the workshop for the manufacture of enamel.

This precise accounting shows that clocks and tobacco—among the most coveted Western items for Qing elites—were readily used as payment for favors to high officials, and that these amounts were part of the normal costs of "doing business" in Beijing. 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."

Sigismondo's letters mention several other friendly officials from the Hall of Mental Cultivation (Yangxindian 養心殿), which comprised imperial private apartments, treasure houses, painting workshops, some "Regoli" (i.e. Manchu nobles), many eunuchs, some "Governors of Beijing,"[75] a "President of the Supreme Criminal Tribunal" whom he called "*mio amicissimo,*"[76] provincial governors and governor-generals, and the Canton Hoppos.[77] This excerpt from a letter by Sigismondo reveals how such friendships, often started in the imperial workshops, could serve the missionaries for many years:

> I was present when the new Hou Pú [= Hoppo], sent by the emperor to Canton, and with whom I have a friendship of sixteen years as he was always with us in the Palace, was selected by the emperor. I immediately congratulated him, and he offered to assist me in Canton if I wished. I told him that I intended to send two [Chinese] men to fetch the stipend [coming from Europe] for me and for my four companions whom he knew, and he proposed that these [two men] go in his company, especially after he heard that they were Agostino and Giacomo Pao, whom he knew. Moreover, so that in the future I would be provided [with assistance], he allowed one of them to remain with him in his Tribunal in Canton, or near Macao, so that [that servant] could live free of expenses and take care of my business, letters and other matters. He also said that [these servants] could travel with the vessels that come to Beijing four times a year, to avoid expenses. Thus, I am sending them in his company, but covering their own [living] expenses.[78]

75 I.e. *Kieu muen ty tu* = *Jiumen tidu* 九門提督, Captain General of Gendarmerie.

76 Sigismondo, *Epistolario*, letter LV, November 25, 1759, 80. This could be the Manchu Omida (鄂彌達; 1685–1761), who was Secretary of the Board of Punishments (*Xingbu shangshu* 刑部尚書) from 1755 to 1761; see *Ming Qing renwu zhuanji* 明清人物傳記 [Biographical data for Ming and Qing personalities], compiled by the Institute of History and Philology, Academia Sinica (Database, Taiwan, accessed April 24, 2017), http://archive.ihp.sinica.edu.tw/ttscgi/ttsquery?0:0:mctauac:NO%3DNO784.

77 "Hoppo" was the European abbreviation for the Guangdong Maritime Customs Superintendent, *Yue haiguan jiandu* 粵海關監督.

78 Italics mine. APF, *Procura Cina*, box 15, letter from Sigismondo to Emiliano Palladini, Beijing, summer 1766, f. 1r. This Hoppo, named in 1766, was Meinardi's long-time friend, Dekui 德魁, an official of the Imperial Household Department

More research is needed to identify all officials found in the correspondence, but a clear pattern is apparent: they were all "friends" of Sigismondo, who often charmed them with gifts and kept in epistolary contact with them. They reciprocated with patronage. We read in a 1764 letter, for example, that several provincial governors, first met by Sigismondo when they were lower officials in Beijing, requested tobacco from him from their far-away posts: "The Viceroy of the province of Huguang, the Viceroy of Shanxi, the Viceroy of Fujian, the Generalissimo of Yunnan and Sichuan [. . .] are all very good friends, and I keep them attached [to us], as they can benefit us much in their government capacity."[79] Sigismondo concludes this same letter by saying: "Not only in China, but also in Europe, and in Rome itself, with empty hands one cannot accomplish anything."[80] The humble and harassed missionary we saw in his early years had grown by the end of his life into a consummate manipulator of social relations and "friendships" at the highest levels.

Conclusion: "Sotto questa coperta facciamo il fatto nostro"

"Under this cover, we manage our own business" ("Sotto questa coperta facciamo il fatto nostro"): so wrote Sigismondo in 1741 to his brother in Turin.[81] That is, under the cover of mechanical arts, we fulfill our main mission, Christian proselytizing. Here Sigismondo implied that he and his fellow missionaries at court were exploiting their skills to build useful relationships and patronage networks. In this view, they were in fact trying to goad the court for their own ends. Sigismondo Meinardi's correspondence, unlike what we are used to reading in the more guarded and emperor-centric Jesuit correspondence, reveals that within the existing power structure and under the sway of imperial favor, there was a space for Europeans in Beijing to use their cultural and technical skills in an informal exchange to protect their "core business" of religious activities from state intervention, although they could never be sure of this reciprocity.

Missionaries like Sigismondo did this by combining direct imperial patronage with interpersonal networking among lesser actors. Within a clearly asymmetrical balance of power, luxury objects and commodities, which were the very elements of leisurely pursuits, in fact became the medium of gift exchange between divergent interests and authorities, working to weaken Qing imperial prohibitions and laws and to create

in charge of European court artisans with the title of Director; see *Ming Qing renwu zhuanji*, (accessed April 24, 2017): http://archive.ihp.sinica.edu.tw/ttscgi/ttsquery?0:0:mctauac:NO%3DNO8130.

79 APF, *Procura Cina*, box 15, letter from Sigismondo to Emiliano Palladini, Beijing, March 4, 1764, f. 1v. The term "viceroy" (*viceré*) in missionary correspondence usually indicates both Qing governors and governors-general, making identifications difficult.

80 APF, *Procura Cina*, box 15, Sigismondo to Palladini, March 4, 1764, f. 1v.

81 Sigismondo, *Epistolario*, letter no. XVIII, 1 November 1741, 24.

ad hoc arrangements tolerated by the emperor that benefitted the missionaries and their communities.

Sigismondo clearly stated that his skills, the objects he produced, and his occasional gifts, far from being a "temporal matter" (*negozio temporale*), "help me captivate the affection of the emperor and princes, and this benefits the holy Christian religion, and for this reason alone I suffer these labors and toils, i.e. for love of God, and zeal for the conversion of souls."[82] The apparently innocuous and apolitical nature of artisanal skills, and the customary daily politics of gift-giving within a ritualized yet fully commodified economy of exchange among Qing political elites, prevented the status quo of European and Christian presence in China from being upset too violently by the central government's interventions.

Sigismondo's patronage network was layered: it depended on the emperor's personal favor, but operated on multiple levels, including princes, members of the Grand Council, officials of the Imperial Household Department, provincial governors, military commanders, and functionaries in the Canton System. In fact, other minor actors, who deserve further research, enabled this web of patronage, from lower-level officials and clerks within the bureaucracy of both Inner and Outer Courts, to the indispensable mediators within the palace, the eunuchs. The production of leisure goods enjoyed by elites and technical skills useful to the state acted as buffers against ideological purity and mitigated the exertion of state violence against Chinese Christians and missionaries.

The European archival records explored here illuminate to an unusual degree the forging of power relations from the point of view of subordinates within the court system, whose labors indirectly supported the economy of leisure of the imperial elites. A question remains: who was using whom? The answer might be that both sides were confident that they were using the other.

Figures

Fig. 1: *Huangchao liqi tu shi* 皇朝禮器圖式 [Illustrated Regulations for Ceremonial Paraphernalia of the Qing Dynasty], 1766, *juan* 3, 儀器, p. 78a (in *Siku quanshu* 四庫全書 edition), reprinted in Qu Yanjun 曲延鈞 ed., *Zhongguo Qingdai gongting ban hua* 中國清代宮廷版畫 [Printed Images from the Qing-period Imperial Palace in China] (Hefei: Anhui meishu chubanshe, 2002), vol. 17, *juan* 3, 515.

82 Letter from Sigismondo to the Swedish supercargo in Canton, Jean Abraham Grill (1719–1799), Beijing, September 30, 1764, in Jean Abraham Grill Papers (Godegård Archives), Nordiska Museet, Stockholm, SE/NMA/35/EA2/6/7/20. Grill supplied the missionary with parts for clocks and his luxury production in general. I am conducting separate research on the important connection of court missionaries to the Canton System.

Fig. 2: *Huangchao liqi tu shi* 皇朝禮器圖式 [Illustrated Regulations for Ceremonial Paraphernalia of the Qing Dynasty], 1766*, juan* 3, 儀器, p. 81a (in *Siku quanshu* 四庫全書 edition), reprinted in Qu Yanjun 曲延鈞 ed., *Zhongguo Qingdai gongting ban hua*. 中國清代宮廷版畫 [Printed Images from the Qing-period Imperial Palace in China] (Hefei: Anhui meishu chubanshe, 2002), vol. 17, *juan* 3, 519.

Fig. 3: "Screen of Twelve Beauties: A Beauty at Leisure, Watching Cats while Handling Beads" [《雍親王提書堂深居圖屏》, "念珠觀貓"], and detail with clock; Beijing, Palace Museum, Gu6458. From Guo Fuxiang 郭福祥. *Shijian de lishi yingxiang: Zhongguo zhongbiao shi lun ji* 時間的歷史映像: 中國鐘錶史論集时 [Historical images of time: Essays on the history of Chinese clocks] (Beijing: Gugong chubanshe, 2013), 119.

Fig. 4: Collection of the Gugong Museum. From Guo Fuxiang 郭福祥. *Shijian de lishi yingxiang: Zhongguo zhongbiao shi lun ji* 時間的歷史映像: 中國鐘錶史論集时 [Historical images of time: Essays on the history of Chinese clocks] (Beijing: Gugong chubanshe, 2013), 238.

Fig. 5: Collection of the Gugong Museum. From *Ri sheng yue heng: Gugong zhencang zhongbiao wenwu / Aomen* yishu bowuguan 日升月恒: 故宮珍藏鐘錶文物 / 澳門藝術博物館 = *Momentos da eternidade: colecção de relógios do Museu do Palácio / Museu de Arte de Macau = Moments of eternity: timepieces collection from the Palace Museum* ([Aomen]: Aomen yishu bowuguan, 2004), 263.

Fig. 6: Archivio Storico Congregazione per l'Evangelizzazione dei Popoli, o 'de Propaganda Fide', Rome, *Scritture Originali della Congregazione Particolare per l'Indie Orientali e Cina* (SOCP), vol. 54 (1764), f. 270r, "Facciata della porta di mezzo della Chiesa della S. Congregazione in Pekino." Copyright © Archivio Storico di Propaganda Fide.

Fig. 7: Courtesy of Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC. Purchase Smithsonian Collections Acquisition Program and partial gift of Richard G. Pritzlaff, S 1991.47.

Fig. 8: Courtesy of Dora Wong (Huang Huiying), New York. Image from Valerie Steele and John S. Major, *China Chic: East Meets West* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999): 27, image 13. Thanks to Annette Bügener for the image.

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