

# «Robbe d'Europa»: Global Connections and the Mailing of Letters, Money, and Merchandise in the Eighteenth-Century China Mission

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**Abstract:** Manuscript reports and letters written in China by the Propaganda Fide and Jesuit missionaries criss-crossed the oceans and the continents to reach Europe on ships, carts, horses, mules, and palanquins, using both European systems of transportation provided by the various East India Companies and governments, and other local public and private postal arrangements. Missionary agencies also mailed from the West *robbe d'Europa* («European things»), such as silver coins, foodstuff and drugs (chocolate, wine, cheese, olive oil, tobacco), medicines, *galanterie* (luxury items), books, devotional objects and prints. Chinese goods (tea, silk, medicines, luxury items, books) were sent in the opposite direction to please patrons in Europe. Without this multi-layered, imperfect, yet workable mailing system, the flow of information and articles fuelling early modern globalisation and, within it, the Chinese missions, would have been impossible.

**Keywords:** Global Connections, China Catholic Mission, Propaganda Fide, Jesuits

In an irate letter dated 17 September 1768, the Discalced Augustinian Giovanni Damasceno della Concezione Salusti described in detail to his direct superior, the Procurator of the Propaganda Fide Catholic missions in Macao, Emiliano Palladini, a recent mishap in the receipt of the annual funds for the small contingent of Propaganda in Peking (one Discalced Augustinian and two Discalced Carmelites).<sup>1</sup> As customary, a Christian courier and servant of the Peking missionaries called Agostino Pao had been sent on the long journey to Canton and Macao, which usually lasted two months. Once in Macao, Agostino received from the hands of the procurator the annual subsidy for the Peking mission. Agostino then travelled to Canton and, as was custom, left almost the entire sum to a Chinese merchant, Antonio Lieu, who issued him a *lettera di cambio* (bill of exchange) for the amount. Once in Peking, Agostino was going

<sup>1</sup> This episode is recounted in a letter by Giovanni Damasceno to Procurator Emiliano Palladini in Macao, Peking, 17 September 1768 (received in Macao on 25 November 1768), Archivio Storico della Congregazione per l'Evangelizzazione dei Popoli or «de Propaganda Fide», Rome (hereafter: APF), *Procura Cina*, box 18, fol. 1r-3v. For background on the office and functions of the Propaganda Fide procurators in Canton-Macao, see Menegon (2018).

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to track down yet another Christian merchant, a certain Ignatio Li, who would release the amount back to the mission upon presentation of the document. This mechanism, very common in China and Europe at the time, was obviously put in place for safety reasons, so that accidents or robberies would not endanger the precious silver coins, but also to allow these Chinese lay intermediaries to make some profit and reward them with some extra earnings. Christian couriers did receive funding to cover travel expenses from the mission's superiors, but did not get much in terms of wages, and the opportunity to invest the annual subsidy until the time it was due in Peking was a nice way for them to supplement their income and be rewarded for an arduous and time-consuming journey.

This time, however, something went terribly wrong. Agostino did not turn in the entire amount to the Canton Chinese agent of the mission. He kept around 200 *pezze* (*pesos*),<sup>2</sup> the portion of the subsidy meant for the Discalced Augustinian and clockmaker Sigismondo da San Nicola Meinardi, the most senior of the Peking missionaries, who had died in December 1767. Agostino invested the amount in merchandise which he loaded onto the tribute ships travelling to the capital on the Grand Canal. Then he journeyed separately and more rapidly by land, back to his home in Peking. However, as Damasceno put it, a big «*pasticcio*» (mess) occurred. A drought meant that rivers levels were low, and before he arrived in Peking, the custom officer in charge of the expedition decided to transfer the annual «tribute» gifts sent to the imperial palace from the south and all the merchandise of private individuals from the boats onto carts for the last stretch towards the capital, so as to avoid delays. Agostino was of course unaware of this change in plans. The imperial caravan eventually reached the «Ha Ta Muen» i.e. Hade men (哈德門, also called «Hata Gate»), the colloquial name for the Chongwen Gate (Chongwen men 崇文門 lit. «Gate of Respectful Civility»). This was the busiest gate in Peking, due to its proximity to the Tonghui 通惠 river, where entry and departure taxes were charged. Custom officers at the gate started calculating levies on the private merchandise, including Agostino's, and curses soon began to fly between the guards and the merchants crowding the scene, who felt they were being overcharged. The Superintendent of Customs (*sopraintendente de dazij*, probably a title corresponding to *guanshui jiandu* 關稅監督), a certain «Grandee Hao» (= Hao Tajin, i.e. 大人 *daren*), in Damasceno's words,

as a good Chinese, i.e. an excellent thief, realized this was a good moment to earn something, and had all the merchandise seized. He then informed the Emperor that the Cantonese who had brought the tribute to His Majesty were also transporting, under that pretext, a lot of private merchandise, and that they wanted to defraud the customs.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Margiotti (1958, 276n30): «The *real de a ocho* was a Spanish and Portuguese coinage. The Spanish coin [...] was minted in silver and weighed 27 grams. In Spain it was also called *peso duro*, *peso* or also simply *duro*. In Italy, however, it was called *patacca* (from the Portuguese *pataca*), *pezza da otto* or *piastra*».

<sup>3</sup> Giovanni Damasceno to Palladini, 17 September 1768, APF, *Procura Cina*, box 18, fol. 1v.

An order was issued to confiscate all private merchandise and to beat the boatmen who were responsible. Agostino, too, was unable to get anything back and ran to Damasceno to explain the incident. While he did return the subsidy for the living missionaries, he had to finally admit that the amount he had invested, corresponding to the late Sigismondo's subsidy, around 200 *taels* (116 *patacche* = same as *pezze/pesos*), had been lost together with an additional investment of 500 *taels* in personal funds. Damasceno and the Discalced Carmelite Arcangelo di S. Anna decided to pull some strings to recoup the loss to the mission and help Agostino as well. They first contacted an official called Huo, who promised to intercede with the Superintendent of Customs. When he ultimately did not deliver on his promise, the missionaries decided to write a memorial directly to the «Count Prime Minister» (*Conte Primo Ministro*), that is, the presiding senior member of the Imperial Grand Council Fuheng (傅恆, 1722-1770), with whom they were familiar as his suppliers of Western luxury items (especially clocks). But since the property of Agostino and that of the missionaries was mixed up with that of others, «Count Fu», as he was also known to missionaries, declared that he could not help. Moreover, as Damasceno observed, «the Count himself had lost more than anybody else in this incident, and he could not insist on this matter with Superintendent Hao, as he feared that he would be denounced to the emperor for having secretly received presents [from Canton]». <sup>4</sup> All was lost. When he learned this, desperate about this financial disaster, which apparently amounted to a total of 700 *taels*, Agostino started a violent argument with Damasceno. The latter, a fiery Roman prone to anger, admitted that «thankfully God tied my hands so that I would not do something excessive, even if I had the impulse to jump on him three or four times. To think of it, I believe it was the devil who was pushing me to kill him». <sup>5</sup> He ended up firing Agostino from his job at the mission, and chasing him from the church as a «dishonest Christian» (*iniquo Cristiano*). Soon afterwards, Damasceno dramatically relinquished his charge as Vice-Procurator of Propaganda in Peking, asking another senior missionary, the Discalced Carmelite Giuseppe Maria di S. Teresa Pruggmayr, to take over.

Silver coins, bills of exchange, European and Chinese merchandise, investments, transportation by sea, river and land, postal connections, networking among Chinese Christians, missionaries, and Qing officials: these are the ingredients we see in Agostino Pao's failed business scheme. Such a rich array of references makes this tragicomic episode a useful point of entry into the economic and structural mechanisms that supported the Catholic mission at the imperial court, and into the global networks that transferred information, funding, and *robbe d'Europa* (European things) from Europe to China and vice versa.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

## Materiality: State of the Field and the Contribution of the Propaganda Archives

This kind of economic and informational infrastructure had in fact been in place since the beginning of the earlier Jesuit mission in China (1550s). Scholarship on this material aspect of the Jesuit mission is relatively scarce. The main published resources are still Margiotti's chapter on the finances of the China Jesuit mission in *Il cattolicesimo* (1958); Dehergne's notes and studies, as mentioned in his *Répertoire* (1973); Alden's unfinished project on the Jesuit global finances, *The Making of an Enterprise* (1996); Golvers's study of a China Jesuit account book (1999); and references to exchanges of information and objects, as well as finances, in Standaert's *Handbook of Christianity in China* (2001). Only recently have a more focused dissertation and some essays on the economy of the China Jesuit mission been written (Vermote 2013, 2017, 2018, 2019). The final dissolution of the Society of Jesus in the 1770s caused the disappearance of most of the Jesuit economic materials, also as part of a plan of systematic destruction of records within the Portuguese mission, and, to a lesser degree the French mission. This dearth of sources and perhaps also a lack of scholarly interest in numbers and materiality until recently have hindered further research.

The Propaganda records, even if representative of a much smaller «enterprise», are fortunately much richer than what remains from the Jesuit mission. As part of my research on the communities of European missionaries living in Peking in the Yongzheng and Qianlong periods (1723-1799), I have explored the Propaganda sources for traces of a fuller picture of the daily workings of the mission, to illuminate the connection between what I call «materiality» of the mission, and the Europeans' social and political networking at the Qing court. The archives of the Propaganda Procurators have survived and contain a wealth of information on such details. Here I am concentrating on the letters written by the five most prolific Peking missionaries to their economic procurators in Canton-Macao between the 1730s and the 1780s:

- Serafino da S. Giovanni Battista, Discalced Augustinian OAD (?-1742; in Peking 1738-42), who acted unofficially as Vice-Procurator for Peking and the north China missions; miniature painter;
- Sigismondo da S. Nicola OAD (secular surname Meinardi, 1713-1767; in Peking 1738-1767), who continued in Serafino's charge; clock and organ maker;
- Giovanni Damasceno della Concezione OAD (secular name Flavio Giacomo Stefano Salusti or Salustri, 1727-81; in Peking 1762-1781) who was briefly Vice-Procurator and, later on, Bishop of Peking; painter;
- Arcangelo Maria di S. Anna, Discalced Carmelite OCD (secular name Vincenzo Bellotti, 1729-1784; in Peking 1762-1784); clockmaker;
- Giuseppe Maria di Santa Teresa OCD (secular name Josef Maximilian Pruggmayr, 1713-1791; in Peking 1745-1791) long-time Vice-Procurator, and Vicar of the Bishop of Peking at the time of the dissolution of the Society of Jesus; without specific court charges.

It is not possible here to cover all aspects of the mission's materiality, and therefore I will concentrate on the infrastructure and means utilised within the mission to send and receive information and resources, including funds and material objects. I will mainly discuss the postal system that we find described in the primary sources and especially how the Peking missionaries sent mail and parcels to southern China and on to Europe, and how they received them in the Qing capital. I will then explain what this analysis can reveal in terms of network creation and start unveiling the connections between Chinese Christians, missionaries, foreign and Chinese merchants, in Canton and elsewhere, and Qing officials in Canton and at the court of Peking.

#### The Mission's Composite «Postal System» within China

So far, our knowledge of the postal system serving the mission has been fragmentary. Noël Golvers in the *Handbook of Christianity in China* (2001) offered a useful synopsis about Jesuit correspondence. Letters in several European languages could be addressed outward to European addressees (including superiors and members of the order, other orders, the papal bureaucracy, family members, and lay people, including patrons and scientists); or inward within the China mission (to other Jesuits, members of other orders, European merchants and officials in Canton and Macao, and Chinese addressees, in which case, letters were also written in Chinese). Given my interest in the economic and material aspects of the Peking mission, I will mainly concentrate on this «inward correspondence» (Golvers in Standaert 2001, 163-66).

Most of the Jesuit inward-bound correspondence has perished, as it was preserved in the personal archives of individuals, the small archives of single residences (particularly important would have been those of the Peking houses), or in the archives of the French and Portuguese procurators in Canton and Macao. The dissolution of the Society of Jesus spelled the dispersal of those archives and much was wilfully destroyed by the former Jesuits themselves, although letters by former Jesuits who joined the Propaganda mission are preserved in the Propaganda archives. Nevertheless, as Golvers mentions, a reading of extant Jesuit letters can still reveal intriguing details about this internal correspondence, such as

the transmission in open or closed envelopes, «private» parts of some letters (*solli*), the use of regular mail services, both public and private, prescriptions [for those mail services], and the time needed to cover particular distances (Golvers in Standaert 2001, 163).<sup>6</sup>

The letters of the Propaganda missionaries in Peking offer a more comprehensive view of the mechanics of mailing than we have seen so far and, in the

<sup>6</sup> On the mechanics of Jesuit inward mail see also Golvers (1999, 333-34). On the Jesuit communication system, see Friedrich (2011).

following pages, I will try to reconstruct the mailing system in the second half of the eighteenth century from their testimonies.

### Chinese Couriers and Agents

Missionaries often used their own couriers to transport letters and parcels from Peking to Canton-Macao and vice versa. These couriers were mostly Christian men, sometimes employed as servants or sacristans by the missionaries, or simply lay converts, who exercised professions that naturally took them to the south. Sigismondo da S. Nicola, for example, referred in 1747 to «my servant Fan Giovanni, who went to Canton three years ago, and who is practical and prudent»,<sup>7</sup> and in 1763 to another courier, Pao Giacomo, whom he ordered to travel to Macao with two servants of the French Jesuits, so as to journey in good company, be safer in transporting the subsidy, and reduce travel expenses.<sup>8</sup> In fact, the Propaganda missionaries often asked the Jesuits to employ their couriers to transport mail, funds or merchandise. In 1774, for example, Giuseppe Maria di S. Teresa refers to a bundle of letters from Europe delivered in Peking by «the servants of Fr. Le Febvre» (Louis-Joseph Le Febvre, 1706-post 1783), procurator of the French Jesuit mission in Canton (1769-1775).<sup>9</sup> In 1775, the same Giuseppe Maria explained to the Propaganda Procurator, Nicola Simonetti, the relationship he had with one of his trusted courier-servants:

The carrier of this letter is my servant, but not a slave (*mancipio*), obliged to obey all his master's commands. I have deprived myself of his services for more than 6 months, until he can come back from Macao. I had no other who was knowledgeable [of the route] and trustworthy to send there. He undertook this troublesome and delicate journey out of love for me. But he is Chinese, he has a family, and owns some fields bought with my money which [unfortunately] have been sterile in the last three years, sometimes due to the drought, sometimes to the excessive rains. If our couriers do not get any gains from these journeys to Macao, who will want once again to undertake such a long and troublesome trip? I hope Your Reverence can help him, and make him return consoled and in the company of others.<sup>10</sup>

The «consolation» referred to here was a monetary reward. Clearly, this servant depended on the church's support. But the opposite was also true: unless these servants were treated well, they would no longer want to act as couriers

<sup>7</sup> Sigismondo to Procurator Arcangelo Miralta, Peking, 24 September 1747 (received in Macao on 17 November 1747), APF, *Procura Cina*, box 15, fol. 1r.

<sup>8</sup> Sigismondo to Palladini, Peking, 20 September 1763 (received in Macao on 3 December 1763), APF, *Procura Cina*, box 15, fol. 1r.

<sup>9</sup> Giuseppe Maria to Procurator Nicola Simonetti, Peking, 10 April 1774 (received in Macao on 7 July 1774), APF, *Procura Cina*, box 17, fol. 1r. A biographical note on Le Febvre in Dehergne (1973, 315).

<sup>10</sup> Giuseppe Maria to Simonetti, Peking, 18 October 1775, APF, *Procura Cina*, box 17, fol. 2v.

on behalf of Propaganda. Good treatment included a sufficient amount to cover the costs for the journey, which lasted a minimum of two months each way. At the bottom of the same letter was the cost of sending a courier to Macao: 50 *pezze*. Considering that the yearly subsidy of a missionary was 200 *pezze*, the expense for a courier's journey was substantial. Sigismondo mentioned that it was possible to find people who would do it for 20 *pezze*, but that these were not trustworthy messengers; rather, they were uprooted men who, in his words, were «miserably poor individuals, without capital and home».<sup>11</sup>

This reference to messengers investing their own capital reveals another important incentive for couriers: the possibility to earn a living by engaging in commercial activities between Canton and Peking. The same servant of Giuseppe Maria, for example, asked the Propaganda Procurator in 1775 for 300 *patacche* to buy «golden thread» in Macao, which he could then sell at a great profit in Peking.<sup>12</sup> Yet these ventures were not always profitable: «this servant of mine, notwithstanding his being faithful and prudent, is not a son of good fortune», continued Giuseppe Maria, referring to an investment of the subsidy the man had made earlier, which in the end earned him only a few taels and a lot of trouble.<sup>13</sup> The more successful of these Christian «courier-merchants» sometimes also acted as financial agents for the mission in Canton. Several letters, including the one used in the opening section, refer to a certain «Signor Lieu Antonio» as the mission's Chinese agent in Canton. Lieu started his «career» as a courier, travelling between Peking and Canton, transporting the mission's mail and funds. He soon used this position to begin his own business, maintaining a commercial relationship with a Christian correspondent in Peking. He invested the mission's silver in merchandise or, possibly, even commercial loans, and by 1766 had become rich enough to purchase, according to Fr. Arcangelo, «a mandarin's button for 500 taels».<sup>14</sup> Once he had been given that rank, Antonio Lieu refused to carry European letters, probably for fear of being intercepted by the authorities and losing his new official title. By 1776, he was residing mostly in Canton, acting as a sort of «bank» for the missionaries, issuing bills of exchange against the surrender of Spanish silver coins coming from Macao, to be transmitted to the missionaries by his Peking agent (as we saw in the incident narrated by Damasceno). That same year, Giuseppe Maria observed that «[Lieu] earns a lot by receiving there in Canton so much money in advance, which then he makes payable to us so late in Peking», moreover at the 93 carats exchange rate for silver current in Canton, but inferior to the rate accepted in the capital.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Sigismondo to Palladini, Peking, 3 May 1763 (received in Macao on 1 September 1763), APF, *Procura Cina*, box 15, fol. 1v.

<sup>12</sup> Giuseppe Maria to Simonetti, Peking, 5 May 1776, APF, *Procura Cina*, box 17, fol. 2v.

<sup>13</sup> APF, *Procura Cina*, box 17, fol. 2v.

<sup>14</sup> Arcangelo to Palladini, Haidian, 4 June 1766 (received in Macao on 21 August 1766), APF, *Procura Cina*, box 14, fol. 1r.

<sup>15</sup> Giuseppe Maria di S. Teresa to Simonetti, Peking, 5 May 1776, APF, *Procura Cina*, box 17, fol. 2v.

Some Christians may also have used their connections with foreign priests and merchants to obtain positions within the Office of the Hoppo in Canton (the title used by foreigners for the yamen of the Guangdong Maritime Customs Superintendent, *Yuehai guanbu* 粵海關部 or *Yue haiguan jiandu* 粵海關監督), and the staff of the governor-general of Liang-Guang (the «Two Guang» i.e. the provinces of Guangdong and Guangxi), also based in Canton. In 1766, for example, the Manchu Dekui 德魁, an official of the Imperial Household Bureau in charge of European court artisans (*Neiwufu lanzhong* 內務府郎中), was named as the new Hoppo.<sup>16</sup> Arcangelo mentioned him as «our friend [...] with whom] we used to meet and talk daily, and who by nature would not damage us Europeans, and who has offered to help us in all we might need [...]».<sup>17</sup> Two Christians joined his staff and left for Canton at his expense, later acting as informers and messengers for the mission. In 1781 Giuseppe Maria referred to one «Yao Mathia, baptized many years ago in Peking, who then moved with his whole family to Canton to become rich with the Customs».<sup>18</sup> At the end of that year, Yao was in Peking, ready to return to Canton with «recommendation letters to get a job in the Customs offices, written by a mandarin in Peking to the ‘Grand Customs Official’ of Canton, recently sent there by the Emperor».<sup>19</sup> In 1780 we find a reference to mail given to a Christian clockmaker named Luigi Kao, who was included in the retinue of the new governor-general of Guangdong-Guangxi (Gioro Bayansan 巴延三) travelling from the capital to his post in the southern province.<sup>20</sup>

There were far too few Christian servants, however, to support all needs. «What’s the use of money if we lack people to send?» («Ma a che serve il denaro, se manca la gente, non avendo chi mandare?»), asked Giuseppe Maria in 1777.<sup>21</sup> That is why the internal courier system had to be supplemented by other channels of transportation. This included trustworthy merchants who agreed to transmit mail, and especially arrange for the shipping of parcels and merchandise. Some were Christians, others were sympathetic non-Christians.

Arcangelo instructed the procurator in Canton, for example, to send his letters to a «shop of Christian merchants» in Peking, a safe address from where the letters could then be forwarded to the Propaganda residence in the capital.<sup>22</sup> A particularly useful group (probably a different one), connected by business

<sup>16</sup> For some bio-references to Dekui, see the database curated by the Institute of History and Philology, Academia Sinica, Taiwan, *Personal Names Authority Database (Ming & Qing) – Renming quanwei ziliaoku* 人名權威資料庫, ID no. 008130.

<sup>17</sup> Arcangelo to Palladini, Haidian, 12 August 1766 (received in Macao on 9 November 1766), APF, *Procura Cina*, box 14, fol. 1r.

<sup>18</sup> Giuseppe Maria to Procurator Candido Paganetto, Peking, 12 February 1781, APF, *Procura Cina*, box 17, fol. 1r.

<sup>19</sup> Giuseppe Maria to Paganetto, Peking, 12 February 1781, APF, *Procura Cina*, box 17, fol. 1r.

<sup>20</sup> Jean Matthieu de Ventavon ex-SJ to Paganetto, Peking, 5 February 1780, APF, *Procura Cina*, box 16, fol. 1v.

<sup>21</sup> Giuseppe Maria to Simonetti, Peking, 29 June 1777, APF, *Procura Cina*, box 17, fol. 3r.

<sup>22</sup> Arcangelo Maria to Simonetti, Haidian, 29 December 1777, APF, *Procura Cina*, box 14, fol. 1r.



and blood ties to some local Christians, was based in Linqing 臨清, Shandong, the main site of the North China Franciscan mission, around 380 kilometres south of Peking (Mensaert 1958).<sup>23</sup> Linqing was at the juncture of the Wei 衛 river and the Grand Canal, and the location of an important custom house. Due to its strategic position, the town was a centre for the distribution of textiles and grain, and the production of bricks and tiles, including those used in the Forbidden City. The Linqing merchants travelled frequently to Canton via the Grand Canal and also had a shop in Peking. They served the needs of both the Shandong Propaganda Franciscans and the Peking Propagandists. Giuseppe Maria trusted their services and found that their rates of exchange for silver were more advantageous than those offered by Antonio Lieu. Other merchants, linked in the sources to the «Hademen», that is, the main custom house of Peking, seem to have served the needs of both the Jesuits and the Propagandists.<sup>24</sup>

Individual merchants of specialty goods were also sometimes used. One of the most profitable and fashionable Western items in Peking was snuff tobacco from Brazil, imported via Macao and Canton. One of the Christians of the Xitang (Western Church), the Propaganda church near the Xizhi gate 西直門, was a «merchant of European tobacco», a native of Shanxi who had a shop not far from the church itself. He was a close friend of Don Cassio Tai (a Chinese priest trained at the Collegio de' Cinesi in Naples), and could be employed to transport mail to Canton and back.<sup>25</sup>

### Public Postal System

Private couriers were not, however, the only way to mail letters. Missionaries could also employ the imperial postal system, as many officials did, in spite of the imperial prohibition on using it for private correspondence.<sup>26</sup> However, the experience was not always positive, as the official system was slow and letters sometimes got lost. In 1724, for example, Procurator Perroni commented on a sort of strike of the postal military personnel that was delaying the arrival of European letters in Peking, a sign that the system was then used by the mission. Apparently, the Grand Treasurer, newly arrived in Canton, stopped payment to the soldiers guarding the postal stations. The soldiers agreed among themselves to interrupt relaying the mail as usual. After receiving strong complaints from merchants in Peking, the Grand Post Master of Canton intervened with the governor-general of Guangdong-Guangxi to end the disruption.<sup>27</sup> In 1725, the procurator, who was still worried about the loss of letters to Peking, learned after «secret investigations» that the Post Master (*Postiere Maggiore*)

<sup>23</sup> Mensaert (1958).

<sup>24</sup> Giuseppe Maria to Simonetti, Peking, 28 December 1774, *Procura Cina*, box 17, fol. 1r.

<sup>25</sup> Arcangelo to Simonetti, Haidian, 17 May 1777, APF, *Procura Cina*, box 14, fol. 3r.

<sup>26</sup> Wilkinson (2018, 847-48).

<sup>27</sup> «Memorie della Cina», 1724, in APF, *Acta CP*, vol. 5 (1729-30), fol. 87v.

of Canton had discovered one of his low-ranking officials pocketing the money given to official couriers and omitting to register letters in the master books.<sup>28</sup>

The connections of foreign supercargoes with the officially authorised *hong* merchants in charge of supervising them within the Canton System established in 1757 became useful for expediting the mailing process through the official postal system. In October 1766, the emperor issued an edict ordering all letters for the Europeans in Peking to be forwarded by the chief *hong* merchant to the imperial post for delivery, without opening or delaying them. In 1767, missionaries commented that the most reliable channel for sending mail via this new system was the French supercargo and his *hong* merchants: that year, the French Jesuits received their mail from Canton in the record time of 59 days.<sup>29</sup> Ten years later (1776), however, the official mail seemed again to be slow and impractical: to send letters from Peking to Canton via the county magistrate (*ci hien* = *zhixian* 知縣) of Canton delayed their delivery, as they often sat a long time in his yamen.<sup>30</sup>

The secrecy of the mail was also an issue. At a time of conflict between Propaganda and the former Jesuits under Portuguese and French patronage, the Propaganda Procurator, thanks to the protection of the important *hong* merchant Pan Zhencheng 潘振承 (1714-88), better known by his commercial name as «Pam Ki Kua» (Pan Qiguan 潘啓官/觀),<sup>31</sup> decided to use the official post controlled by the county magistrate of Canton only for ordinary dispatches, as they were sent to the Imperial Astronomical Directorate in Peking, still controlled by possibly hostile former Jesuits. Correspondence on delicate matters was instead sent via faithful merchants.<sup>32</sup>

#### *What was mailed? Letters, parcels and merchandise*

The composite mailing system described was used to send not only letters, but also bulkier parcels and merchandise. While the letters could travel faster via land, merchandise moved mostly by river and the Grand Canal, using the slower imperial tribute ships and grain convoys (*liangchuan* 糧船). Sometimes smaller quantities of merchandise could be sent via land on mules, for at least part of the trip. The items sought after in Peking (besides silver ingots or coins) were Western products for consumption by Europeans, which could not be found

<sup>28</sup> Domenico Perroni, "Memorie della Cina dell'anno 1725 per la Congregazione di Propaganda Fide," APF, *Scritture originali della Congregazione Particolare dell'Indie Orientali e Cina* (SOCP), vol. 32 (1726), fol. 286r-v.

<sup>29</sup> See a Chinese-language memorial issued by Fuheng, ordering the implementation of the imperial decree, dated 10 October 1766, in Han (2011, 41-42); on the 59-day speedy delivery, see Sigismondo to Palladini, Peking, 24 September 1767 (received in Canton on 2 November and in Macao 16 November 1767), fol. 1r.

<sup>30</sup> Arcangelo to Simonetti, Haidian, 15 October 1776, APF, *Procura Cina*, box 14, fol. 1v.

<sup>31</sup> Wilkinson (2018, 3112).

<sup>32</sup> Arcangelo to Simonetti, Haidian, 17 May 1777, APF, *Procura Cina*, box 14, fol. 3r.

on the Peking market, or items that could be used as gifts to ingratiate the Qing nobility and the palace personnel.

Foreign foods and beverages were at the top of the list. Bottled wine, and occasionally wine in wooden barrels, travelled in great quantities, to be used for Mass, as well as for daily consumption. *Xeres* (i.e. Jerez) wine was prized for its durability and affordability. Giuseppe Maria observed that producing wine in Peking was possible, but the results were mediocre (he once mentioned he could use it only «to dress the salad», as it had evidently turned into vinegar!),<sup>33</sup> and in the end the cost of buying grapes, processing them and cooking the wine so that it would last was the same as for the *Xeres* available in Canton (2 *massi* per bottle). Bordeaux wine was the preferred choice of the French Jesuits. We also find mention of wines from Portugal, the Canaries and Persia.<sup>34</sup>

The other highly prized foodstuff was chocolate, which was shipped in airtight metal containers and prepared as small cakes, in at least two varieties, namely «European» chocolate (South American cocoa processed in Portugal, Spain or Italy), and Philippine chocolate, considered inferior. Occasionally rare items reached Peking to please the missionaries with some familiar comfort food: beer, cheese, olive oil and coffee. Arcangelo, a native of Milan, for example, wrote to the procurator: «I received the cheese, something I very much appreciated since I was born in a country where there is such abundance of it, but of which I have been deprived for so many years».<sup>35</sup>

Snuff tobacco was by far the most coveted luxury commodity. Initially imported by the Jesuits to the court of the Kangxi emperor in the late seventeenth century, it soon became very fashionable among Qing aristocrats, palace personnel, and literati. The best qualities came from the state of Bahia in Brazil, and there is not a letter to the Propaganda Procurator that does not mention the tobacco varieties most desired by Chinese nobles, such as *mostrinha* or *cidade*.

<sup>33</sup> The comment is found in a letter by Giuseppe Maria to Miralta, Haidian, 28 July 1748 (received in Macao on 10 September 1748), APF, *Procura Cina*, box 17, fol. 2v: «[...] pregandola di volere a mio conto inviarmi una trentina di botteghe di vino portoghese per le messe, mentre il vino da me fatto l'anno passato mi serve per mangiare insalata» [«I am begging you to send me at my expense about thirty bottles of Portuguese wine for the mass, since the wine I made last year is only good for eating salad»].

<sup>34</sup> On *Xeres* wine, see Giuseppe Maria to Palladini, Haidian, 28 July 1769 (received in Macao on 23 October 1769), APF, *Procura Cina*, box 17, fol. 2v; on Bordeaux wine, see Ventavon to Procurator Francesco Giuseppe Della Torre, Peking, 18 September 1783, APF, *Procura Cina*, box 16, fol. 3r; on other wines, see for example «Copia del Diario del Sig. D. Matteo Ripa, mandato a Cantone a Gennaro Amodei», Peking, 25 November 1710–November 1711, APF, SOCP, vol. 26 (1712–1713), fol. 368v. As we read in Margiotti (1958, 376n30), the *mas* was a subdivision of «the *tael*, the Chinese silver currency (*liang* 兩) that was so named by the Portuguese, probably from the Hindi *tola*, later passed on to other Western languages. In 1722 a silver *tael* weighed 16 ounces and was divided into 10 *mas*, 100 *condorins* and 1000 *li* or *casce* (*caixas*). In the same era the silver *tael* was worth 11 *paoli* or Roman *giulii* and almost a *baiocco*. The *mas* was worth 11 *baiocchi* and ½ *quattrino*».

<sup>35</sup> Arcangelo to Palladini, Haidian, 25 January 1765 (received in Macao on 10 June 1765), APF, *Procura Cina*, box 14, fol. 1r.

The missionaries and several Christians from the Peking community engaged in a brisk importation of the precious snuff, which could both be used as a gift to officials, eunuchs and palace servants, and sold on the market by missionaries and by Christian tobacconists for a handsome profit. This became one of the preferred methods to raise cash for the strapped Propaganda mission, and it appears that, as usual, the richer Jesuit mission was importing even larger quantities of it for internal consumption, for gifts and to sell.<sup>36</sup>

Other commodities that travelled towards Peking, but also in the other direction, were medicines and so-called *galanterie* or novelty items. European curiosities that reached Peking as gifts for the emperor, the court, and the open luxury market, included clocks, glassware, French scissors, Indian fine cotton cloth and handkerchiefs, European velvets, and enamels. Missionaries would also send back to their patrons, friends and relatives in Europe, Chinese and Japanese lacquerware, silk cloth, painted fans, Chinese paintings, porcelain sets, and special varieties of tea, such as Pu-erh (*puercha* 普洱茶).

Finally, missionaries also received European books, European writing paper, devotional prints and objects, and liturgical implements, items on whose circulation several scholars have conducted research in recent years. Those missionaries who had technical tasks at court requested and received whenever possible special tools, clockwork parts, mineral colours, chemical ingredients for the production of paints and glassware and so on.<sup>37</sup>

*How was it mailed? Transportation, addressing, packaging, time, and costs*

Means of transportation

In 1774, Giuseppe Maria di S. Teresa replied to the Propaganda Fide procurator in Macao in a somewhat irritated tone:

Here in China we do not have the ease of sending chests and cases like in Europe or in France, where every week anybody can send big trunks with the departing public coach, paying by the pound according to the weight of the container. I wish we had the same service also in Peking and Canton, and in such a case I would certainly send you some parcel, not just containing letters, but also some novelty items. But in these cities, we only have the post, and we can only use it to send letters.<sup>38</sup>

These words echoed some of his earlier comments made in 1771: «we are in China and here the opportunities to send merchandise are rare, so we must

<sup>36</sup> References to tobacco in the Propaganda correspondence are so frequent to defy citation. On the history of tobacco in China, see Benedict (2011); on Brazilian tobacco exports to Asia and China/Macao, see Amaral Lapa (1968, ch. 10, «Comércio com o Oriente», 253-300).

<sup>37</sup> References to these commodities and objects are scattered in the missionary correspondence I have read, and too diffuse and ubiquitous to cite here in full.

<sup>38</sup> Giuseppe Maria to Simonetti, Peking, 10 April 1774 (received in Canton on 7 July 1774), APF, *Procura Cina*, box 17, fol. 1r.

avail ourselves of any possible occasion offered to us». <sup>39</sup> These comments clarify that letters and merchandise had to take two different routes and that opportunities for shipping large parcels did not arise frequently. To send letters in small containers or wooden cases to save on postal fees, as the procurator had done, thereby irritating Giuseppe Maria, was a mistake, as it entailed sending the parcel with the slow tribute boats, rather than the faster private couriers or even the official postal system which only transported letters. Indeed, to send parcels, trunks and chests it was necessary to use the aforementioned «grain boats» or tribute boats (*leam chuen* i.e. *liangchuan*), or take advantage of special expeditions, such as the arrival of new missionaries directed to the imperial court. Transportation by mule was exceedingly expensive compared to the boats. In 1771, for example, the agent Antonio Lieu refused to arrange for the transport of two cases of wine from Macao to Peking because the cost of having them sent by mule, plus the custom duties, would have exceeded the value of the wine being shipped. <sup>40</sup> Moreover, travelling by land to Peking would have made it impossible to deliver some of that wine to the missionaries of Linqing in Shandong. To send a chest to Shandong from Peking was troublesome and required a cart and two men for a journey of ten days each way. The best way was to separate what was needed in Shandong from what was going to Peking and ship the chests for Shandong via Jiangxi, where they could be sent by canal and reach Linqing directly. In one instance, the sea passage along the coast to the port of Tianjin, three days away from Peking, was used to send some wine at the cost of 20 *pezze/pesos*, reaching Peking intact well before the arrival of the riverine tribute ships. <sup>41</sup>

#### Addressing and packaging

Preparing the letters and parcels so that they could be easily transported and reach their addressees was important as well. A bundle of letters, for example, was improperly prepared by Procurator Palladini in 1768 as a «large square parcel, too wide for the official post», and could not be sent with the imperial post because «parcels have to be prepared according to the Chinese fashion, long and narrow, with an address in Chinese». <sup>42</sup> The addresses were relatively generic, as was common in pre-modern times, yet precise enough to guarantee delivery. Arcangelo, for example, provided two Chinese addresses in Peking to the procurator: the first was the Propaganda church, that is, the Xitang (西堂, Western Church); the second was the address of the Peking shop of the Chris-

<sup>39</sup> Giuseppe Maria to Palladini, Peking, 29 December 1771 (received in Macao on 28 March 1772), APF, *Procura Cina*, box 17, fol. 1r.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, fol. 1r.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, fol. 1v.

<sup>42</sup> Giuseppe Maria to Palladini, Haidian, 27 February 1769 (received in Macao on 17 April 1769), APF, *Procura Cina*, box 17, fol. 1r.

tian merchants. A cover with the merchants' address in Chinese characters had to be pasted over the bundle. Once it reached the Peking shop, the merchants would open the bundle, to find a second cover with the church's address. Moreover, the name of the church, «Xitang», had to be specified. To merely use *Tianzhutang* (天主堂, i.e. Catholic Church) was confusing and, in the past, bundles addressed that way had been sent to the nearby Portuguese Jesuits of the Nantang (南堂, Southern Church), provoking delays and possible leaks of sensitive information. Vague addresses could indeed delay delivery and, on one occasion, «the poor guy of the post wasted lots of time till he could find the shop of the tobacconist to whom it had been directed».<sup>43</sup>

In the opposite direction, and when using the official post, it was necessary to find an agent in Canton to forward the mail to Macao, since letters would reach Canton, but no further than the postal yamen. The procurator had to send a cover in Chinese to Peking in advance, specifying the address in Macao for the commercial agent in the capital to use when returning mail in the opposite direction.

Bundles also had to be packaged to avoid drawing attention to them and thus pass as regular Chinese mail. Giuseppe Maria reminded the procurator «not to put the [European-style] seal outside the Chinese bundle as you did in your last letter, because that attracts attention in this postal office [of Peking], when they see a bundle of letters addressed to a Chinese with a European seal».<sup>44</sup> Obviously, Christianity was still a forbidden sect, and the Chinese government was somewhat suspicious of foreign intentions. Better to avoid any pretext for the mail to be intercepted.

### Delivery times

Delivery times differed depending on the route chosen, the specific historical circumstances and accidents of all kinds. Two conscientious procurators from the 1740s to the 1760s, Arcangelo Miralta and Emiliano Palladini, always noted on letters received from Peking the arrival date in Macao. We thus have an approximate idea of the average time it took for letters to reach the south. Typically, mail took just over two months to reach Canton and four to six days from Canton to Macao. The opposite route would take the same time, although delays or loss were possible due to many factors.

Complaints about loss of letters are to be found, though not in great number, during the tenures of Miralta and Palladini as procurators. The late 1750s to the mid-1760s, however, was a period of more irregular communication, especially after the Qing central government forbade direct correspondence between Ma-

<sup>43</sup> Quotation from Giuseppe Maria to Simonetti, Peking, 11 January 1778, APF, *Procura Cina*, box 17, fol. 1r; see also Arcangelo to Simonetti, Haidian, 14 January 1778, APF, *Procura Cina*, box 14, fol. 1r and Arcangelo to Paganetto, Haidian, 9 February 1779, APF, *Procura Cina*, box 14, fol. 1r.

<sup>44</sup> Giuseppe Maria to Simonetti, Peking, 27 September 1777, APF, *Procura Cina*, box 17, fol. 1r.

cao and Peking, ordering that all mail first be sent to the governor-general in Canton.<sup>45</sup> In that period, letters sent by Procurator Guglielmi in 1757 and 1758 via the official post were only received in Peking in 1760. In Guglielmi's case, the matter was made worse by the procurator's chronic lack of response to requests from the Peking missionaries. Guglielmi, a sloppy and dishonest procurator – the man whom Palladini had to remove from his post by secret order from Propaganda immediately after disembarking in Macao – quite likely did not reply to many letters from Peking, and possibly destroyed some of those he did receive to eliminate traces of complaints about his conduct (Guglielmi was accused of concubinage and engaging in private commerce in Macao).<sup>46</sup>

Many more factors played a role in delivery times. Chinese festivals delayed the arrival of post, especially during the New Year closure of the imperial administrative offices. Bureaucratic sloth in the office of the Canton county magistrate was blamed for delays. Corrupt servants of the missionaries would not deliver the letters to the post and pocketed the copper coins of the fees. Tensions with foreign merchants in Macao and Canton and wars in Europe and the colonies (for example the Anglo-French wars in the late 1750s and 1760s, and the American Revolutionary War in the 1770s) made the arrival of mail rare from Europe, but also within China. In spite of this, the number of letters travelling back and forth was still remarkable.<sup>47</sup>

### Costs

A fixed amount was charged for each letter sent or received through the official postal system. In the 1730s, for example, the amount was 300 copper coins (*ciappe*) per letter, corresponding to two *massi* of good silver. Another 300 coins had to be paid to a private courier, who would spend an entire day delivering the bundles from the postal relay station to the Propaganda churches, one in the city and the other in Haidian, close to the Suburban Imperial Palace of Yuanmingyuan 圓明園. In order to ensure prompt delivery, postal officials were also given

<sup>45</sup> Li Shiyao, governor-general of Guangdong and Guangxi, observed in a memorial dated 14 December 1759: «[...] it is reasonable that matters regarding foreigners should fall under the jurisdiction of local officials, and that [foreigners] should be prohibited from hiring locals when exchanging correspondence»; *Zhongguo diyi lishi dang'an* (1999, I:336).

<sup>46</sup> Palladini, «Supplemento alle Memorie [...] per l'anno 1761» APF, SOCP, vol. 52 (1760-63), fol. 400v.

<sup>47</sup> On Chinese festivals delaying the arrival of the post, see Rinaldo Maria di S. Giuseppe OCD to Miralta, Haidian, 1 March 1731 (received in Macao on 3 April 1731), APF, *Procura Cina*, box 29, fol. 1r; on servants embezzling money, see Serafino to Miralta, Haidian, 30 November 1738 (received 24 January 1739), APF, *Procura Cina*, box 30, fol. 1r; on the Anglo-French war's impact on mail, see Giuseppe Maria di S. Teresa to Simonetti, Peking, 9 September 1778, APF, *Procura Cina*, box 17, fol. 2r-v: «This year the French [Jesuit] Fathers did not receive the gazettes of the year 1776, which every year were sent to them from Europe, so we know nothing new of that year, principally due to the War of the English with their American subjects».

gifts three times a year, in the first, fifth and eighth months. The Jesuits usually tipped them generously with two *taels* each time. The poorer Propaganda mission, however, could not afford it and, in 1738, the Augustinians Serafino da S. Giovanni Battista and Sigismondo da S. Nicola blamed the stinginess of the Lazarist Teodorico Pedrini for the loss or delay of their letters, attributing it to «a certain Genoese liberality which is also rooted in the heart of those from the Marche» (in Italy, the Genoese are known for being stingy, and Pedrini was from the Marche region [...]).<sup>48</sup> When, on the fifth moon, the postal officials did their round of the Peking churches to collect gifts, Pedrini only gave them a tip of 500 copper coins. The postal officials commented: «if their letters will not be mailed or will get lost, they should not complain». Serafino then begged the Jesuits to forward also his own mail to Macao via their contacts.<sup>49</sup>

### Conclusion

My preliminary conclusions below suggest why researching these issues does indeed matter.

First, the reconstruction of the way the infrastructure for sending merchandise and letters worked reveals the degree of connectivity of missionaries within China, with Macao and with Europe. While sending and receiving letters to and from Europe could take years, within China the flow of information was generally much more continuous and abundant. This is no surprise, perhaps, but so far, we have had little precious proof to assert it with certainty. Noël Golvers already commented that the rate of survival of letters going to Europe (at least official ones), which were written in several copies and sent via several routes, is in fact remarkable. When we consider an internal administrative archive like that of the procurator of Propaganda, we realise that the quantity of correspondence reaching and exiting that office kept the procurators and their assistants quite busy. This also gives us a sense of how much must have been lost from the Jesuit mission's administrative archives.

Second, from references in the letters by Peking missionaries we have positive proof, including names, dates and circumstances, of specific instances of how mission networks were built, information was circulated, and gifts were exchanged. This was done to create connections (*guanxi* 關係) with Chinese government officials at the highest level, but also at lower levels, with supercarries of East India Companies, with Chinese merchants and Chinese Christians.

Finally, the importance of Chinese support in keeping this system working cannot be understated. Without Chinese converts acting as couriers and agents and without the support of imperial officials in key positions within the Impe-

<sup>48</sup> Sigismondo to Miralta, Peking, 26 August 1738 (received 4 October 1738), APF, *Procura Cina*, box 15, fol. 1r.

<sup>49</sup> Serafino to Miralta, Haidian, 25 August 1738 (received 4 October 1738), APF, *Procura Cina*, box 30, fol. 5r.



rial Household Bureau and other offices, mail and merchandise would have been impossible to ship.

The missionaries' technical and artistic skills deployed among officials in the capital (besides the emperor), but also material incentives, including the importation of luxury items (from clocks to Brazilian tobacco), were the lubricant that oiled the system. Ideas flowed, but only thanks to the very *materiality* of the system undergirding circulation, something that, as scholars, more often interested in ideas, we sometimes tend to forget.<sup>50</sup>

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