



A DISCUSSION ON A PORTUGUESE EMBASSY AT THE OLD SUMMER PALACE

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Abstract

From 1752 to 1753, by the order of King Joseph I, the Portuguese embassy led by Francisco Pacheco de Sampaio was dispatched to China. This article attempts to use several Chinese and Portuguese historical documents to clarify historical facts with emphasis on the experience of Pacheco's embassy at the Old Summer Palace. After the Portuguese embassy arrived in China, Emperor Qianlong met with it for five times at the Old Summer Palace. In these audiences, the two parts played their respective roles, fulfilled their respective tasks, and to a certain extent, achieved their respective aspirations. This historical dialogue between China and Portugal was a significant attempt to promote the knowledge and understanding between the two parts.

Keywords

Embassy of Francisco Pacheco de Sampaio, Old Summer Palace, Sino-Portuguese relations

1. Introduction

During the Ming and Qing dynasties, Portugal dispatched several diplomatic missions to China. During the reign of Emperor Zhengde in the Ming Dynasty, the embassy led by Tomé Pires reached Beijing. In the Qing Dynasty, various Portuguese embassies came to China: from 1667 to 1670, the embassy of Manuel de Saldanha was sent to China by order of King Afonso VI; from 1725 to 1728, the embassy of Alexandre Metelo de Sousa e Menezes was dispatched to China by order of King John V; from 1752 to 1753, the embassy of Francisco Pacheco de Sampaio was sent to China by order of King Joseph I.

This paper aims to take the embassy of Francisco Pacheco de Sampaio to China during the reign of Emperor Qianlong as the object of study, attempting to use various Chinese and Portuguese historical documents to clarify historical facts, with focus on the embassy's experience at the Old Summer Palace. Previous studies on this embassy are relatively insufficient, which pave the way for further research.

On September 7, 1752, through a memorial submitted by Aligun, the Governor-General of Guangdong and Guangxi provinces, Emperor Qianlong was informed that the Portuguese embassy had already arrived in Macao and was awaiting the imperial order to travel to Beijing. On April 30, 1753, the embassy departed from Macao for Beijing in accordance with the imperial order. On May 4, the Ambassador Francisco Pacheco de Sampaio met with Emperor Qianlong in the Palace of Qianqinggong in the Forbidden City, presenting the Portuguese royal letter. During the 39-day stay in the imperial capital, the embassy visited several notable places such as the Temple of Heaven, the Imperial Observatory, and the Old Summer Palace, among others.

In 1753, the Pacheco Embassy entered the Old Summer Palace five times. The first visit was on May 11, with the main purpose of presenting royal gifts. The second visit took place on May 18. The third visit was on May 27, highlighted by the acceptance of the official letter from the imperial court. The fourth visit occurred on May 28, originally intended as farewell to the emperor. The fifth visit was on June 6, for the purpose of attending the Dragon Boat Festival celebrations.

2. The First Audience of the Pacheco Embassy at the Old Summer Palace

The first imperial audience at the Old Summer Palace took place on May 11. On this day, the main activity of the Portuguese mission was to present 'Fang Wu', the gifts offered by the King of Portugal. There was a total of 48 loads of gifts, including gold silk fabrics, silver silk fabrics, silver utensils, automatic lighters, various spices, wines, medicinal oils, swords, precious stones, snuff boxes, glass vases, among others (Yan, 2003, p.214).

According to the French Jesuit Jean Newielhe, the senior officials appointed to accompany the embassy led the ambassador to an inner hall, where dinner was served to him (Newielhe, 1754, p.117). Chinese documents also mention this: a banquet was held in the Audience Hall (First Historical Archives of China et al., 1999, p.266). At the dinner, the ambassador took the first seat, followed by the embassy's 'secretary-in-chief', the 'steward', and the renowned Jesuits Augustin von Hallerstein and Giuseppe Castiglione. On the opposite side were five senior officials. In another hall, the other missionaries serving at the court were invited by the emperor, including Michel Benoist, the painters Ignaz Sichelbarth and Jean-Denis Attiret, the mechanics Gilles Thébault and Sigismondo, and the future Director-General of the Imperial Observatory, Félix da Rocha. During the banquet, eunuchs brought the gifts from the King of Portugal into the hall, and the emperor accepted all of them in public (Newielhe, 1754, p.117). In accordance with the Chinese custom, this was a great honor for the guests.

After the dinner, the ambassador and his entire entourage were taken to a large field with many tents, where another ceremonial banquet was held. The emperor and the senior officials appeared solemnly to the sound of music. In accordance with the Chinese ritual, the emperor sat on his throne to the north, while the ambassador, the embassy's secretary, the steward, Castiglione and Hallerstein sat to the west. On the east side were the invited nobles and senior officials (Newielhe, 1754, p.117). The place where this ceremonial banquet was held was called Shangaoshuichang (High Mountain and Long River), where the emperors of the Qing Dynasty hosted banquets for foreign guests. Emperor Qianlong once wrote: "Shangaoshuichang is located in the southwest part of the imperial garden, with a flat and gentle terrain, where there are several multi-story buildings. (...) It is the place where ceremonies and banquets are held for foreign peoples and where performances are staged."

During the banquet, the emperor personally filled Pacheco's cup: "I was summoned to the throne (...) the emperor handed me a golden cup filled with wine with his own hand, telling me to drink as much as I could; I drank a little (Pacheco, 1756, p.76)." Decades later, such ceremonies also drew the attention of the British ambassador Lord Macartney, who recounted that Emperor Qianlong "then, with ceremony, personally served each of us a cup of warm wine with his own hand, and we immediately drank a sip in front of the emperor." Henry Kissinger argued that the emperor's act of personally serving the drink was one of the 'Five Bait Strategies', concept used by the rulers of the Han Dynasty to deal with the 'barbarians', namely: "For those who submit as vassals, the emperor summons them to entertain together. He personally serves them drinks and also hands them food with his own hand, aiming to win their hearts (Kissinger, 2012, p.17)."

In addition to the ceremonial banquet, the imperial court also organized for the embassy dance, opera, and acrobatics performances, among other shows, as well as boat tours of the palace. The official in charge of receiving the embassy was Prince Fuheng, brother of the empress and a highly influential figure during the reign of Emperor Qianlong – in other words, the emperor's 'brother-in-law and chief favorite minister' (Pacheco, 1756, p.76). Prince Fu had been overseeing matters related to the embassy since its arrival in China.

The reception which the embassy received during its first audience at the Old Summer Palace was in fact very similar to the most splendid and prominent festive activities held there during Qianlong's reign: the 'Three Lantern Festival Banquets', which were held at Shangaoshuichang to demonstrate the imperial generosity toward foreign guests. Traditionally, when foreign guests were invited to banquets, the emperor personally presided over the ceremony. During the banquets, rituals such as the offering of drinks, the presentation of food, and the distribution of imperial gifts would take place. While dining, there were also various dance, music, and acrobatics performances (Kan, 2023, p.113). On the other hand, the Pacheco Embassy received distinct treatment compared to other guests. The most notable example was the construction of the Xieqiqu architectural complex, which Emperor Qianlong had rushed to complete. The ambassador's impression of this complex was as follows: guided by Prince Fu and other senior officials, "we proceeded to the house built to the design of the Fathers, titled Western-style Buildings, where the natural talent of the architect must compensate for what the buildings lack; it had been completed in great haste, due to the emperor's great effort to ensure I saw it in its final perfection. (...) The first hall was adorned with many European furnishings, most of which were inappropriate; but all these incongruities were offset by the excellent ceiling paintings, works of the great Castiglione and other Fathers serving at the palace (Pacheco, 1756, p.78)." Thus, it is clear that Pacheco knew the court had hurried to finish the work specifically for the Portuguese embassy. However, his comments on both the interior and exterior style of the architectural complex were not accurate. According to recent researches, regarding Xieqiqu, the central pavilion and the two curved wings surrounding the lake formed a stage-style backdrop, imitating 17th-century Italian architecture. This type of design was still popular in Europe during the century (Kan, 2015, p.123). In terms of Pacheco's perspective, consideration must be given to the relatively delayed introduction and acceptance of fashionable European architectural styles in Portugal in that period, as well as Pacheco's own experiences and knowledge. Even so, when Prince Fu asked the ambassador whether he had ever seen such things in Europe, the latter replied that there were many things in the palace he had never seen before, for the quantity of items was truly vast and all were of the highest quality (Yan, 2003, p.214). The atmosphere between the host and the guest was of complete harmony.

3. The Embassy's Other Four Audiences at the Old Summer Palace

The embassy's second audience at the Old Summer Palace took place on May 18. On that day, the emperor attended the event again at the Hanjingtang Hall, hosting another banquet for the embassy. The hall was another venue traditionally used to receive foreign guests and hold ritual ceremonies. In fact, it was also designed with exotic tastes, incorporating Western elements such as panoramic paintings ('Tongjinghua') that used perspective techniques, which aligned with the emperor's wishes. Chinese archives contain the following records: on the 5th day of the second lunar month in the 14th year of Qianlong's reign, the court ordered Castiglione to sketch a panoramic painting for the Jifengxuan Pavilion in accordance with the style of the panoramic paintings in the Hanjingtang Hall (Ju, 1988, p.57). The ceremony on May 18 was similar to that on May 11, with the only difference being that the banquet on May 11 was held inside a tent, while the one on May 18 was held inside a hall (Newielhe, 1754, p.118). The emperor explained to Pacheco the reason for inviting him to the palace again: "(...) and after receiving wine and tea with the customary ceremonies, he called me over and did the same as on the first occasion. He further told me that, according to the laws of his Empire, the supreme court should host me three banquets; however, he wished to spare me from the court, and instead had invited me to this second dinner, asking me to remember the act, to relate it to Your Majesty as soon as I came into your presence (Pacheco, 1756, p.81)." During the second audience at the palace, the emperor gave Pacheco a snuff box and authorized him to visit the palace again.

On May 27, the ambassador entered the Old Summer Palace for the third time to receive the emperor's official letter to King Joseph I and other gifts that had not yet been presented. The recipients of the gifts included the King of Portugal, the ambassador, the vice ambassador, and other members of the entourage.

As the departure date was set for May 28, the ambassador entered the Old Summer Palace for the fourth time with the intention of bidding farewell to the emperor. During the audience, the emperor asked Pacheco to sit beside him and presented him with a 'Jui', a type of jade artifact that symbolized good fortune. Pacheco believed that to be the final audience (Newielhe, 1754, p.118).

On May 30, Pacheco himself did not enter the palace. However, Castiglione came to inform him that the emperor wished to keep a portrait of Pacheco in the palace and requested permission for Jean-Denis Attiret to paint him. By imperial order, Attiret designed and painted the portrait on May 29 and went to the palace on May 30 to finish it. Upon seeing the portrait from a distance, the emperor declared: "It is the ambassador." In the portrait, Pacheco was dressed in the attire he wore for the audiences, with a hat on his head. This portrait was completed after the embassy departed, and the emperor immediately ordered it to be placed above his throne in the palace (Newielhe, 1754, p.118). The emperor's order to have Pacheco's portrait painted was indeed unusual and outside the customary rituals. The imperial ruler intended to keep a visual memento of the ambassador. Furthermore, it is worth noting that the issue of wearing a hat also contained a cultural clash between the East and the West. In the official report of Ambassador Alexandre Metelo de Sousa e Meneses, who came to China during the reign of Emperor Yongzheng, it is written: "if wearing a hat in the presence of superiors is discourteous among Europeans, in China it is discourteous to be uncovered in the presence of superiors." The case of Pacheco's portrait also confirms this.

The embassy's fifth and final entry into the Old Summer Palace was on June 6, which was the Dragon Boat Festival. Invited by the emperor, the ambassador, his family, his attendants, and the Fathers went together to the palace to attend the festival celebrations at Fuhai Lake. The day was filled with festive activities. The first event was a banquet. Afterwards, the ambassador, the secretary, and the steward were led to an inner hall, where the emperor awaited them and engaged in a friendly conversation. The emperor gave the ambassador additional gifts, including a highly prized large porcelain vase that had stood beside the throne, a box containing a small book with paintings and poems designed by the emperor himself, a snuff box he used daily, and a fan. Newielhe commented that the greatest value of all was that the gifts had been presented by the emperor's own hand (Newielhe, 1754, p.119). According to another source, the emperor emphasized: "This (the small book) was painted and written by my own hand, something that even nobles and senior officials could not obtain (Yan, 2003, p.215)." Following this, the emperor authorized the embassy to leave Beijing on June 8 and expressed his sorrow at their departure. Subsequently, in accordance with the court's arrangements, Pacheco moved to the designated location to watch the aquatic performances. On this occasion, Pacheco's seat was placed beside the senior officials and nobles. The scene he witnessed was impressive: "(...) a great number of boats circling the lake, following one another with enough space to reveal all that was remarkable in the craftsmanship, magnificence, and grace with which they were made; on nearly all of them were displays alluding to our farewell, and at the same time, an unceasing display of fireworks was set off, which retained their brilliance on the water, shaped into various forms of fish and birds that did not differ greatly from their real counterparts in movement and form (Pacheco, 1756, p.87)." It is fair to say that the court went to great lengths to extend its hospitality as a host.

The embassy departed from Beijing on June 8, 1753.

Conclusion

The Portuguese embassy led by Pacheco was the first European mission to be received at the court of Emperor Qianlong. Beyond the missionaries who resided permanently in Beijing, the embassy's members became the first European witnesses to the luxurious Western-style Buildings of the Old Summer Palace—works of which the emperor was immensely proud. As the Old Summer Palace was one of the residences and administrative centers of the Qing emperors for nearly the entire year, as well as a key venue for receiving foreign guests, Emperor Qianlong's decision to host the Portuguese embassy there on multiple occasions, specifically at Shangaoshuichang and Hanjingtang Hall, clearly indicated that he had specific motives. Unfortunately, the Portuguese embassy seemingly failed to recognize the palace's significance as the center of Chinese political affairs at the time. For various reasons, it was truly difficult for European missions to gain a clear understanding of the affairs of this ancient empire.

By the end of this historic encounter, both parts ultimately expressed a relatively 'satisfied' attitude. From the ambassador's perspective, the emperor clearly bestowed numerous honors and courtesies. For instance, Prince Fu once noted: "His Majesty treats the ambassador with great pomp. It is impossible to treat him better. He has never treated foreigners from other countries in this way (Yan, 2003, p.215)." Another example was the embassy's authorization to enter the Old Summer Palace bearing sword, "a privilege that has never been granted before (Newielhe, 1754, p.117)." In contrast, during the reign of Emperor Yongzheng, the Portuguese ambassador Alexandre Metelo de Sousa e Meneses was received strictly in accordance with protocol: "(...) it was further reported to the Board of Rites that the gifts were distributed in front of the Wumen Gate. In the fifth year of Yongzheng's reign, three banquets were held at the Board (First Historical Archives of China et al., 1999, p.273)." This treatment followed the normal procedures of Chinese tributary diplomacy. However, Ambassador Pacheco received what appeared to be a sincere invitation from the emperor to remain for a few more days in China, a gesture that went beyond mere courtesy.

One incident that indirectly evidenced the emperor's exceptional treatment was the following: on June 1, the emperor appointed the Portuguese Father Félix da Rocha as the Vice Director of the Imperial Observatory, a sixth-rank official position. Immediately afterwards, the emperor asked Castiglione whether the ambassador was satisfied with this appointment. Castiglione replied in the affirmative. The emperor explained that he had taken this step to please the ambassador, as Félix da Rocha was his compatriot (Newielhe, 1754, p.118). This aligned with what the emperor stated in the imperial letter sent to the King of Portugal: "One Portuguese working in the imperial capital has been promoted, thus comforting the distant yearning of yours." The primary reason for Félix da Rocha's promotion was precisely his nationality, which made the emperor's fondness for the Portuguese embassy abundantly clear.

Friendly relations between China and Portugal were maintained. The Qing government continued to treat Western residents in China—particularly the Portuguese—with benevolence, policy that had been established prior to Pacheco's departure. Nevertheless, the Portuguese embassy's fundamental objectives—preserving the Catholic mission in China, which was facing difficulties at the time, and defending Portuguese commercial interests in Macao—never became topics of negotiation between the two parts during the embassy's stay in China. These issues were deliberately 'forgotten', a result of careful deliberation and emulation of the example set by Ambassador Alexandre Metelo de Sousa e Meneses. The ambassador who visited the court of Emperor Yongzheng had consulted the missionaries established in China—especially those residing in the capital—about his concerns. Due to their familiarity with China's political system, these missionaries provided highly effective suggestions for the embassy's diplomatic strategy. As early as the end of the first audience at the Old Summer Palace, Pacheco informed the emperor: "at the moment, I had just completed all the business that had brought me into your presence; having delivered the letter and the gifts, all that remained is for Your Majesty to set the date on which I should depart for Macao (Pacheco, 1756, p.77)." He sought to reassure the emperor, dispel any suspicions, and demonstrate that he had no other agenda. Subsequently, the interactions between the two parts became increasingly harmonious and amicable. The emperor intended to display his generosity and hospitality, which afforded Pacheco more opportunities to visit the Old Summer Palace. Naturally, against the backdrop of religious incidents in Fu'an and Suzhou at that time, if the Portuguese ambassador had raised these sensitive issues in front of the emperor, his mission in China would have been abruptly terminated. Given the rarity of European diplomatic missions to China of the time, the European information hubs such as Amsterdam and Cologne monitored the progress of the Portuguese embassy in China, which required Pacheco to act with extreme caution. Everything the embassy did had to satisfy Emperor Qianlong; otherwise, Portugal's reputation in European public opinion would have been seriously damaged.

At the same time, for the Qing government, the entire process of the Pacheco embassy's stay in China conformed perfectly to China's traditional diplomatic system. The Chinese diplomatic logic and actions were based on the strict observance of a tributary system. The treatment extended by the emperor was intended to demonstrate China's superiority. All actions related to the Pacheco Embassy were confined to the rituals established by the tributary system and cultural tradition. This stable situation was not altered by any specific event. As the French

Jesuit Jean-Joseph Marie Amiot explained to the British ambassador Lord Macartney, “China had always treated foreign missions through the tributary system. There was no exception for any European missions, and their duration of stay was highly limited. Even the Portuguese embassy, which received the best treatment, only remained for 39 days (Wang, 2023, p.160).” However, the global order of the time was undergoing rapid change. The ancient tributary system had already begun to show its limitations.

For Emperor Qianlong, the Pacheco Embassy served as a witness to his grandeur, and his favorable treatment of the embassy was meant to be disseminated far and wide. As recorded in Chinese archives, when Pacheco returned to Canton, he emphasized: “By the benevolence and protection of the emperor, I will return to my country soon, and proclaim the boundless grace of the emperor so that all nations may know of his kindness and express their gratitude (First Historical Archives of China et al., 1999, p.275).” The emperor’s friendly treatment was precisely based on this, and in a sense, it was a form of gratitude for the Portuguese embassy’s long journey and its recognition of his authority. On the other hand, a series of religious incidents occurred during this period, making the situation for Catholicism in China increasingly difficult. Nevertheless, this Portuguese ambassador, who had appeared in front of the emperor and engaged in various conversations, did not mention a word about it. The many courtesies the emperor bestowed on Pacheco were, to a certain degree, a way of thanking and rewarding his conduct. On one occasion, the emperor commented on Pacheco to the missionaries: “I believe that he (the ambassador) is an intelligent man, highly educated, and very capable of handling important affairs (Yan, 2003, p.216).”

The Pacheco Embassy was the last diplomatic mission received by the Qing government before the visit of George Macartney’s embassy. During the Portuguese embassy’s stay at the Old Summer Palace, China and Portugal fulfilled their respective tasks and achieved their respective aspirations to a certain extent. One scholar commented on the Dutch embassy to China in 1795 as follows: “The mission of this embassy was much more ceremonial than substantive (Wang, 2010, p.189).” The Pacheco Embassy was no different. This was also, to a certain degree, a common characteristic of European missions to China before the late Qing. In summary, the historic dialogue between China and Portugal which took place between 1752 and 1753 was a significant attempt to foster knowledge and understanding between the two nations at the farthest ends of the Eurasian continent.

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ⁱ In this area, it is necessary to note the following works: Ding, Q. (1992). "Portuguese Embassies to China". *Forbidden City Journal*; Huang, Q. H. (2006). *History of Sino-Portuguese Relations*. Huang Shan Publishing; Feng, E. K. (2018). "Analysis of the Credential Acceptance Ceremonies for Embassies of the Three Nations". *Journal of Anhui University*; Chen, Y. F. (2022). "Reinterpreting European Missions to China in the Early Qing Dynasty and Disputes over Diplomatic Ceremonies". *Collected Papers of History Studies*.