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Political Intentions of Chinese Textiles in Portuguese Sacred, Solemn, Celebratory Events of the 16th - 18th Centuries

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In the early 16th century, Portugal was well aware of China's relevance as one of the most important Asian markets, and made considerable effort to have direct interaction with it¹. The first Portuguese voyage to China was made under command of Jorge Alvares between July and August of 1513. Although the Chinese imperial court only officially recognized a relationship with Portugal in 1554, trade in Chinese goods began much earlier, and was reinforced shortly after the establishment of Macao, around 1557.

The Portuguese invested in the distribution of Chinese silk products throughout their seaborne empire, through Guangdong and Macao mainly to Japan and India², where part of it was used to purchase other valuable merchandise, while the remainder was sent on to Europe, enthusiastic for Asian products, thereby contributing to its diffusion and use in both secular and religious contexts. Although Chinese silks had arrived in Europe since Roman times, after the rise of Ming dynasty in China, in 1368, and the subsequent interruption of trade with the West, these and other Asian luxury commodities so far imported by way of the Silk Road became increasingly rare. With the opening of the new maritime routes, the Portuguese not only established direct contact by sea between Europe and Asia for the first time, but also ensured the intensification of trade and an unprecedented increase in volume.

Among the Asian goods to arrive in Portugal as a result of this new transoceanic experience, Chinese textiles deserve special attention. In the short term these textiles became part of the decorative displays conceived for sacred events in Portugal, where they take on important and diverse roles: besides their inherent practical and aesthetic contributions, the exhibition of Chinese textiles greatly enhanced the religious, symbolic, cultural, economic and political messages underlying these events. This is the conclusion I reached in my doctoral thesis on this subject by analysing some 200 extant textiles in Portugal and over a hundred printed documents concerning the founding and history of the religious orders and houses established in Portugal³.

¹ Rui Manuel Loureiro, "Macao, frontier city and maritime trading center", in *Portugal and the World in the 16th and 17th centuries*, ed. Ana de Castro Henriques (Lisbon: Museu Nacional de Arte Antiga, 2009) 287-296.

² See for example: Tien Tse Chang, *Sino-Portuguese Trade from 1514 to 1644*. Leyden, 1934; Benjamim Videira Pires, *A Viagem de Comércio Macau-Manila nos Séculos XVI a XIX*. Macao: Imprensa Nacional, 1971; BOXER, Charles Ralph, *Portuguese Conquest and Commerce in Southern Asia: 1550-1750*. London: Variorum Reprints, 1985; Idem, *The Great Ship from Amacao*. Macao: Instituto Cultural e Centro de Estudos Marítimos, 1988.

³ Maria João Pacheco Ferreira, *Os têxteis chineses em Portugal nas opções decorativas sacras de aparato (séculos XVI-XVIII)*. PhD diss., University of Oporto, 2011. See also Maria João Pacheco Ferreira, *As Alfaias Bordadas Sinoportuguesas (Séculos XVI a XVIII)*. Lisbon: Universidade Lusíada Editora, 2007.

Interestingly, with few exceptions, the documents analyzed mention above all the fabrics from Asia, especially those from China, India and Iran implying that these were main textiles worthy of the authors' attention. Within this documentation, a set of twenty texts explicitly record that between 1595 and 1747 Chinese textiles appear regularly in several sumptuous festivities of sacred-profane content, in particular, beatifications, canonizations, transfer of images, bodies or relics, processions, prelate's entries, weddings, christenings and tragi-comedies. Despite their stereotypical nature, these sorts of sources excel in content, rather dense and extensive, giving sometimes an impressive level of detail important information about the environments in which Chinese textiles were exhibited, their functions and typologies. Here, we observe a considerable diversity of pieces in terms of their morphology and function which can be distributed in two main groups: 1) the costumes worn by the participants in the celebrations, such as robes, skirts, shawls and tunics representative of Portuguese clothing at the time; 2) the ornaments use to adorn the different spaces where ceremonies took place in the context of built structures (permanent and ephemeral), the procession and the city, such as altar frontals, hangings, curtains, valances, canopies, pavilions and different cloths, fabrics and silks of various colours used as draperies to attire the built surfaces.

The diverse information that arises from both the documentation and analysis of the extant textiles offer tangible confirmation of the extent to which these kinds of objects were integrated into Portuguese daily life. It also enables us to verify that the characteristics of these objects are compatible with those observed and studied, both in terms of techniques and materials used, as well as in terms of the iconographic repertoire and even the plasticity that characterizes them⁴. Very briefly, in these historical sources it is possible to recognize typical Chinese iconographic programs in which animal motifs and local flora predominate, pieces which are completely European in terms of the subjects represented, type of structure, design and plastic aspects to which they are associated as well as the combination of European and Chinese elements⁵. Among the decorative programs with European stylistic references are four important thematic groups, namely Christian (figure 1) and mythological iconography⁶, botanical ornaments and heraldic motifs, based on a considerable diversity of decorative vocabularies connected with the Renaissance, Mannerism, the Baroque and even Rococo styles, developed in Europe between 16th and 18th centuries⁷.

Beyond this sort of practical information, the 20 texts selected for analysis provide important clues about the way these commodities were perceived within Portuguese society. Over the chronological period studied, authors not only describe Chinese textiles with more or less detail but also formulate, quite regularly, praise comments concerning their material value (for example, the type of raw materials involved and the huge quantities in which they are employed), their exquisite beauty, novelty and quality of workmanship, the vivid and wide colour palette and the ornamental programs displayed, as

⁴ Ferreira, *Os têxteis chineses*, 75-109; 293-309.

⁵ Ferreira, *As Alfaias Bordadas*, 190-207; Maria João Pacheco Ferreira, "Sinoportuguese Embroidery – A paradigm of artistic and cultural exchanges between East and West", in *Bulletin du CIETA*. 82 (2005) 115-118.

⁶ Maria João Ferreira, "Christian Themes in Chinese-Portuguese Embroidered Vestements", in *Oriente*. Lisbon: 7 (2003) 22-39 and Maria João Ferreira, "Ganymede and Fortune. Examples of Themes from Classical Mythology in Sino-Portuguese Embroidered Textiles", in *Oriente*. Lisbon: 12 (2005) 90-114.

⁷ Ferreira, *As Alfaias Bordadas*, 119-190.

well as their provenance which alone promoted the highest applauses⁸. As an example, Siro Ulperni who was responsible for describing Saint Magdalene of Pazzi's canonization feasts, about a set of coloured satins, which were assembled in the church of the Carmelite convent in Lisbon in 1672, notes, "that to praise it, one need only to say it was from China"⁹.



Figure 1. Immaculate Conception (detail of Chasuble), 109*89 cm, church of Saint Peter, Miragaia, Oporto, Maria João Ferreira©

Aside from the fact that not all of the references may refer directly to Chinese textiles, it is evident that they were held in very high esteem. Even once passed the initial allure that surely followed the arrival of

⁸ Ferreira, *Os têxteis chineses*, 326-330.

⁹ Siro Ulperni, *O Forasteiro Admirado. Relaçam panegyrica do Trivnfo, e Festas, qve celebrou o Real Convento do Carmo de Lisboa Pela Canonizaçao da Seráfica Virgem S. Maria Magdalena de Pazzi, Religiosa da sua Ordem*, primeira parte (Lisbon: Off. de António Rodriguez d'Abrev, 1672) 15.

Asian goods to the kingdom in the first years of the 16th century, thanks to their novelty and decorative competence, the Portuguese adopted Chinese commodities, integrating manufactures of this kind into Catholic religious practices and rituals of the liturgical calendar. Even in the middle of the 18th century, Chinese textile production maintained its high reputation, and Father José da Costa Leite chose them as the reference standard to assess the ornaments that adorned the route of the procession of the Holy Sacrament in Braga in 1728: “... one could see the precious rich quilts on the windows, and while the sight was amused by them, one could say if not from another part of the world, the quilts would come from China, or belonging to Braga they came from Beijing”¹⁰.



Figure 2. Branches, flowers and birds (detail of hanging), 277*184 cm, Saint Roch Museum, Lisbon, Maria João Ferreira©

¹⁰ “Viaõ-se nas janellas ricas colchas, tão preciosas, que divertindo-se nellas os olhos, chegaraõ a dizer que a não serem de outra parte eraõ da China, ou se a Braga vieraõ de Pekim”; Pe. Joseph Leyte da Costa, *Dezempenho festivo ou Triunfal apparatus com que os Illustres Bracharenses, pelas ruas da Augusta Braga, tiraraõ a publico o Eucharistico Mannà da Ley da Graça, Epilogo da maravilhas, saboroso sustento de Angelicos Espiritos, & Soberano Corpo de Christo sacramentado* (Lisbon: Off. de Antonio Pedrozo Galram, 1729) 16.

Chinese textiles were highly embellished with fauna and flora in dazzling colours (figure 2), which were exotic and extremely appealing to Portuguese taste. In fact, it is important to highlight the role of birds, flowers, fruits and foliage that stand out both in costumes and adornments. Most of their depictions reveal naturalistic approaches to contents. This is an aspect, which is also transmitted through the written descriptions, always emphasizing the variety of species and colours that characterize them. The presence of Chinese textiles with this kind of decoration in the context of church ensembles seems, overall, a perfect prefiguration of the Garden of Eden, the image regularly invoked by Portuguese authors to describe the ambiances recreated inside the church on these occasions¹¹. In this respect, the Chinese items appeared to have been very effective not only as ornaments but also as textiles suitable for the settings of solemn events. They had the great advantage of adhering to the guidelines arising from the Synodal Constitutions that exhorted the use of quality cloth without images of heretics or any other indecent, dishonest or immoral subjects¹².

However, according to the analysis of the selected sources, it seems clear that the exhibition of these vivid and exotic objects reflected more than religious or ornamental functions. China was of paramount importance to the Portuguese overseas empire, especially from an economic and missionary point of view. As mentioned earlier, the exhibition of these textiles, which were living testimonies of the Portuguese experience in China, also held clear cultural, economic and political symbolic valences that were emphasized on these occasions. Unfortunately, it is not possible to develop all of these aspects and only a very brief overview of the subject can be given here, and so I will focus on a case study of the Jesuit festivities.

As is well known, the Company of Jesus became not only an indispensable partner of the Portuguese empire¹³, but also an important propaganda agent for Chinese issues. From the mid 16th century, China became the prevalent subject of European textual production¹⁴ and a recognized target of Jesuit missionary interests in Asia - a postponed and never fully accomplished purpose, responsible for the

¹¹ Take, for example, the ensemble conceived for the church of the Irish seminar in Lisbon for the celebration of the canonization of St. Ignatius of Loyola and St. Francis Xavier in 1622, described in the following terms: “*tam rica, como curiosamente, porque sobre damascos, & veludos, se puserão tantas flores, tantas imagens, tantos frutos, & outros varios brincos de cera, que os que nella entraão cuidauão que estauão no parayso da terra*”; *Relações das Sumptuosas Festas com que a Companhia de Jesus da Província de Portugal Celebrou a Canonização de S. Ignacio de Loyola, e S. Francisco Xavier* (Lisbon: s.n., 1622) fl. 50.

¹² *Constituições Extravagantes do Arcebispado de Lisboa* (Lisbon: in the house of Antonio Gonsalves, 1569), fl. 11v.

¹³ See for example Dauril Alden, *The Making of an Enterprise. The Society of Jesus in Portugal, its Empire, and beyond (1540-1750)*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996.

¹⁴ Francisco Roque Oliveira, *A construção do conhecimento europeu sobre a China, c. 1500-c.1600*. (PhD diss., Autonomous University of Barcelona, 2003), 510, accessed February 17, 2011 <http://www.tesisenxarxa.net/TDX-1222103-160816/>. In fact, in the early 17th century, these and other works with the same vocation (in the more general pedagogic and within the spread of missionary activity) gain in number of editions and printings in relation to texts of Scripture, comments or theological works, whose publication while remaining predominantly decreases; Diogo Ramada Curto, *O Discurso Político em Portugal (1600-1650)* Lisboa: Centro de Estudos de História e Cultura Portuguesa - Projecto Universidade Aberta, 1988) 107.

keeping of the expectant ambience created around China¹⁵. Within the multiple narrative genres used by the Society of Jesus, the six texts studied reporting Jesuit celebrations in Portugal offer different approaches to promote their proselytizing campaigns. These reports, with a pedagogic and an apologetically essence within the spread of missionary activity, present more subtle discourses built on curiosity in which, although propaganda and pious edification are mixed together they never assume a strictly religious dimension, hence their advantage when compared with other sorts of Jesuit documentation. They also contain another role of prime power: to glorify Portugal's state. From the moment on missionary activity was assumed as a duty of Catholic monarchies, missionaries departed to save souls, but also to serve their kings and while searching for the greater glory of God, also sought the prestige of the sovereign and its people¹⁶.

Paradigmatic testimony of this situation is a book concerning the festivities performed in Portugal in 1622 by the Society of Jesus to commemorate the canonization of Saint Ignatius of Loyola and Saint Francis Xavier, two of the most prominent figures of the Company of Jesus. Like many other works printed around the world on this occasion¹⁷, witnessing the evangelist campaign undertaken in Asia under the patronage of the Portuguese crown, this anonymous printed report of the event represents a powerful form of promoting the Portuguese Empire, and most particularly the missionary effort of the Portuguese Patronate as the preface explicitly refers:

*"Canonization has been celebrated in 622, the 13th of March, in the glorious doctor of Saint Gregory religion day, with an enormous ovation and pleasure of the entire Roman court, who celebrated and solemnized it with an extraordinary joy. Those news were immediately spread out to all the Christian communities, mainly at Portuguese kingdom, one of the world most interested, because Saint Francis Xavier was adored with great intensity and care, not only in Portuguese territory but also at the conquered ones, and also the admiration experienced by the glorious Saint Ignacio to this Crown, grateful for the splendor, liberty and compassion with which the King John the third, received and favored the Company in his kingdom"*¹⁸.

Even though the Jesuits lived one of their golden moments in the early 17th century, they couldn't avoid the severe criticism and general attack of different religious orders against them. The basis was their pioneer missionary methods, their exclusive presence in China until 1630, or the loss of influence that the Portuguese Jesuits previously enjoyed near the court of Lisbon, once the dual Iberian monarchy was established (between 1580-1640). Despite the Spanish geographical origins of both canonized saints, the Jesuits defended Portuguese national cause and stressed the importance of Portugal in the statement of

¹⁵ In 1604 Father Nicholas Longobardo still expressed: "... I fear here an ocean, a new world, a very large promise land [...] and believe that from the conversion of China will result greater glory of God than that the Company has in her account in the hole universe"; Fernão Guerreiro, *Relação Anual das Coisas que Fizeram os Padres da Companhia de Jesus nas suas Missões nos anos de 1600 a 1609* (Coimbra: Imprensa da Universidade, 1931) vol. 2, 125.

¹⁶ António A. M. Martins do Vale, *Entre a Cruz e o Dragão. O Padroado Português na China no século XVIII* (Lisbon: Fundação Oriente, 2002) 526.

¹⁷ See the list provided by Georg Schurhammer, "Festas em Lisboa em 1622 (uma relação inédita)", in *Brotéria*. Lisbon: LV: fasc. 4 (1952) 3.

¹⁸ *Relações das Sumptuosas Festas com que a Companhia de Jesus da Província de Portugal Celebrou a Canonização de S. Ignacio de Loyola, e S. Francisco Xavier* (Lisbon: s.n., 1622) fl. 1v.

the Society of Jesus as the driving force of Catholic proselytism across the globe under the auspice of the Portuguese empire.

The innovative intervention that characterized the Jesuit methodology of spiritual conquest was deeply affected by the posture and performance of Francis Xavier who was in the meantime an object of canonization and not by chance elected as patron saint of missionaries. On the other hand, this priest became symbolically attached to China when he died at Sichuan's islands in 1552 without having accomplished his wish to convert China and Japan to Catholicism.

These great moments of festive solemnity, which were attended by all social strata, proved to be an ideal channel of communication between promoters of Asian missionary activities and the public, given that the ambience was particularly auspicious for attracting potential supporters of the Jesuit and Portuguese causes.

Conscious of this potential, the Jesuits invested their initiatives with a wide range of hagiographic, pedagogic and propagandistic intentions, which were transmitted through complex allegorical programs¹⁹. However, the ability to understand these mainly intellectual messages and the persuasive effect of these proceedings was somehow limited, requiring the implementation of other appealing components with more immediate and spectacular impact. And it was in this sense that textiles came to be indispensable tools in the sumptuous and fascinating mechanisms adopted in these processes of attraction and decoding, either in the event itself or later in the printed written texts reporting on the event.

With the exploration of the power of image in 17th Europe for the transmission of ideas²⁰, the use of Chinese textiles within the religious liturgy suited the European practice of a visual catechism, as opposed to Protestant iconoclastic reaction, which in a pedagogical, particularly appealing and persuasive way conveys the Christian doctrine. Those objects not only presented imagery which was intrinsically suited to the occasion, but they were also living and portable representations of that exotic and distant land where, at any moment, the spread of the Christian word through the efforts of Jesuits priests would occur. On the other hand, the admission of this type of pagan crafts as an adornment of divine worship in Europe reflected not only the methodology being implemented by the Society of Jesus for converting pagans in Asia, but also reinforced the idea disseminated by the Counter-Reformation of a universal Catholic Church.

Chinese textiles, as material testimonies of the information disseminated through the written word when exposed in these kinds of commemorative events, where they could be seen and appreciated by the community who were not acquainted with this type of goods in their daily life, contributed to a better and more comprehensive knowledge of Asia. This was a matter that, from the 16th century onwards, became essential in the European system of knowledge in its many dimensions. Thus, missionaries, objects and texts contributed to the construction of a clearer concept of China and what it represented in cultural and artistic terms which, until the middle of that century, had been tilted in favour of technical

¹⁹ For this subject see for example: Per Bjurström, "Il Teatro Barocco e i Gesuiti", in dir. Irma B. Jaffe and Rudolf, Wittkower, *Architettura e Arte dei Gesuiti* (Milan: Electa, 2003) 155-185 and Marcello Fagiolo, "La Escena de la Gloria: El triunfo del barroco en el mundo del teatro de los jesuitas", in ed. Giovanni Sale, S.I., *Ignacio Y El Arte de los Jesuitas* (Bilbao: Ediciones Mensajero, 2003) 207-222.

²⁰ Mario Praz, *Studies in Seventeenth-Century Imagery*. Rome: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 1964.

and practical aspects with a more immediate implication in the maritime and mercantile interests that so far prevailed²¹.

Another aspect that should be retained when studying the use of Chinese textiles in solemn sacred celebratory events is the economic and commercial dimension. Within the classical tradition of representing every continent by a personification epitomizing the essential characteristics of each continent, China was also included in the list of allegories paraded in the processions, alluding to Portugal as the head of a vast commercial emporium in Asia. This is visible in the costumes worn by *Asia* or by *China* itself in the procession in Évora in 1622: while the former took a Chinese robe, China held a ship alluding to the various places that Francis Xavier had passed and “wore Chinese clothing, matched with identical socks and large sleeves”.

The aforementioned presence of Asia’s image also occurs as an element of the four parts of the world - as an allusion to the missionary activity around the world - a fundamental subject in Jesuit iconography. And in this framework textiles with Chinese origin could be used in association with other allegories than strictly *Asia*. For example, in the procession organized in Braga in the same year to commemorate the canonization of both Jesuits, the figure of *Europe* was entitled to wear Chinese adornments such as embroidered velvet sleeves. This option reflects the other side of the Portuguese maritime enterprise: serves as a reminder that Portugal was responsible for the arrival in Early Modern Age of significant quantities of exquisite and innovative commodities to Europe.

As shown by the evidence compiled in the course of our investigation, it would appear that the arrival of Chinese textiles in Portugal in significant quantities became a reality from at least the 1580’s. When describing the procession in Oporto, the anonymous author of the previous text uses the figure of China to inform the reader that she is “dressed in several silks, & colours, all of which came from that kingdom to Portugal”²². To what extent were these literary discourses intended to promote and encourage the consumption of Asian goods, which were arguably signs of Portuguese power in the East and essential to the empire’s survival?

In order to conclude: in a country where catholic religion emerges as the main reference and unifying force of the society²³, the contents of the printed texts denounce the close dependency that underlies the relationship between the religious and political powers and the obvious awareness of both in relation to the meaning of solemn religious festivals as a means of influence and authority above the community²⁴. Both entities, political and religious, aimed to encourage reverence and ensure a perpetual place in the

²¹ Luís Filipe Barreto, “Apre(e)nder a Ásia (Séculos XVI e XVII)”, in coord. Ana Maria Rodrigues, *O Orientalismo em Portugal (Séculos XVI-XX)*. (Lisbon: Comissão Nacional para as Comemorações dos Descobrimentos Portugueses - Edições Inapa, 1999) 67.

²² *Relações das Sumptuosas Festas*, fl. 180.

²³ António Filipe Pimentel, “D. João V e a Festa Devota: do espectáculo da política à política do espectáculo”, in ed. João Castel-Branco PEREIRA, *Arte Efêmera em Portugal* (Lisbon: Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian, 2000) 156; João Francisco Marques, “Lisboa Religiosa na segunda metade do Século XVII”, in ed. Luís de Moura Sobral, *Bento Coelho da Silveira 1620-1708 e a Cultura do seu Tempo* (Lisbon: Ministério da Cultura - Instituto Português do Património Arquitectónico, 1998) 140.

²⁴ Maria Manuela Milheiro Fernandes, *Braga: A cidade e a festa no Século XVIII* (Guimarães: Núcleo de Estudos de População e Sociedade - Instituto de Ciências Sociais, 2003) 76.

living memory of the collective and both shared the concerns and the mechanisms of persuasion in a properly oriented way to sensibilities, knowing and aspirations of all social layers²⁵. Within this context, the textual forms analysed clearly imply repercussions in the political field, even if only indirectly.

Chinese textiles constitute material signs of power whenever they are invoked and praised in these descriptions of solemn religious celebrations commemorated in Portugal between the 16th and 18th centuries. They represent knowledge, social status, economic prestige, and the great extent of contemporary commercial networks. Last but not the least, their presence naturally promoted the Portuguese State and Catholic church in recalling the meaning that China assumed in the Portuguese seaborne empire, especially to the Portuguese crown and the Society of Jesus, the great and principal disseminator of the word of God in that country.

²⁵ Ferreira, *Os têxteis chineses*, 213-221.