

GIUSEPPE CASTIGLIONE

A Jesuit Painter at the Court of the Chinese Emperors

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Castiglione and the Conquests of the Emperor of China

On the 26th day of the fifth moon of the thirtieth year of his empire – 13 July 1765 to be precise – Ch'ien-lung promulgated a decree translated at the time as follows:

'I wish the sixteen prints of the victories that I won in the conquest of the kingdom of Chumgar and the neighbouring Mahomedan countries, which I had painted by Lamxinim and the other European painters who are in my service in the city of Peking, to be sent to Europe where the best artists in copper shall be chosen so that they may render each of these prints perfectly in all its parts on plates of copper.'¹

Thus engraving, another great expression of European art, interested the Emperor no less than painting. He had seen engravings of battles executed after the originals of the German painter Rugendas (1666–1742) and this had given him the idea of immortalizing his recent victories in Upper Asia.

The struggle carried on for several years against the Kalmucks (or Eleuths) had come to an end in 1759. Zungaria, in eastern Turkestan, had submitted. Kashgaria, for long a vassal of the Zungars, was annexed in 1759 under the name of Sin-kiang or New Territory. Thus the whole of Upper Asia had come under Chinese authority. The final conquest was followed, in April 1760, by a grandiose ceremony in the course of which Generals Chao-hui and Fu-te, victors in this campaign, were heaped with honours. Ch'ien-lung instructed the Court painters, and especially the Jesuit missionaries, to paint their portraits at the same time as a series of battle scenes destined to decorate the central hall of the Tzu-kuang-ko on the east bank of the central lake in Peking. It was in this hall, installed in 1760, that

Emperor Ch'ien-lung used to receive tributary princes and European ambassadors.² Amiot, in his biography of Father Attiret, states that 'during the whole time that this war against the Eleuths and other Tartars their allies lasted, as soon as the troops of the Empire had won a few victories, the order was immediately given to the painters to depict them. Those of the principal officers who had played the greatest part in events were chosen for preference to figure in painting as they had done in reality.' The missionary painters were, in a sense, reporters before the word was thought of. According to the scholar Paul Pelliot the drawings to be engraved from, sixteen in number, reproduced on a reduced scale the mural paintings in the palace.³ The latter had been executed by Giuseppe Castiglione, Jean-Denis Attiret, Ignatius Sickelpart and a barefoot Augustinian, Father Jean Damascène, who in 1788 became Bishop of Peking. The Emperor was very impatient. 'I wish this work to be executed with the greatest celerity', he wrote. But once the decree had been promulgated conflicts of influence divided England and France, each country wishing to attract attention to its own merits. As the final decision rested with the viceroy of Canton, the superior of the French Jesuits of Canton, Father Le Febvre, sent one of his mandarin friends to see him. This mandarin, 'a declared protector of the French, succeeded in convincing the viceroy that the arts were more cultivated in France than in any other country in Europe and that engraving especially was carried there to the highest point of perfection'.⁴

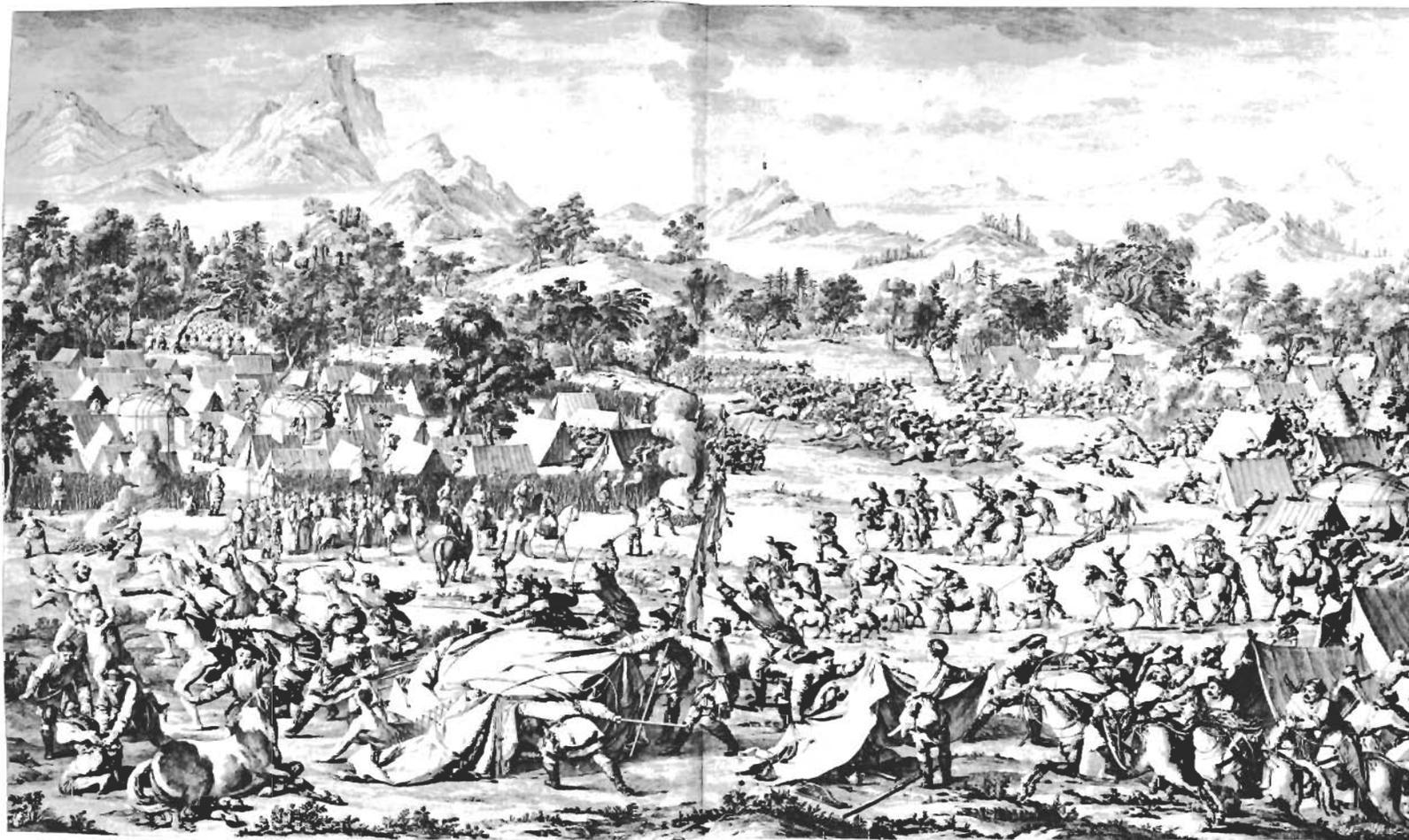
The importance of this order was not solely of an artistic nature. It was thought that it would also direct China's interest to France and enable precious advan-



The Storming of the Camp at Gädän-Ola. Etching from the series *The Conquests of the Emperor Ch'ien-lung* after a drawing by Castiglione. Cat. 121. Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris.

tages from both the commercial and the religious point of view to be obtained. The Dutch, the Portuguese and above all the English constituted rivals from whom it was good, on any occasion whatever, to distinguish oneself.

Once the decision had been taken, the matter was concluded according to the rules. Transactions between Chinese and Europeans were governed by strict protocol. Only the Hong merchants privileged by the Emperor, were entitled to negotiate with the



The Battle of Oroï-Jalatu. Etching after a drawing by Castiglione. Cat. 123. Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris.

'foreign devils'. Each nation had its own Hong. The contract for the execution of the engravings was signed by P'an T'ung-wen, the intermediary of the French, along with nine other merchants. Numerous precautions were taken to ensure the success of the enterprise.

To reduce the risk of loss – shipwrecks were frequent at that time – the drawings were to travel on four different ships and to return in the same way. The prints were to be divided equally between two ships. The period allowed for execution was very short:



The Raising of the Siege at the Black River. Etching after a drawing by Castiglione. Cat. 122. Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris.

everything had to be back within the thirty-third year of Ch'ien-lung's reign, that is to say, in 1768.

It was not until 31 December 1766 – more than a year after its promulgation – that Ch'ien-lung's decree

reached the Marquis de Marigny, director-general of the King's buildings and director of the Académie Royale de Peinture. It was accompanied by a letter from Castiglione, who had died six months earlier,



The Battle of Tongusluk. Etching after a drawing by Castiglione. Cat. 124. Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris.

giving very precise advice on the execution of the engravings. 'Although the Emperor's decree accompanying my letter according to his orders will be sufficient for the artist charged with engraving the

prints to conform exactly to the original, in order to leave nothing for the Emperor to desire and for the sake of the reputation of European artists I have thought it proper to recommend two things to you:



Portrait of the Hong merchant P'an Ch'i-kuan. Painting under glass. Goeteborg Museum, Goeteborg, Sweden.

'1. The first time the prints are engraved with the graver or etched with acid take care that they are expressed on the copper with the greatest and most graceful delicacy, and that the artist performs his task with the greatest possible exactitude and precision, as befits a work to be presented to such a great Emperor.

'2. If, after the number of prints requested by the Emperor, the plates prove to be faint or worn, they must be retouched and repaired before being sent to China, so that the new prints made from them in the country may have the same beauties as the first ones.'⁵

Charles-Nicolas Cochin, of the Académie Royale de Peinture et de Sculpture, was immediately charged with getting the work started.

Cochin chose artists whose talent he knew: Augustin de Saint-Aubin, Jean-Philippe Le Bas, B. L. Prévôt and Jacques Aliamet. These set to work, on 22 April 1767, engraving the first four plates 'after and in conformity with the drawings of the missionaries and with any improvements that might be made by Monsieur Cochin'. When the twelve other drawings arrived – in July – other engravers joined the undertaking to speed its completion: Denis Née, Louis-Joseph Masquelier, then Pierre-Philippe Choffard and N. de Launay.

Everything was done to ensure complete success. France's prestige was at stake. The Imperial order aroused tremendous curiosity. Henri-Léonard Bertin, deputy of the department of the Compagnie des Indes, had even suggested to the King, when the first drawings arrived, that they should be reproduced on vases of Sèvres porcelain and woven at the Gobelins. 'This would give the whole empire of China a high idea of the superiority of our artists, our manufactures and our



Mulan II. The Camp. Painting on silk (detail). Ca. 0.77 × 27 m. Cat. 49. Musée Guimet, Paris.

nation, and the French would no longer, as they are in China, be confused with the other nations under the name of Europeans.’⁶ Did the King give his consent? A letter from Bertin to Marigny permits us to suppose so, as far as the Sèvres porcelain is concerned. Unfortunately, I have found no trace in the factory archives of any such order having been carried out.

Copper-plates were brought from England. As for the printing, paper of French manufacture was generally only thirty-six inches wide so Sieur Prudhomme, a paper merchant, was ordered to manufacture specially a paper called ‘Grand Louvois’ adequate to the dimensions of the drawings. The printer chosen, Sieur Beauvais, was ‘the only one in whom one can place entire confidence, both as to his talents, which are above those of others, and as to his probity, which is well known’.

The correspondence exchanged between Cochin and Marigny bears witness to the slowness of the work. If we are to judge by the accounts found in the Archives Nationales, delays in paying the engravers scarcely encouraged rapid completion. On the other hand, inequalities in the standard of the originals created numerous difficulties. Father Damascène’s drawing, for example – which was among the first batch to reach Paris – gave Cochin a lot of trouble. ‘The second plate’, he wrote to the Marquis de Marigny, ‘is by Monsieur de Saint-Aubin. It has turned out quite well, but it arrived later than Monsieur Le Bas’ because it had to wait until I had modified the drawing which, being by Father Damascène, was among the less good ones.’

Account also had to be taken of the Imperial taste.

‘You have already been informed’, writes Marigny to Cochin, ‘that the Chinese prefer exactitude and finish of execution to everything which with us would characterize genius and talent. It is right that they should be given what they want.’

To enable Cochin to carry out his task, the King freed him from his other duties. He constantly intervened in the work of the engravers. ‘I have been so pressed by Monsieur Le Bas for a drawing of China that is intended for him that I have been working to excess and without turning from it for a single moment’, he wrote in 1771.

From time to time Bertin, general controller of finance, who kept up a regular correspondence with the Jesuit missionaries in Peking, requested Father Benoist, superior of the French mission, ‘to inform the Emperor of China of the care being given this work’. And the Emperor did not omit to express his satisfaction.

Such a concern for perfection naturally occasioned delays in delivery far exceeding those that had been foreseen. The first seven engravings did not reach Peking until December 1772, the last batch in 1775. Castiglione, having been dead for more than nine years, did not have the joy of seeing the fruit of his labours! The Hong merchants of Canton paid the Compagnie Française des Indes the sum of 204,000 francs for these engravings. All the copper-plates were sent – as laid down by the contract – with a printing of two hundred copies. Every precaution had been taken to prevent any element of the work from remaining in the hands of the engravers. But some prints certainly slipped through the net. Apart from the copies for the royal family and the King’s library, Bertin, a great collector

22.11.1773

se garder pour nous servir en faire les
distributions les sommes payées
Tableau des acomptes qui ont parvenu nécessaires de Distributeurs
pour parvenir à ce que toutes les Planches soient achevées
cette année avec les temps ou à son opportunité de les donner.

En avril. { a c H. De St. Aubin 3000 }
 { a c H. De Laussay 1000 } 5300^{fr}
 { sur les fournisseurs du Papier 1000 }
 { Pour l'imprimeur 300 }

En May. { a c H. Le Bas 2000 }
 { a M. Allamot 3000 } 8300
 { a M. Choffard 2500 }
 { a compte sur le Papier 500 }
 { Pour l'imprimeur 300 }

En juin { a M. Prevost 3000 }
 { a compte sur le Papier 1000 } 4600
 { Pour l'imprimeur 600 }

En juillet { a M. Choffard 2500 }
 { a compte sur le Papier 1000 } 3800
 { Pour l'imprimeur 300 }

En août { a c H. De St. Aubin 2400 }
 { Pour l'imprimeur 300 } 3100

En septembre { a c H. Le Bas 3000 }
 { a c H. Allamot 3000 } 8900
 { a c H. Choffard 2000 }
 { Pour l'imprimeur 900 }

Il restera quelques sommes mémoires à payer pour l'achat de
le Papier avec l'imprimeur pour les Encadrements et autres frais,
aussi bien que pour les honoraires accordés à c H. Cochon.

who never lost sight of his interests, did not fail to reserve a complete set for his private collection (the Hôtel Bertin stood at the corner of the Rue Neuve des Capucins and the boulevards), but he refused this privilege to Attiret's brother, a painter in Dole. One set in a wooden coffer decorated with a five-clawed Imperial dragon, and another bound with the arms of France, are in the Bibliothèque Nationale, a third is in the Bibliothèque Mazarine, a fourth in the Musée Guimet (gift by Wannieck, 1925) and a fifth incomplete set of fifteen prints is in the possession of the Musée de Fontainebleau (left to it by Faucigny-Lucinge, 1964). Finally, Louis XVI presented a set to his Minister Necker, which is preserved in the château de Coppet, Switzerland.

The prints reserved for the Emperor bore manuscript poems by Ch'ien-lung accompanied by the seal of the Imperial Library and small seals indicating that this is the Emperor's calligraphy. What happened to these copies? After the Boxer Rising of 1900 the Imperial apartments were sacked by the Austrian soldiers quartered in the city. Among the booty seized were the celebrated engravings. After being sold to a famous collector, one series, through my good offices, was put on public sale at the Hôtel Drouot in 1952, together with a copper-plate engraved by J.-P. Le Bas representing the battle of Khorgos after a drawing by Father Attiret.

To avoid all confusion, let us note that in 1785 Isidore-Stanislas Helman, a pupil of Le Bas, engraved

List of advances to be paid to the artists for the series of etchings *The Conquests of the Emperor Ch'ien-lung*, 22 March 1773. Archives Nationales, Paris.

a new series of *The Conquests of the Emperor Ch'ien-lung* on a smaller scale. The Musée Guimet possesses two copies of these (numbers 33 534-97 and 1392-97). These engravings are not of the same quality as the original series. The captions that accompany them contain errors which Paul Pelliot has corrected in the *T'oung Pao* (1921). Moreover, Helman added to this series eight prints (*Ploughing Ceremony Performed by the Emperor of China, Banquet at the Palace, etc.*). One of Helman's prints in the Musée Guimet bears the following caption:

'Battles and conquests of the Emperor of China engraved by various French artists under the direction of C.-N. Cochin, by Sieur Helman, engraver of Monseigneur le Duc de Chartres and pupil of Le Bas.'⁷

The Emperor had been so satisfied with the engravings executed in France that he had fresh prints made from the plates in China, by Chinese disciples of Castiglione. After the Kalmuck campaign there were other 'colonial conquests', as Walter Fuchs puts it. Under the aegis of the missionaries, the Chinese engravers illustrated these military successes on the borders of Tibet, in Formosa, Nepal, Annam and Yunnan, using, it seems, sketches by the painter Feng Ning. Somewhat rough in execution, these plates do not possess the quality of the work done in Paris under the direction of Cochin. Their documentary interest is likewise debatable. Some authors allege that most of these glorious battles took place in the imagination of peaceful generals in their camps. Would not, to vanquish without battle be one of the forms taken by Chinese wisdom?



