

God and Guns in Eighteenth-Century China: Jesuit Missionaries and the Military Campaigns of the Qianlong Emperor (1736–1795)

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Introduction

We have never valued ingenious articles, nor do we have the slightest need of your country's manufactures.

This famous assertion of Chinese self-sufficiency, made in 1793 to the envoy of the King of England, Lord Macartney, for long seemed to epitomize the pre-Opium War Chinese response to the West. Yet the Qianlong Emperor's declaration was somewhat disingenuous. The Chinese court had displayed considerable interest in what certain foreigners had to offer, employing Jesuit missionaries as astronomers and mathematicians, as interpreters, and as artists, builders of automata, and architects.

Chinese interest in Western technical skills was still evident only a few years before the rebuff to the British. In the 1770's the Emperor had closely questioned court missionary Michel Benoit about Western science, philosophy, warfare, cartography, shipping and navigational practices, reiterating as late as the 1780's his desire that more missionaries be sent to serve at the imperial court. The Christianity which the missionaries sought to spread was, however, formally interdicted and intermittently persecuted at this time.

The question is, whether there occurred in the late eighteenth century an actual shift in Chinese attitudes and perceptions, or whether there was merely a diminution of Chinese willingness to acknowledge the possibility that there existed areas of even limited Western superiority, and in either instance why this should have been the case. A satisfactory answer is vital to a proper understanding of Chinese attitudes on the eve of the unequal treaties.

This paper, without claiming to provide any definitive solution, seeks to contribute to the debate by casting light on Chinese use of the Jesuit missionaries' skills to promote various military projects in the second half of the eighteenth century. It will consider the Jesuits' activities in the three broad categories of armament construction, cartography, and assistance with imperial propaganda.

Background

Jesuit cartography and armament construction in China both had venerable precedents. The comparative accuracy of Western calculations, a leading factor in the seventeenth-century appointment of European Jesuits such as Adam Schall and Ferdinand Verbiest to head the imperial Board of

Astronomy, also meant that the missionaries' maps were superior to Chinese ones. Notable among early Jesuit cartographic efforts to attract literati and even imperial attention were the world maps of Ricci and later Verbiest. In the early eighteenth century, the missionaries undertook a survey of the empire that was to form the foundation for all subsequent geographic study of China. The military utility of such work was not lost on the beleaguered emperors of both the late Ming and early Qing dynasties, versed in the doctrines of the classical strategist Sun Zi, one of whose most important instructions was to "know one's terrain."

European armaments, often lighter and more mobile than indigenous Chinese ones, had begun to reach China with Portuguese traders in the early sixteenth century. As the Ming fought for survival, Adam Schall, under protest, directed the construction of cannon for them. He also supervised the—ultimately unsuccessful—fortification of Peking against peasant rebels and Manchu invaders. Later Verbiest also was ordered to establish a cannon foundry; it produced nearly six hundred pieces that helped to defeat the Three Feudatories, the Western Mongols, and the Russians, and continued in use at least until the end of the dynasty. Verbiest was much criticized by European rivals belonging to other religious orders for his "military" activities, but received papal approval for his unorthodox attempts to advance the faith. His foundry, his designs, and the principles he set out in a now lost work on artillery, continued to be used by the Chinese at least until the Opium War.

The late eighteenth-century was an important time for the Jesuits, whose order was suppressed worldwide in 1773. It was also a turning point for the Qing dynasty, marking its transition from strength to decline. After the suppression, the missionaries remained in Peking as "ex-Jesuits," continuing their technical work for the Chinese in the hope of ultimately achieving large-scale conversions.

From the copious correspondence of the senior missionary at Peking, Father Amiot, who resided there from 1751 until his death in 1793, we know that there was some curiosity about military affairs at the China mission in Peking, and concomitant receptivity to the notion of actual involvement in such matters. Encouraged by his principal correspondent, the sometime Comptroller-General of France, Henri Bertin, Amiot reverted again and again to military topics, as well as translating for the first time the classic work of Chinese military strategy, Sun Zi's *Art of War*, for an avid French Enlightenment audience.

Moreover, Amiot's correspondence indicates that he tried to interest his Chinese patrons in a new European invention whose considerable military potential he recognized. By about 1784 he received information describing the hot-air balloons of the Montgolfier brothers and Blanchard, which were then creating a sensation in Europe. When Amiot's efforts to communicate his enthusiasm to his Chinese patrons met with no success, one of the imperial princes advised him to present a case for the advantages that hot-air balloons

would bring in wartime, but even this tactic was unavailing.

Despite their lack of interest in hot-air balloons, however, the late eighteenth-century Chinese were not aloof to the possibility that Western technological skill could be of direct military use, as had been the case in the preceding century. In 1772, noting that the emperor considered that the missionaries in his service knew "something of everything," Jean-Mathieu de Ventavon wrote to his superiors in Rome that:

By [the Emperor's] order, the fathers of our tribunal are sometimes called to go and assist at artillery practice; at other times we are called to figure out the usage of the different arms brought by European merchants, that the mandarins in Canton present to his Majesty. Finally [...] our fathers were [...] questioned as to whether they could, as in the past, cast pieces of artillery, to which they replied that at present there was no one who knew how to do it.

Even as he revealed their role as accomplices in arms sales, de Ventavon was at pains in this letter, written at the height of the suppression *furor*, to demonstrate the missionaries' lack of involvement in military matters. His defensiveness was prompted by criticism of an earlier proposal that he had presented to Qianlong for the fortification of Peking. This plan encountered resentment on the part of Chinese and Westerners alike, as one of his colleagues described:

He offered to make [the plan] in relief... [T]he Emperor took the plan and resolved to have it explained to him, and perhaps to have it executed on the spot. But his ministers sought to find fault with it; they criticized every part of it. Moreover, we [Jesuits] were afraid that in Europe we would be accused of "teaching the infidels the art of war."

Responding to a rebuke from Rome, de Ventavon expressed caustic surprise that none of his critics had cautioned him before he embarked on the fortifications project, comparing their condemnations with the overt toleration, at least, of Adam Schall's activities a century earlier.

Soon afterwards a Jesuit missionary became directly involved in the Chinese military campaign to suppress the rebellion of the Jinchuan aborigines of western Sichuan. Esconced in a steeply mountainous area, these rebels built stone forts that the Qing, hampered by the difficulty of transporting heavy cannon along precipitous paths, were unable to destroy. This problem was solved in part by the expedient of carrying thousands of metal ingots which artisans attached to the army could forge into cannon when and where needed. The Chinese, who for centuries had been fortifying entire towns with massive walls, were old hands at siege warfare, but sieges were usually decided by mass assaults, mining or blockades, rather than by bombardment. The traditional methods were not feasible against the Jinchuan fortresses because of the nature of the terrain, and, moreover, city walls traditionally were made of tamped earth rather than of stone.

Thus it was that the emperor ordered the Portuguese Father Felix da Rocha to proceed to the war front in 1774 with a view to directing the construction of cannon. That such was the purpose of sending da Rocha is

clear from the imperial order and from an earlier edict in which the Emperor ordered that designs for mortars be sent to the front along with, *inter alia*, surveyors from the imperial Board of Astronomy to which da Rocha and other Jesuits were attached. It is highly likely that the designs in question were those made by Verbiest a century earlier, for these had been republished only a few years earlier in a text that included a number of Verbiest's cannon designs in its several chapters on military items.

Jesuit descriptions of da Rocha's trip to the Jinchuan front, written for European consumption, barely mention da Rocha, and state only that the Emperor sent him to make a map of the area, which, according to these accounts, the Chinese authorities expected soon to be under their control (although in fact the war continued for a further two years). The Chinese and Jesuit sources also differ in their versions of what happened when da Rocha reached the front in October 1774. According to the Jesuit accounts, by that time da Rocha was so exhausted and unwell that he returned to Peking without accomplishing his mission. The biography of Agui, the Qing commander-in-chief, however, indicates that da Rocha announced that the emperor had sent him because earlier calculations concerning the mortars had been imprecise. After da Rocha made various measurements, relating mainly to the angle at which the the cannon was fired (something Verbiest had discussed in some detail in his treatise), it became possible to fire the cannon with a far narrower margin of error, so that bombardment of the rebel fortresses became considerably more effective. Moreover, a new cannon seems to have been cast very shortly after da Rocha's arrival, presumably based on the designs he brought with him, and perhaps produced under his actual supervision.

In short, this Chinese source reveals that da Rocha was actively engaged in "teaching the art of war to the infidel." It cannot be that the Jesuits who described the campaign in their letters to Europe were unaware of da Rocha's activities—such ignorance would surely have involved an unlikely degree of complicity on the part of too many people. Doubtless, despite their many internal divisions, they wished to avoid drawing the type of criticism levelled a few years earlier at de Ventavon. Their misleading inexactitude in this instance raises questions about the reliability of all Jesuit sources transmitted from China during this period.

Da Rocha visited the Jinchuan area again in 1777, after the war was over. On this occasion he apparently did survey the newly pacified area for his Chinese masters. By then he was already a veteran cartographer for the Qing. After the 1759 annexation of Xinjiang, Qianlong personally selected da Rocha to take part in a survey of the newly conquered region. Together with Father Joseph Espinha, he twice made the several months' journey to Xinjiang, in 1756 and 1759. Once in Xinjiang the two followed different itineraries. Da Rocha took the northern route to Ili while Espinha took the southern route, journeying as far as Kashgar, on the border with what is now Pakistan.

The maps they produced were kept in the palace and apparently not made generally available, and there is no known separate edition of these maps extant. However, the Jesuits' work was almost certainly the basis for maps that appeared in Chinese gazetteers of Xinjiang from the 1770's on. In addition, the great Qianlong atlas that appeared in 1764 undoubtedly was based on their work and on other Jesuit cartography. In 1769, moreover, Father Benoit was ordered to make a new map of Central Asia, for which purpose he taught himself the art of copper-engraving and trained several Chinese assistants.

It was in connection with the Central Asian conquests that Jesuit missionary artists at the court of Qianlong became involved in a more subtle way in the fulfilment of imperial military policies. In 1760 the emperor had rebuilt an old palace with a view to commemorating military exploits, particularly the conquest of Xinjiang. In addition to hanging on its walls the portraits of one hundred generals and statesmen who had taken part in the campaigns, the Emperor commissioned three Jesuit artists, Brothers Castiglione and Attiret and Father Sichelbart, and an Italian Augustinian, Brother Jean-Damascène Sallusti, to produce sixteen scenes depicting important battles and memorable events of the war. After the emperor saw some German engravings of original battle paintings, he decided to have his own paintings engraved in copper. Since there was then no one in China capable of carrying out so intricate a task (it was only later that Benoit acquired the skill), the missionaries convinced the emperor to send the paintings to France for engraving. By 1775, 200 copies of each engraving, made on special paper by the best French artists, had reached Peking, where the emperor had Benoit and his assistants make further copies. Subsequent campaigns were commemorated in victory pictures both drawn and engraved in China by Chinese artists and craftsmen.

Conclusion

What conclusions can be drawn from this account of Jesuit involvement in Chinese military affairs in the late eighteenth century, and in what ways might it have affected Chinese attitudes towards Westerners at that time?

I will first turn to the issue of Chinese reticence. As the confidence of the Qing court ebbed, the Chinese probably were reluctant to acknowledge any degree of dependence on foreign advice and assistance. It is only from Agui's biography that we know of da Rocha's involvement in cannon construction—and he surely had no reason to invent this story. Official Chinese accounts and other private descriptions of the war do not mention it. Moreover, for the Chinese there was considerable propaganda value to be gained from declaring one's self-sufficiency to a foreign state of whose potential menace to national security the Qianlong emperor was certainly aware.

Of their various military contributions, the Jesuit sources suppressed only the fact of their advice on artillery. Although Jesuit mapping indisputably was militarily useful to the Chinese, it also could be characterized as a *bona fide* service to the general expansion of geographic knowledge that formed part of

the European Enlightenment. The missionaries' role in arranging for the engraving of the victory pictures in France was genuinely intended to enhance that country's reputation in China, even if at the same time it did serve imperial military policies.

The apparent shift in Chinese perceptions may be partly due to the fact that, while the Macartney embassy unmistakably represented a single foreign ruler, the missionaries, like the foreign merchants still confined to Canton, clearly were of different nationalities and were riven by internal disputes. Yet, given the later Chinese failure to realize the importance of such distinctions after the abolition of the East India Company monopoly in 1834, we cannot be certain that they appreciated the significance of the distinction.

Another possibility, admittedly speculative, concerns factional squabbles among senior Chinese. Father Amiot, at least (who was still alive in 1793 and in contact with Macartney) greatly admired Agui, the ranking grand councillor, former commander-in-chief of the Jinchuan campaign and a man much interested in scientific matters. Given da Rocha's assistance to Agui's faltering campaign in 1774, it is reasonable to suppose that Agui was kindly disposed towards the missionaries. On the other hand, the minister in charge of the embassy was Agui's great opponent Heshen; the conflict between these men and their adherents were then a major feature of court politics. It is not beyond the realm of possibility that the imperial assertion of disdain for the embassy's gifts may have been prompted, at least in part, by a wish on Heshen's part to undermine any advantage Agui might have gained as the result of his contacts with the missionaries.

The response to Macartney forms part of a discernible pattern. At least since the advent of the first Jesuits in the late Ming, the Chinese have sought to absorb western technological skills while for various reasons remaining inimical to Western ideologies, whose intended introduction they surely sensed in Macartney's mission. Kangxi was thankful to improve his arsenal under Verbiest's direction so as to suppress opposition, while clearly recognizing and rejecting the actual and symbolic threat that papal authority over Chinese Christians would pose. In the eighteenth century, imperial armies also were saved at least in part as the result of da Rocha's advice, yet at that very time Christians in China were suffering unremitting persecution. In the late nineteenth century, reformers sought to retain the Chinese intellectual essence while acquiring such Western knowledge as they thought would bring their nation wealth and power. In the late twentieth century, Chinese rulers, similarly wary of Western values, tried to introduce economic reform in isolation from political change. It is thus possible to see the eighteenth-century Jesuits who served the Qianlong Emperor and his military needs, but who were unable to spread their religion among his subjects, as representative of Sino-Western relations in the broadest sense.

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