

Giuseppe Castiglione (1688-1766), Jesuit Painter in the Forbidden City: Unifying Spirit Between East and West

by Matthew Ehret-Kump

This report is written in honor of Helga Zepp-La-Rouche, who has dedicated her life to bringing out the best in every culture, on her 70th Birthday.

In pursuing the Belt and Road Initiative, we should ensure that when it comes to different civilizations, exchange will replace estrangement, mutual learning will replace clashes, and coexistence will replace a sense of superiority. This will boost mutual understanding, mutual respect and mutual trust among different countries.

—Xi Jinping, Belt and Road Summit, 2017

Now that a new paradigm of trust, mutual respect and cooperation amongst the various cultures of the world has taken on a new empowering life, led by Xi Jinping's vision of the Belt and Road Initiative, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and the BRICS, thinking citizens must take the opportunity now to embody the best character of this new renaissance spirit.

This means that instead of looking only at what separates the various cultures of the world as distinct from their neighbors, the time has come to commit ourselves to a true universal renaissance, whereby each culture finds what is most beautiful, good and truthful in itself and also in its neighbors. The best discoveries of each culture, when cross-pollinated in this way, will create a new and incredible "one" that will always be more than the sum of its parts, and will contain a greater degree of potential for creative

expression and understanding than each could sustain on its own.

A Renaissance Mind in the Forbidden City

For those not familiar with the figure of Giuseppe Castiglione (also known as Lang Shi Ning, 1688-1766), it is extremely rewarding to explore his works and incredible life as the court painter of three emperors of China during the Qing Dynasty (Kangxi, Yongzhen and Qianlong) from 1715 to his death in Beijing in 1766.

Although very little today remains of Castiglione's original letters and writings, his genius can still be strikingly felt and studied. Born in Milan and trained in the renowned *Botteghe degli Stanpator* art studio by master painters Carlo Cornara and Andrea Pozzo, Castiglione was contracted to produce paintings for Jesuit churches in Italy before he headed off to China at the age of 19. Emperor Kangxi had requested the services of Jesuit specialists in optical perspective, painting, mechanics, clock making, medicine, enameling and topographical projections.

Castiglione's style harmonically blended the most powerful discoveries of the West with the East, including linear perspective, *chiaroscuro* (albeit in an extremely subdued form to satisfy Chinese aesthetic tastes), and refined Chinese pigments and poetic symbolism. Although missionary painters had been trying since the time of Matteo Ricci (1552-1610) to introduce western artistic styles into China, painting never found



Giuseppe Castiglione with scientific instruments introduced into China by the Jesuits.

an organic form to take hold until Castiglione.¹

His use of oil techniques, combining renaissance realism with Chinese pigments and styles, had never been accomplished in an organic manner before. His style became known as Xianfa or “line method,” a technique which, while beautiful, was incredibly challenging, as the tempera-on-silk process was much more unforgiving for mistakes compared to traditional canvases used in Europe. Castiglione not only revolutionized painting but also copperplate engravings, architecture, and even enameling, crafting new techniques and blending styles in eastern and western aesthetics in all domains.²

Upon arriving in China, Castiglione was immediately called to the Imperial Court and asked to paint a bird for Emperor Kangxi who was so impressed with the young man’s work that he soon assigned him ten students.

Emperor Kangxi (1661-1722) had been educated both by the official Confucian scholars and by the Jesuit missionaries in the Court. He became a close collaborator with the Jesuits in the study of astronomy, science, music, and philosophy. He believed firmly in the coherence of the Christian teachings of the Jesuit



Castiglione’s “Bean Flowers and Millet.”



Matteo Ricci

1. Matteo Ricci introduced several instruments to the Court during his pioneering work in Beijing, including the clavichord (*gukin*). He also composed eight moral poems titled *Songs for Western Keyboard* (*Xi qin Quyü*), each being rendered as a musical composition using counterpoint. Today only Matteo’s text survives, but not his music. Ricci also introduced many religious paintings which did not resonate with the Chinese at the time.

2. Marco Musillo. *Reconciling Two Careers: The Jesuit Memoir of Guiseppe Castiglione*, 2008.

Fathers and the core philosophic outlook of the Confucian tradition in China, and had issued an edict to allow the Jesuits to proselytize freely throughout the country.

Like Matteo Ricci, who had first established the cooperation between the Jesuit Fathers and the Court during his time in China (from 1583 until his death in 1610), and also like Emperor Kangxi, Castiglione believed in uniting and transforming both Chinese and European cultures through a pursuit of beauty and excellence in all domains of science, the arts, and engineering. It was recognized by these great think-

ers that simply preaching a religious text was not sufficient to do justice to God’s will, and that nothing short of studying the book of nature in pursuit of the mind of God would suffice at truly winning converts and allies.

Sadly, none of Castiglione’s works from the period in Kangxi’s Court have survived. The earliest surviving works by Castiglione begin in the reign of Kangxi’s son, Emperor Yongzheng (1722-1735). These include the 1723 hanging scroll, “Gathering of Auspicious Signs” [Figure 1], produced for the new emperor’s inauguration, and his famous “One Hundred Steeds” (1728) [see detail in Figure 2].

During Emperor Yongzheng’s reign, Castiglione worked intensively on flowers, landscapes, and birds and other animals, taking each subject to new poetic and technical heights along the way.

During this process, Castiglione’s works on portraiture also attained incredible realism never before seen in China, despite the challenge of not being permitted to employ chiaroscuro (light and shadow) techniques,

as Chinese aesthetics during the Qing period considered such uses of shadow in portraiture as morally inferior. Even with this restraint, Castiglione was able to convey a deep realism and spirit in the personalities of his figures, discussed more fully below.

Castiglione, following in the tradition of Leonardo da Vinci, is also credited with producing the first treatise on perspective in China, *The Science of Vision* (Shixue) in 1729. He designed many murals in the Forbidden City for Emperor Qianlong using the *trompe l'oeil* effect called *quadratura*, which was popularized in European cathedrals and theatres [Figure 3]. Castiglione's collaborator in the publication of *Shixue* was a brilliant Chinese mathematician, painter and government official named Nian Xiyao, who wrote in the book's preface:

China has cultivated a great tradition of depicting nature in landscape paintings but neglected the accurate representation of projection and the measurement of buildings and implements. If one desires to depict these objects correctly, one must use the western technique.

Rites Controversy: Threat to Renaissance Thought in China

The close collaboration between the Qing Court and the Jesuit Fathers was fundamentally destroyed by a process known as the Rites Controversy, which began during the reign of Kangxi and came to its drastic end during the reign of his grandson, Qianlong. The fault lies entirely with the Venetian faction within the Church in Rome. Since the time of Matteo Ricci—the first to recognize the profound



Figure 1. Castiglione's "Gathering of Auspicious Signs" (1723).



Figure 2. Detail of Castiglione's "One Hundred Steeds."

nature of the Confucian tradition, both in its philosophic and religious nature, and in its embrace of a scientific outlook toward the development of man and nature—he and the Jesuits who followed him over the next century were given leading positions in the Court, especially in the Bureau of Astronomy, which played a central role in Chinese society.

Gottfried Leibniz, whose correspondence with several Jesuit Fathers in China led him to publish detailed comparative studies of Christian and Confucian beliefs and practices in his *Novissima Sinica* (1697), described Kangxi as a monarch "who almost exceeds human heights of greatness, being a god-like mortal, ruling by a nod of his head, who, however, is educated to virtue and wisdom . . . , thereby earning his



Figure 3. One of the many examples of the "trompe l'oeil effect," by Castiglione.

right to rule.” Leibniz wrote, anticipating the New Silk Road:

I consider it a singular plan of the fates that human cultivation and refinement should today be concentrated, as it were, in the two extremes of our continent, in Europe and in China, which adorns the Orient as Europe does the opposite edge of the Earth. Perhaps Supreme Providence has ordained such an arrangement, so that as the most cultivated and distant peoples stretch out their arms to each other, those in between may gradually be brought to a better way of life. I do not think it an accident that the Russians, whose vast realm connects Europe with China and who hold sway over the deep barbarian lands of the North by the shore of the frozen ocean, should be led to the emulation of our ways through the strenuous efforts of their present ruler [Peter I].³

In 1692, Kangxi issued an edict granting all Christians the right to teach and preach, and to bring Chinese subjects into the Catholic Church, requiring only that civil servants, who were chosen for their positions based on national examinations in Confucian moral and social teachings, maintain moral allegiance to the Confucian principles and continue to perform the rites and ceremonies appropriate to their offices.

A debate ensued in Rome, with the Jesuits being accused of condoning “pagan” practices and supposedly obfuscating the Confucian views regarding God. (See [“Matteo Ricci, the Grand Design, and the Disaster of the ‘Rites Controversy.’”](#)) Over the next fifty years, this faction, knowing little or nothing about China or the Confucian ideas, argued that a Chinese subject must renounce Confucianism before becoming a Christian. It

3. G.W. Leibniz. Preface to the *Novissima Sinica* (News from China), translated by Daniel J. Cook and Henry Rosemont, Jr., in their *Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz: Writings on China*, Open Court, 1998, pp. 45-46. For the full story of Leibniz’s extraordinary design and efforts to unite Europe and China, see [“The Leibnizian Roots of Eurasian Integration,”](#) by Jason Ross, *Executive Intelligence Review*, April 29, 2016.

succeeded in convincing several Popes to issue Papal Bulls against Christian adherence to Confucian beliefs and rites. Since the adherence to Confucian moral and social teachings were the basis of government service, these dictates from Rome essentially demanded a revolt against the government and the peace of the state by Christian recruits.

Kangxi had no choice but to expel the Christian missionaries in 1720, although he allowed several of the leading scientific advisors to retain positions in the Astronomy and Engineering bureaus—and he allowed Giuseppe Castiglione to remain in the Court to continue his painting and teaching.



The Kangxi Emperor (1661-1722)

More than a century of collaboration between Renaissance science and culture in the West and that of Confucian China in the East was drastically and tragically curtailed. (The scholar Nathan Sivin has argued forcefully that this era of cooperation had witnessed a true scientific revolution in China.) The pace of the dramatic scientific and economic progress within China gradually slowed over time. In the West, the imperial forces centered in Venice and later in the Anglo-Dutch Empire asserted their power over the humanist forces that had supported cooperation between East and

West. By the 19th Century, British gunboats, loaded not only with weapons, but also with opium from British India, invaded and conquered the weakened forces in China, unleashing the “Century of Humiliation” of imperial occupation and forced legalization of opium in China.

Qianlong Emperor: Castiglione’s Protector and Patron

The progress made during the Kangxi reign, due in no small part to the collaboration with the Jesuit Fathers, was in part sustained under the following reigns of Yongzheng and Qianlong (reigned 1722-35 and 1735-1796, respectively), both of whom continued to cooperate with the few Jesuits who had been allowed to remain in China—including Giuseppe Castiglione. Qianlong, the Qing dynasty’s 4th and longest reigning Emperor, saw himself walking in his grandfather’s

footsteps as an ecumenical unifier of the diverse ethnicities, religions and language groups in China.

Qianlong also had to resist efforts by his more radical advisors, who demanded that all Jesuits be expelled from the Imperial Board of Astronomy which they had led since the early days of the Qing Dynasty. He also promoted Castiglione to third civil official rank and Vice President of the Six Boards.⁴ The Emperor also sponsored the western-eastern fusion of the visual arts and architecture in ways never before seen. The National Palace Museum of Taipei features the following description of Qianlong's outlook on the arts:

Qianlong, who perceived detailed, naturalistic painting as a means of propagating the magnificence of the Qing empire was a particularly strong proponent of this mixing of eastern and western artistic styles.

One of Castiglione's close allies in Beijing was Ferdinand Augustin Hallerstein (1703-1774), who served as a leading diplomat between the East and West and was the head of the Imperial Board of Astronomy from 1746-1774. Hallerstein's letters provide insight into the tense atmosphere of the Court and the Emperor's resistance to the anti-Christian pressures being applied by his advisors. Early in the Emperor's reign, all efforts made by the missionaries to speak with the Emperor and plead for leniency had been blocked by the court eunuchs and mandarins. Hallerstein documented that a memorial letter of leniency had been presented by Castiglione to the Emperor in 1736, in the following account:

The Emperor came as usual to sit by him and watch him paint. The Brother laid down his brush and, suddenly assuming a sad expression, fell to his knees and after uttering a few words Sacred Law drew from his breast our Memorial wrapped in yellow silk. The eunuchs of the presence trembled at this Brother's audacity, for he had concealed his purpose from them. However, the Emperor listened to him calmly and said to him in a kindly way: "I have not condemned

your religion; I have simply forbidden the people of the Banners [referring to officials and military forces] to embrace it." At the same time he signed to the eunuchs to receive the Memorial and turning to Castiglione he added: "I shall read it, do not worry, and go on painting."⁵

It was in this same year that China's first painting academy was established, which strongly promoted the Xianfa style and Castiglione was made "official court painter."

Governance and Art

Since Castiglione's art is very much connected to the governance of China, it is important to briefly look at the political environment shaping his art from several angles.

After putting down Mongol uprisings in 1755-59 and extending the empire's territories to include Tibet and some areas now in Central Asia, the Qianlong Emperor did not enslave the Mongol Buddhist or Zunghar (central Asian) peoples, but rather worked to build, beautify and protect their temples, mosques and other cultural treasures. In mastering their languages, and even adopting many of their customs as his own, the Emperor, who was fluent in 5 languages, described his approach to cultural diplomacy in the following terms:

When the rota of Mongols, Muslims and Tibetans come every year to the capital for an audience I use their own languages and do not rely on an interpreter . . . to express the idea of conquering by kindness.

In the various portraits which Castiglione was commissioned to paint of the Qianlong Emperor for display in the various regions of China, the Emperor consciously projected himself differently to each constituency. The National Palace Museum of Taipei described the strategy thus:

To the Tibetans, Qianlong portrayed himself as a re-incarnation of one of the most important bodhisattvas of Tibetan Buddhism, Manjusri; for the Mongols, he took on the role of a Steppe prince

4. This was the highest rank ever achieved by a Jesuit. See Friederike Biebl, "[The Magnificence of the Qing—European Art on the Jesuit Mission in China](#)," 2014.

5. Natasa Vampelj Suhadolnic. "[Ferdinand Augustin Hallerstein on Giuseppe Castiglione's Art](#)," 2015.



Figure 4. Three portraits by Castiglione of the Qianlong Emperor, as he presented himself to various constituencies: in Manchu warrior armor (left), as formal Han royalty (middle), and as the Buddhist Mañjuśrī (right).

who understood their steppe traditions; and to the Han Chinese he portrayed himself as a scholar and a great patron of Chinese Learning and art. [Figure 4]

Most importantly, however, the Emperor saw himself not as an elite dictator, but as a humble servant. In many of his portraits, Qianlong ensured that Castiglione portrayed him with his family, studying paintings or practicing calligraphy, or hunting deer, rather than in formal imperial styles. [Figure 5]

Emperor Qianlong promoted a Confucian policy of

political harmony through the advancement of arts and culture. For this reason, Qianlong loved his friend Castiglione more than all other missionaries and advisors, maintaining him as the official court painter during his entire reign, with Castiglione being the only foreigner ever permitted into the bedchambers of the Emperor and his wife in order to paint their portraits.⁶ He made

6. In an anonymous, unpublished biography of Castiglione written soon after his death, the anecdote of the Emperor's admiration for the painter is described, as well as Castiglione's humility and disdain for honors: "Since he was a child, he was an admirer of Castiglione and developed a great love and filial affection for him. As soon as he became



Figure 5. Two Castiglione portraits of the Qianlong Emperor: in his study (left, date unknown); and in a detail with the Royal Children (right, 1736-37).



Figure 6a. Ruins of the Emperor Qianlong's Old Summer Palace.

Castiglione Administrator of Imperial Parks and commissioned him to design the decorations and western-styled pavilions inside the gardens of the Old Summer Palace, the Yuanmingyuan, in 1747. The British made sure to destroy these works during the Second Opium War of 1860 and only relics remain today, although artistic reconstructions do exist which feature a glorious image of a classical fusion of eastern and western architecture [Figure 6].

When Castiglione died on July 17, 1766 in Beijing, the Emperor personally wrote his obituary, erected a tombstone and ensured that he was buried alongside the two greatest Jesuit missionaries who paved the way for a new paradigm of universal renaissance thinking, Matteo Ricci and Johann Adam Schall von Bell.

With the destructive consequences of the Opium

the Emperor, he could not stand the fact that the worthy old man did not have any honors, so he decreed that he would enter the Order of Mandarins. [...] A lot of people started to congratulate him openly on what they thought was a settled fact, but the virtuous old man abhorred these kinds of honors, [...]. So while asking God for what he had to do to avoid those honors [...] he looked unusually sad so that his friends took it as a clear sign of his unwillingness to accept such a favor: a clear sign indeed also for the Emperor, who as he did not want to afflict the very person he wanted to gratify, recalled the decree, something which rarely happens. Castiglione's humility had prevailed." (Musillo, *op. cit.*, p. 54)



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Figure 6b. Artist's rendering of the Old Summer Palace.

Wars and the foreign imperial control over China, Xianfa ceased to be practiced and has been largely forgotten. However, with President Xi Jinping leading a new era of ecumenicism and cultural exchange under the New Silk Road, the spirit of Castiglione and other great renaissance visionaries can finally be revived and taken to a new level.

Let us close with the wise words of Helga Zepp-LaRouche, who summarized this potential in her April 14, 2017 speech to a Schiller Institute conference, under the title, "[East and West: A Dialogue of Great Cultures](#)":

The Confucian tradition is experiencing a great renaissance in China right now, led by President Xi Jinping, who has made it a point that Confucian teaching must be taught on all levels of society. We could turn back to the European high tradition at will. We could go back to Plato, the Classical Greeks, the Italian Renaissance, the German Classical period. And this is the European culture which is the New Paradigm of the New Silk Road, and if it is revived with a dialogue of culture with it, then at any time we can make it alive and with it a new Renaissance. If each nation and each culture makes alive again their highest cultural achievements, presenting to themselves and other nations their best aspect, it is certain a new renaissance will come—seizing upon the best from universal history, but beyond that, enthusiastically creating new corresponding concepts for mankind achieving maturity.