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THE WESTWARD DISSEMINATION OF PRE-MODERN CHINESE BOOK COLLECTIONS TO EUROPE: THE BOOKS OF JOACHIM BOUVET

Abstract

One of the most magnificent collections of pre-modern Chinese books kept in Europe was brought to France by Joachim Bouvet, a French missionary, in the 17th century. It is widely accepted that these forty-nine volumes of Chinese books were a gift from the Chinese emperor Kangxi to Louis XIV, the king of France, with Bouvet, the person who brought the books, believed to have been appointed as the Kangxi Emperor's special envoy. However, as I intend to show here, it may be that neither was Bouvet a special envoy, nor were the books a gift from the Chinese emperor.

Keywords: Chinese history, missionary, pre-modern Chinese book collections, Joachim Bouvet

INTRODUCTION

There are many collections of pre-modern Chinese books all over the world, known as *Hanji* 漢籍 in Chinese. As we all know, many Chinese books were transported to nearby countries such as Japan and Korea, and had a great influence on their cultures. In actual fact, Chinese books were also transported to farther places including Europe. Therefore, I would like to discuss the collections of Chinese books in Europe in this article.

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OVERSEAS COLLECTIONS OF CHINESE BOOKS IN EUROPE

Chinese books were transported to Europe in several ways, including being obtained by missionaries from the East or having been sought out by private collectors. As Chinese Studies has developed since the 20th century, the purchase of Chinese books by research institutions related to Chinese Studies has become one of the main sources of Chinese book collections (Chen, 2018; Xu, 2017). These books are still preserved in universities, museums, and art galleries with many scholars, namely European, Chinese, and Japanese, having sorted out these books and published catalogues of them (Xie, 2015; Xie, 2016; Xu & Sun, 2011). There are also articles concerning some typical examples of such books that have great value. However, when discussing the background of these books, both Eastern and Western scholars mostly use Western historical data. In this way, some of their conclusions display biases.

As mentioned previously, there are forty-nine Chinese books kept in the National Library of France, brought to France by a French missionary, Joachim Bouvet, following his first visit to China. This is an early example of Chinese books being brought to Europe by missionaries. Generally, I consider these forty-nine books as a gift from the Kangxi 康熙 Emperor, one of the most famous emperors in Qing dynasty in China. However, in this article, I would like to use Chinese historical data and knowledge to re-examine this collection in order to prove that at least some of these forty-nine Chinese books might not have been a gift from the Chinese emperor after all. I would also like to discuss overseas collections of Chinese books from a new point of view.

JOACHIM BOUVET

Joachim Bouvet, whose Chinese name was Bai Jin 白晉, was a French missionary who brought the forty-nine volumes of Chinese books under discussion here to France. Born in 1656, he was one of six missionaries sent to China by Louis XIV, the king of France. He arrived in Beijing (then known in the West as Peking), the capital of China, in 1688. According to his report to Louis XIV, he was placed in an important position by the Kangxi Emperor after his arrival (Bouvet, 2013). Over the course of his life, he went back to

Europe several times. He spent his later life in China, and passed away in Beijing in 1730.

Both Chinese and Western scholars have carried out research on Bouvet. In 1929, Paul Pelliot wrote papers questioning the validity of Bouvet's claims that he was an envoy from Louis XIV when he visited China the second time (Chen, 2018). In 1976, Janette Gatty published a collection of essays titled *Les recherches de Joachim Bouvet (1656-1730)*. In 1985, Claudia von Collani wrote a book presenting an account of Bouvet's life. This work followed many opinions of earlier scholars, especially those of Gatty, including the claims that Bouvet was the Kangxi Emperor's special envoy, and that the Chinese books he brought back after his first visit were a present from the Kangxi Emperor, claims which are the main subject of this article. Collani's book was published in China in 2009 and became one of the most important sources for Chinese scholars who wished to study Bouvet (Collani, 2009). In recent years, Chinese scholars themselves (Cao, 2015; Li, 2013) have written articles about Bouvet. However, concerning the history of Bouvet's first visit of China, they did not engage in their own detailed research, but only followed the ideas of Gatty and Collani. Additionally, there are articles based on research concerning the Chinese books kept in the National Library of France that were brought there by Bouvet. Indeed an article by Chen (2018) includes details about these books and offers the novel hypothesis that these books may not actually be presents from the Kangxi Emperor, at all. However, he fails to provide a full development of the proof of this hypothesis. Thus, there are still many problems to be solved concerning Bouvet's life in China, especially his first visit.

In order to deliver the forty-nine volumes of Chinese books to France during his first return visit, Bouvet left China from Macao on January 10, 1694 and arrived in Brest, France on March 1, 1697 (Cao, 2015). According to Claudia von Collani:

The capital of France, a brilliant metropolis, was a topic that the Kangxi Emperor and Bouvet often talked about. Because of Bouvet's introduction, the Kangxi Emperor came up with the idea of establishing an academy of sciences in China following the French way. He appointed Bouvet as a special envoy and sent him to France to solicit extraordinarily learned Jesuits for establishing the academy. In order to build the relationship between France and China, the Kangxi Emperor asked Bouvet to bring presents to the French Emperor,

including 49 Chinese books that were beautifully designed and bound. These books, later collected by the National Library of France, become the core of the Chinese collection in the library to this day. (Collani, 2009, p. 26)

What Collani expounded had been widely accepted in the previous studies. Until now, the research on Joachim Bouvet's life and his relationship with the Kangxi Emperor has been based almost entirely on Western historical data and the previous research of Western scholars. In contrast, the incorporation of Chinese history and Chinese historical data gives us a fresh perspective on Bouvet.

DISCUSSION

Undoubtedly, the above-mentioned forty-nine volumes of Chinese books, kept at the National Library of France until now, constitute valuable cultural heritage, and are often defined as evidence of the communication between the Chinese emperor and the king of France. However, this might not have been the case. The previously discussed published work tells us about two points in particular. Firstly, Bouvet was sent back to France as a special envoy of the Kangxi Emperor. Secondly, Bouvet brought forty-nine Chinese books to the king of France as a present from the Kangxi Emperor. I will argue against these two points using Chinese historical data in the following sections.

WAS JOACHIM BOUVET TRULY THE KANGXI EMPEROR'S SPECIAL ENVOY?

In this chapter, I would like to discuss whether or not Bouvet was truly the Kangxi Emperor's special envoy.

After Bouvet went back to France, he wrote a report about the Kangxi Emperor, including details of his life in China and his association with the Chinese emperor, and submitted it to Louis XIV. He also published it as a book later called *The History of Kangxi* (translated into Chinese and incorporated in *Baijin yanzhong de Kangxi Huangdi* published in China in 2013). In Bouvet's book, he wrote:

Of course, we have accomplished the great mission perfectly given by Your Majesty. When we left China, The Kangxi Emperor was planning to give a large piece of land to Jesuits in China, and hoped Your Majesty would send more missionaries to China. (Bouvet, 2013, p. 33)

According to this, Bouvet seems to have been so admired by the Kangxi Emperor that he was placed in an important position.

In the standard narrative, Bouvet was sent back to France as the Kangxi Emperor's special envoy, and before he went back to France, "he had the use of all the privileges that a special envoy can have" (Collani, 2009, p. 26). However, there is evidence which can prove that he might not have been the Kangxi Emperor's special envoy after all.

Firstly, in the Chinese official historical record that is still being kept today, there is no mention of Bouvet having become a special envoy. Actually, in the official Chinese record, Bouvet's name did not appear until he came back from France and entered China a second time. Therefore, even though it is widely accepted that Bouvet had been placed in an important position by the Kangxi Emperor when he first came to China, it can be inferred that this conclusion was only based on Bouvet's own description.

Moreover, Bouvet did not have any credentials from the Kangxi Emperor to prove his position as a special envoy. The reason that he did not present any credentials to Louis XIV when he came back to France was that, "in Chinese tradition, they only use written documents when they issue orders to inferiors" (Collani, 2009, p. 27). Moreover, it was impossible for most of the Chinese and French to communicate directly during this period of time because of the different languages, as well as the long distance between the two countries. Although Louis XIV and most of Bouvet's readers, who knew little about China, might have believed Bouvet's excuse, his story was actually full of inconsistencies.

In fact, in Chinese history, written documents were used in different formal situations, such as issuing orders to one's inferiors, advising superiors, and reporting to the throne. Many written documents of this type still exist today. Written documents were used not only within the Chinese government, but also in its communication with other countries. At that time, China only allowed trade with other countries by way of a tribute system, meaning that countries could bring goods as tribute and then receive gifts in return. As vassals of China in the tribute system, many countries that were deeply affected by Chinese culture brought tribute, as well

as written documents, to China. This constitutes proof that in Chinese culture, the tradition of “using written documents only when issuing orders to inferiors” does not exist. Actually, in the Chinese official historical record, there are also written documents sent to European countries, one of which I will discuss in detail later.

But there is another thing we should notice. According to Bouvet’s interpretation of “Chinese tradition”, in the Kangxi Emperor’s eyes, the Chinese emperor and the king of France were equal in position. In the Veritable Records of the Qing dynasty (*Qingshilu* 清實錄), namely the Chinese official historical record, although I could not find any letters to the king of France, “letters”, more accurately known as “imperial rescripts”, to leaders of other European countries were found. For instance, this is an imperial rescript from the Kangxi Emperor to the king of the Netherlands on July 27, 1686 on the lunar calendar.

The imperial rescript granted to the king of the Netherlands states:

We think winning over people living both near and far, and letting them come under us, is a great strategy in the period of prosperity. Paying tribute is also a great principle for the tributary state. People who keep showing its sincerity, should be granted imperial favor. Although the King of the Netherlands is living far from here, he sent an envoy to offer a report and pay tribute (to us), and expressed his loyal devotion. His loyalty unquestionably should be praised. So we grant this rescript to praise the King of the Netherlands, as well as presents such as silk, silver and so on [...]. (Daqing Shengzurenhuangdi Shilu, July 27, 1686)

In Bouvet’s book, he mentioned the attitude of the Kangxi Emperor towards envoys from Netherlands and other countries. He thought that the Kangxi Emperor was different from most Chinese, because most Chinese “only welcome envoys from countries which would like to come under China, while the Kangxi Emperor did not act in this way. He treated almost every country that sent envoys to China equally” (Bouvet, 2013, p. 9). However, in the imperial rescript mentioned above, the Kangxi Emperor thought that envoys from the Netherlands came to China to pay tribute, just as envoys had from other countries in the tribute system. In fact, the Kangxi Emperor selected the words which were only used when writing to his inferiors in this imperial rescript. Obviously, I can assume that Kangxi Emperor treated the king of the Netherlands just as a king of a tributary state of Qing, and did not communicate as one in an equal position.

Indeed, it would be difficult for a Chinese emperor to perceive that all other countries should be treated equally, since the tribute system of China had had a long history. Additionally, the Kangxi Emperor and his officials in the Chinese government knew little about Europe. In another imperial rescript of the same day, the Kangxi Emperor mentioned the conflict with Russia at that time. It said:

Recently, we asked the envoy from the Netherlands (about Russia). He replied that his country borders on Russia, and people from these two countries can understand each other's languages. We wrote about the whole thing that we had already ordered Russia several times, placed the seal of Ministry of War upon it, gave it to the envoy from the Netherlands, and let him hand over to the Tsar of Russia. (Daqing Shengzurenhuangdi Shilu, July 27, 1686)

Since he had not received any reply from the envoys sent to Russia, the Kangxi Emperor asked the envoy from the Netherlands and understood that the Netherlands shared border with Russia allowing people from these two countries to communicate. Thus, the Kangxi Emperor granted a rescript and allowed the envoy from the Netherlands to hand it over to the tsar of Russia. However, actually, as we know, the Netherlands did not border Russia at this, or at any time. This illustrates that the Kangxi Emperor had little knowledge of Europe, while his misunderstanding of Europe and the world led him to treat the kings of European countries just as mere leaders of tributary states in the Chinese tributary system.

In summary, in the Chinese official historical record of, there is no record of Joachim Bouvet becoming a special envoy. He did not hand over any credentials to Louis XIV and his excuse for not doing so was not a reasonable one. Thus, Bouvet might not have been the Kangxi Emperor's special envoy after all.

WERE THE FORTY-NINE VOLUMES OF CHINESE BOOKS A PRESENT FROM THE KANGXI EMPEROR?

I would now like to discuss the forty-nine volumes of Chinese books themselves in this section. These forty-nine volumes, representing twenty-two kinds of books, with yellow-or-blue silk covers, were written in Chinese and Manchu, and were mostly published during the Ming and Qing dynasties.

Table 1

	Title	Edition
Book 1	『新編直指算法統宗』十七卷	明萬曆壬辰賓渠旅舍刻、天啓甲子聖益軒重印本
Book 2	『字彙補』十二集	清康熙五年彙賢齋刻本
Book 3	『本草綱目』五十二卷	清康熙二十三年金閶綠蔭堂文雅堂印本
Book 4	『書經大全正解』十二卷	清康熙二十九年贈言堂印本
Book 5	『性理標題綜要』二十二卷	明崇禎間翼聖堂印本

*The data in Table 1 was compiled based on the work of Chen (Chen, 2018).

Although, generally, as a gift to another country, these forty-nine books should have been published by government publishing houses, in actual fact, a number of them were published by non-government publishers. I have listed a part of the editions of these forty-nine books which were published by non-government publishing houses in this form, the underlined charters being the names of such publishers. This is evidence that a number of these books might not have been a gift from the Chinese Emperor after all.

Using Book 3 as an example, Figure 1 is the title page of the book. It shows the title and the author of the book, as well as the date and place of publication. “Bencao Gangmu” 本草綱目 is the title of the book, with “Li Shizhen” 李時珍 being the name of the author. “Kangxi Jiazi” 康熙甲子, meaning the 23rd year of Kangxi in Qing dynasty (1684), is the year in which this book was published. The characters on the left side “Lvyintang Wenyatang” 綠蔭堂文雅堂 represent the name of the non-government publishing house which published this book, while the stamp on the bottom right corner “Lvyintang” 綠蔭堂 also displays the name of the publisher. “Jinchang” 金閶, another name for the city Suzhou, is shown as the location of this non-government publishing house. Considering the fact that Suzhou is a city in the southern part of China, books published by such a publishing house should have been quite rare in the north. Therefore, it is quite likely that Joachim Bouvet bought this book on his way to Macao.

In addition, there are stamps on some of these books which show that they were not gifts from the Chinese government but trade articles. As an example, Figure 2 is the title page of another book. The title is *Xiaojing Xiaoxue Jizhu* 孝經小學集注. There is a stamp on the bottom left corner of this title page, bearing the legend “Fanyinbijiu” 翻印必究, meaning that



Fig. 1. The title page of Bencao Gangmu 本草綱目 (*Compendium of Materia Medica*). Author: Li Shizhen 李時珍. Year of publication: 1684
Source: gallica.bnf.fr / Bibliothèque nationale de France, <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b9006483t/f2.item>, Held in the National Library of France



Fig. 2. The title page of Xiaojing Xiaoxue Jizhu 孝經小學集註. Author: Zhu Xi 朱熹. Year of publication: probably published in the end of the Ming dynasty or the beginning of the Qing dynasty (1628-1661).
Source: gallica.bnf.fr / Bibliothèque nationale de France, <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k98173430.r=%E5%AD%9D%E7%B6%93%E5%B0%8F%E5%AD%B8?rk=21459;2>, Held in the National Library of France

unauthorized reproduction in any form may result in prosecution. As this stamp shows that this was a book intended for sale, it was certainly not a gift from the Chinese Emperor. Overall, it is justifiable to conclude that at least a number of these forty-nine books were not sent as a gift from the Kangxi Emperor.

CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE WORK

In conclusion, the claim that Joachim Bouvet served as a special envoy of the Kangxi Emperor and brought books as gifts to Louis XIV may need to be reexamined. Firstly, Bouvet might not have been the Kangxi Emperor's special envoy. Secondly, it has been established that a number of these forty-nine volumes of Chinese books were definitely not gifts from the Kangxi Emperor.

As Paul Pelliot already pointed out in a paper from 1929, after Bouvet was commissioned by France and returned to China, he persuaded a merchant ship called the *Amphitrite* to pose as a boat sent by the French king to call on the Chinese emperor (Chen, 2018). Most of the studies about Bouvet have tacitly acknowledged of his book *The History of Kangxi* as the truth. Although there are many details that are of high historical value in the book, there are also a lot of exaggerations and dubious accounts. Moreover, it has been ascertained that Bouvet was incapable of understanding classical Chinese well. Therefore, there are still plenty of mysteries about Bouvet which need to be cleared up.

Overseas collections of Chinese books are examples of cultural heritage in the globalization process, and they connected people from both East and West through transportation. It is necessary to use both Eastern and Western knowledge and historical data in order to research the sources of overseas collections of Chinese books once again as it can provide us with a new point of view regarding communications in the world.

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