

*Transformations of Intercultural Diplomacies: Comparative Views on Asia and Europe (1700 to 1850).*

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**Reviewed by** Samuel Weber

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What were the repercussions of the Atlantic revolutions at the end of the eighteenth century on intercultural diplomacy between Europe and Asia? Recent work in diplomatic history has pointed to 1800 as a watershed in the way diplomacy was conducted in Europe: whereas in the early modern period foreign relations were structured by a need to balance multiple, competing normative standards, the Atlantic revolutions heralded the rise of sovereignty as the sole organizing principle of diplomacy. This finding begs the question of how this shift within Europe affected the continent's relations with the Asian Empires. It is a truism that the transition to the Vienna system in Europe coincided with growing economic and military imbalances between the west and the rest. But does this mean that one automatically led to the other? This and other questions were tackled during a three-day workshop at the University of Bern.

The first speaker of a panel on “Transformations around 1800”, MATTHEW MOSCA (Seattle), discussed the sudden surge of European interest in the languages of the Qing Empire after 1792. He argued that the linguists in question were a motley crew who often acted as individuals and representatives of organized religions rather than as part of coordinated efforts led by European states, thus making it difficult to see the renewed fasci-

nation with Oriental languages as part of a linguistic arms race between European powers.

Focusing on the Ottoman Empire, WILL SMILEY (Portland) examined how foreign subjects captured under arms were freed in the long eighteenth century. He showed that while the Ottomans initially refused to accept the European law of nations and were able to force European diplomats to negotiate agreements on a case-by-case basis, these nevertheless created legal precedents which in the long run enabled European powers to impose the *ius gentium* on the Sublime Porte.

PASCAL FIRGES (Paris) zoomed in on a much shorter period in a paper on French diplomatic practice on the Bosphorus in the wake of the French revolution. He argued that revolutionary France was primarily interested in forging a Franco-Ottoman alliance against the counterrevolutionary monarchies of Europe. In the process realpolitik trumped all other considerations, with France going so far as to relinquish ceremonial positions that would have been unthinkable to forsake in interactions with European powers.

In his comment on this and the other papers of the panel, HILLARD VON THIESSEN (Rostock) suggested that the changes described by Firges were not so much a sign of French pragmatism as of incipient imbalances between the Europe of the

nation-state and the empires of the Orient. France was willing to forsake earlier pretensions because such concessions to the “Oriental” Ottomans were inconsequential to its status within the emerging Concert of Europe.

HENRIETTA HARRISON (Oxford), by contrast, shed light on how the Qing and Ottoman Empires sought to react and adapt to the changes underway in Europe around 1800. She pointed out that, from an Asian perspective, the irony of the shift toward a supposedly universal order of interaction between sovereign states was acute: as Europe embraced a new normative order, the empires in the east who took the universal appeal of the law of nations seriously found themselves shut out of the Vienna system. In order to account for the increasingly lop-sided relations between Europe and Asia, she suggested looking more closely at technological changes taking place at the time.

In the first paper of a panel on “Practices of Diplomatic Interactions”, ADAM YUET CHAU (Cambridge UK) compared the hosting system of ordinary households in Qing China with the audience system the Qing emperors put in place to host representatives from the inner-Asian periphery. Differentiating between hospitality and hosting, he argued that audiences at the Qing court forced attendees to comply with a set of rules laid down by the host and thus cemented the emperor’s sovereignty as head of the extended household of the court.

TANJA BÜHRER’s (Bern) presentation concerned the Indian agents, interpreters and intermediaries who negotiated with the Nizam of Hyderabad on behalf of the British East India Company from the 1770s onward. Though tied to the local ruler through patronage, they offered their intercultural knowledge and skills to European powers. Paradoxically, this informal intercultural diplomacy came to be seen as unacceptable in the early nineteenth century at the exact moment

when the Nizam of Hyderabad had, for all intents and purposes, lost his sovereignty to Britain.

MICHAEL KHODARKOVSKY (Chicago), in a paper on Russia’s Asian frontier, argued that the early modern Russian Empire increasingly appropriated Ottoman rhetoric of sovereignty in order to justify the subjugation of its Asian neighbors who incidentally lacked the new structures of government of the emergent Russian Empire. As Tsarist officials sought to turn the nomad populations on the empire’s eastern frontier into loyal subjects, they invested heavily in the training of a new indigenous elite. While the latter could and did act as intercultural interlocutors with the center, these developments paved the way for the emergence of new national identities in the nineteenth century and the ethnic conflicts that befell Russia in the twentieth.

JAN HENNINGS (Budapest) focused on Petr Tolstoy, Russia’s first resident ambassador to the Sublime Porte, and how he gathered information on the Ottoman Empire from a variety of informal actors *en route* to his new post. His comparative study of two empires on the fringes of Europe showed that in the early decades of the eighteenth century when Russia was yet to turn westward and adopt the Europeans’ Orientalist view of the Ottomans, the Black Sea was a “shared world” in which Russians and Ottomans intermingled and exchanged information.

In a paper on the bey of Tunis’ relations with European powers in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, CHRISTIAN WINDLER (Bern) drew attention to the symbolic aspects of the shift from bilateral arrangements to more standardized forms of interaction between formally sovereign states. He argued that the ceremonies and rituals which had originally been set up to regulate interactions in the Mediterranean were increasingly manipulated by Europeans to convey new notions of western superiority over the “Barbary” Coast.

In his comment HENNING SIEVERT (Zürich) drew attention to the importance of informal actors in all settings, and the considerable advantages this entailed: straddling multiple worlds and languages, these intermediaries were ideally placed to act as intercultural brokers. It was only around 1800 that these multiple allegiances became a cause for concern. As Europeans grew wary of the ambiguities characteristic of Old Regime diplomacy, diplomacy based on trial and error and productive misunderstanding gave way to more professional but also culturally less sensitive practices.

In the eyes of ANDRÉ KRISCHER (Münster), the papers showed that the shift from a set of competing normative standards toward a new universalism around 1800 was not just a European but indeed a global phenomenon. If early modern European diplomats had successfully fostered peaceful relations with non-European powers, this was because the practice of negotiating *ad hoc* arrangements in Euro-Asian relations did not differ dramatically from the need to reconcile contrasting normative standards that characterized inter-European diplomacy under the Old Regime. In light of this Krischer suggested speaking of a “global early modern age” during which relations between Europe and Asia were governed by a mutual commitment to balancing competing priorities and interests. This sparked an impassioned debate. Europeanists reiterated that competing normative frameworks existed within Europe itself, which made it relatively easy for European diplomats interacting with Asian powers to find common ground and build working relationships. Global historians, on the other hand, cautioned against effacing important differences. Although differences between inter-European and Euro-Asian relations were of degree rather than kind, the gap separating Europeans from Asians was nevertheless considerably wider than the one between representatives from the same continent.

In his keynote lecture SANJAY SUBRAHMANYAM (Los Angeles) developed a model of encounters between Europeans and Asians at the dawn of the early modern age. After a phase of improvisation and frantic information gathering on both sides, relations were usually put on a stable footing in a relatively short amount of time. Although the subsequent phase was generally one of routinization and ritualization, intercultural misunderstandings continued to crop up as more information on the other side became available. While these could be smoothed out by highly skilled intercultural intermediaries in some cases, in others, such as the Portuguese expansion into Japan, they could lead to the unilateral suspension of seemingly stable relations.

The last panel on “The Social Identities of Diplomatic Agents” was opened by IRINA FLITER’s (Tel Aviv) case study of two brothers who acted as Ottoman *chargés d’affaires* in Prussia around 1800. Although in many respects the Argiropoulos still acted like early modern diplomats, the study of their careers revealed that the sultans sought to professionalize their diplomatic service in the period, indicating that the Sublime Porte did attempt to keep pace with contemporary developments in Europe.

By contrast, DAVID DO PAÇO’s (Paris) paper drew attention to the persistence of Old Regime practices on the eve of the revolutionary upheavals at the end of the eighteenth century. Using the Cobenzl family’s network in Istanbul as an example, he showed that Josephine economic and imperial policy was deeply rooted in patronage. Operating within a dynastic logic, Austrian nobles-cum-civil servants made their clientele available to the monarch in a shared effort to further the aggrandizement of both heads of household.

HENRIETTA HARRISON’s (Oxford) case study of Li Zibiao, the Chinese-born and European-educated interpreter who accompanied Macartney on his famous embassy to China, shed light on the considerable wiggling room of early modern in-

termediaries. While this allowed them to push personal agendas, it also raises the question of how trust was built and maintained between interpreters and principals. In her paper Harrison stressed the role of male bonding and sociability in achieving this.

MAY BO CHING (Hongkong) shifted focus from court diplomacy to boatmen and cooks who interacted with Europeans in the Pearl River Delta in the long eighteenth century. She argued that while their grasp of English was often poor, these “little people” at the bottom of the social hierarchy were nevertheless better equipped to engage in successful intercultural communication, not least because they were less affected by the profound changes that were taking place in the “big world” of their betters.

In their closing remarks JEROEN DUINDAM (Leiden) and MAURUS REINKOWSKI (Basel) both pointed out that the early nineteenth century did indeed mark a watershed in Euro-Asian relations. An informal system of intercultural intermediaries who often made a virtue of their multiple allegiances gave way to a new system which was certainly more professional and rational but also less apt to accommodate the cultural needs of both sides. Since this transition coincided with a growing asymmetry of military and economic power between the west and the rest, from the 1850s forward the scales were definitely tipped in Europe’s favor.

This set the stage for the final discussion, during which a number of interrelated issues was raised. Some discussants questioned to what extent the case studies presented in the workshop challenged the received wisdom on Euro-Asian relations in the long eighteenth century and how they might be integrated into a new narrative. In response to this others suggested that a focus on shifts in the normative standards governing foreign relations in the period could help weave the case studies into a coherent narrative. There was, however, no general consensus as to when the

shift toward the new universalism of state sovereignty as the sole organizing principle of foreign relations occurred. Some discussants argued that the Atlantic revolutions did not really mark a watershed: the most profound changes happened gradually and materialized only in the first decades of the nineteenth century. If this were the case, this would suggest a potential link between the shift from an informal system of bilateral agreements towards more formalized interaction between formally sovereign states and the growing asymmetry of power between the west and the rest. Some discussants suggested putting this hypothesis to the test by comparing Euro-Asian relations with Europe’s diplomatic ties to other continents, particularly Africa and Latin America.

### **Conference overview**

Henrietta Harrison (Oxford) / Christian Windler, (Bern) / Nadine Amsler (Bern):

Introduction

#### *Panel I: Transformations around 1800\**

Matthew Mosca (Seattle)

Comprehending the Qing Empire: Building Multilingual Competence in an Age of Imperial Rivalry, 1790-1820

Will Smiley (Portland)

Ottoman Diplomacy and the Law of Nations, 1699-1856

Pascal Firges (Paris)

The French Revolutionary Transformation of Diplomatic Practise: Franco-Ottoman Negotiations in Istanbul, 1792-1797

Henrietta Harrison (Oxford) / Hillard von Thiessen (Rostock)

Comments, Panel Discussion

#### *Panel II: Practices of Diplomatic Interaction*

Adam Yuet Chau (Cambridge UK)

Hosting the Periphery: The Alternating Audience System during the Qing Dynasty

Tanja Bühner (Bern)

Intercultural Diplomacy at the Court of the Nizam  
of Hyderabad, c. 1770-1815

Michael Khodarkovsky (Chicago)

The White Tsar and his “Unfaithful” Subjects: In-  
tercultural Diplomacies on Russia's Asian Frontier

Jan Hennings (Budapest)

Exchanges between Centres beyond the Periph-  
ery: The First Russian Permanent Embassy in Is-  
tanbul

Christian Windler (Bern)

Performing Inequality in Mediterranean Diploma-  
cy

Henning Sievert (Zurich) / André Krischer  
(Münster)

Comments, Panel Discussion

Keynote Lecture:

Sanjay Subrahmanyam (Los Angeles)

The Usual Compliments? Translations and Si-  
lences in Early Modern Intercultural Diplomacy

*Panel III: The Social Identities of Diplomatic  
Agents*

Irena Fliter (Tel Aviv)

The Prussian Connection: Careers of Ottoman  
Diplomats in Times of Revolutions

David Do Paço (Paris)

Family, Clientelism and Regional Integration from  
Below: The Oriental Branch of the Cobenzl Clie-  
ntele between Vienna and Istanbul

Henrietta Harrison (Oxford)

Becoming a Faithful Interpreter: The Story of Ja-  
cobus Ly and the 1793 Macartney Embassy to Chi-  
na

May Bo Ching (Hongkong)

Little People, Big World: Intercultural encounters  
around the Pearl River Delta in South China from  
the Sixteenth to the Nineteenth Century

Maurus Reinkowski (Basel) / Jeroen Duindam  
(Leiden)

Comments, Panel Discussion

Round Table, Final Discussion

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