

A LOVE OF EUROPEAN AND GLOBAL PROJECTS

The Sun King, lord of the earth

Versailles frescoes showed the globe's continents paying homage to Louis XIV of France, who diplomatised, conquered or traded with all, sometimes on surprisingly equal terms

Philip Mansel | LMD English edition exclusive

ON 15 SEPTEMBER 1684 Louis XIV received an unusual visitor to Versailles: a Chinese convert to Catholicism called Michael Shen Fuzong, who wore a green silk tunic and blue brocade vest embroidered with dragons. Louis was so eager to start conversation that he interrupted Shen's kowtows: he liked flattery, but not prostration. The next day Shen, accompanied by a Jesuit who had long served in China, Philippe Couplet, again talked to the king, during dinner; the king made Shen recite the Ave Maria, Paternoster and Credo in Chinese. The royal family watched him eating with chopsticks on a golden plate especially brought for him. Shen and Couplet then visited the gardens where the fountains were turned on in their honour.¹

Their visit was a sign that Versailles was not just a French palace, housing French ministers, princes and courtiers. It was also a global hub, open to visitors from the entire world. Part of its original purpose was to attract and impress foreigners, and demonstrate that a French palace could surpass the palaces of ancient and modern Rome. Its ceremonial entrance, the Escalier des Ambassadeurs (destroyed to make way for a private theatre in 1752, although a copy survives in the palace of Louis XIV's greatest admirer, King Ludwig II, at Herrenchiemsee in Bavaria) had frescoes of people from the continents of Asia, Africa, America and Europe admiring a bust of Louis, and tapestries of his victories.

Louis XIV was a global monarch, as implied by his motto *Nec pluribus impar* – 'not unequal to more' (realms to conquer). His interest in world conquest, conversions and trade was fuelled by discussions with French travellers, missionaries and merchants. The gem merchant Jean-Baptiste Tavernier, in his dedication to Louis in his account of his travels from court to court across Asia, wrote, 'It seems to me that all the kings of Asia and Africa will one day be your tributaries and that you are destined to command the entire universe.'² A Jesuit missionary, Père Pallu, noted in 1684, 'His Majesty loves the sciences extremely and every kind of knowledge which one can acquire in foreign countries.'³

'Respect of all the nations'

Louis financed the dispatch of French Jesuits, mathematics teachers at the Collège Louis le Grand, to the Chinese court, with stocks of mathematical and astronomical instruments. They arrived in Beijing in February 1688 and both captivated, and were captivated by, the Kangxi emperor (1661-1722). They saw the emperor daily, teaching him mathematics and astronomy, drawing him maps of the earth and the heavens, and translating French books on mathematics and medicine into Chinese. In 1692 an imperial Edict of Toleration confirmed permission for them to preach Christianity and to make converts. In 1693 they treated the emperor with quinine to cure him of a fever. A French Jesuit, Père Joachim Bouvet, returned to France on the emperor's orders in 1697, bringing Chinese manuscripts for the Bibliothèque du Roi in Paris, and recruiting more astronomers for China.

Père Bouvet compared the Kangxi emperor to Louis in his book *Portrait historique de l'empereur de la Chine présenté au roy* (1697), calling him 'a prince who like you, Sire, joins to a genius as sublime as it is solid, a heart even more worthy of the Empire'. Kangxi would be 'the most accom-



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Jean-Baptiste Tavernier

The young Louis: portrait by Le Brun, 17th century, in the Louvre Museum, Paris

plished Monarch who has reigned on the earth in a long time, if his reign did not coincide with that of Your Majesty'. China, for Père Bouvet, was worthy of the 'respect and admiration of all the nations', as it was distinguished by its 'marvellous art of government', and a moral code not totally different from Christianity.⁴

The two courts shared a taste for hunting, literature, science, magnificence and hierarchy. Under Louis XIV, one monarchy spoke to the other, as equals and on topics both understood, across 4,000 miles and a hundred years before the dispatch of the first British embassy to China in 1793, which would be ruined by the refusal of the ambassador, Lord Macartney, to follow Chinese etiquette.⁵

Both the papacy and the Sorbonne, however, were dismayed by the Jesuits' 'accommodation' with Confucianism and ancestor worship in China. The Jesuits considered them purely civil actions, compatible with Catholicism: the pope forbade such flexibility in 1704 and again in 1707. The Kangxi emperor did not convert to Christianity, as his Jesuits had expected. However, needing foreign astronomers, cartographers and interpreters, he remained more tolerant of Christian missions than his bureaucrats. French missionaries Jean-Baptiste Régis and Pierre Jartoux would help map the Chinese empire for his successor: the maps were printed in Paris in 1730-34.

China was not the only distant land that interested Louis. He established French colonies in Asia, Africa and America: Louisiana, claimed in

1683, including the entire Mississippi valley, was one of the largest land grabs in the history of European imperialism. He also wanted Siam. In 1688, after an exchange of embassies, Louis sent 1,000 troops there. The king of Siam, Phra Narai, hoped they would help him control his mandarins. The French ambassador advised him to convert to Catholicism, as it was the religion most likely to instil obedience in his subjects. But Louis's troops overreached themselves in Siam, as they did elsewhere. An attempt to take Bangkok provoked a revolt; Phra Narai was imprisoned, bibles and portraits of Louis were burnt and French troops expelled. For the next 180 years Siam remained a hermit kingdom, closed to the outside world.

The Ottoman ally

The Ottoman empire, with which France had long been allied, was another of Louis XIV's concerns. The Ottomans and the French were united by hostility to the House of Austria, France's main rival in Europe (this drove France to form alliances in turn with Sweden and Bavaria). In famine years, France was supplied with grain shipments from Ottoman territory, organised by the French ambassador in Constantinople. The Ottoman empire also allowed French missionaries to operate on its territory. They converted many local Christians from Orthodoxy to Catholicism, and some began to go to Paris for their education, the beginning of the French-speaking elite of the Levant, which survives to this day.

In 1688 the Ottoman empire seemed close to collapse, after being repeatedly defeated by the Austrian monarchy. Louis considered seizing Syria, Egypt, and Constantinople itself. A French mission was sent round the eastern Mediterranean to draw detailed maps of potential conquests; the former navy ministry in Paris has the best early views of the ports of the Levant.

In the end, the traditional French alliance with the Ottoman empire survived. In September 1688 Louis sent French armies to make a devastating attack on the Rhineland; Speyer, Heidelberg and Mannheim were destroyed. The aim was to prevent Austrian armies attacking France and, at the request of the Ottoman government, made through the French ambassador in Constantinople, to deflect Austrian pressure on the Ottomans. It was a major blunder. Louis XIV's worst enemy, William III of Orange, Stadtholder of the Netherlands, who was sure that he would not be attacked by France, invaded England with a European army, at the request of the opponents of James II. He took the throne almost without bloodshed and began Britain's second Hundred Years War with France. It ended with France losing territory in the Rhineland, Canada and India.

The Spanish connection

Another object of Louis's ambitions, besides China, Siam and the Ottoman empire, was the Spanish monarchy, then a global power ruling most of Central and South America, as well as Spain and half of Italy. In 1700 Louis helped put his younger grandson, the duke of Anjou, on the throne of Spain as Philip V; Anjou had the best, and most convenient, hereditary claim and had been named in the will of the late Spanish king, Charles II. Louis abandoned the possibility of partitioning the Spanish monarchy and acquiring more territory for France (he had already conquered Alsace, Franche-Comté and half of Flanders), in favour of winning the Spanish monarchy for the Bourbons. He put his dynasty before his country; the War of the Spanish Succession to keep Philip V on the throne brought France close to collapse. Nevertheless, Louis would have been proud to observe that the present king of Spain, Philip VI, is his direct descendant.

Louis was a king who prioritised European and global projects. After his death on 1 September 1715, he was commemorated in memorial services from Mexico City to Aleppo, as well as in France and Spain. Today he would be pleased that Versailles has visitors from across the world, over seven million a year, more than any other palace except the Forbidden City of his admiring fellow monarch, the Kangxi emperor, in Beijing ●

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¹Theodore N Foss, 'The European Sojourn of Philippe Couplet and Michael Shen Fuzong 1683-1692' in Jerome Heyndickx (ed), *Philippe Couplet SJ (1623-1693): the Man who brought China to Europe*, Steyler-Verlag, Nettetal 1990, pp 129-30 ²Jean-Baptiste Tavernier, *Les six voyages... en Turquie, en Perse et aux Indes*, Gervais Clouzier, Paris, 1682, II, 177, VI, II ³Dirk Van Der Cruyssen, *Le Noble désir de courir le monde: Voyager en Asie au XVIIIe siècle*, Fayard, Paris, 2002, p 281 ⁴Isabelle and Jean-Louis Vissière (eds), *Lettres édifiantes et curieuses de Chine par des missionnaires jésuites (1702-1776)*, Garnier Flammarion, Paris 1979, pp 26, 89, 92, 143-44 ⁵Isabelle and Jean-Louis Vissière (eds), op cit, p 145

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