

Interview with [Birgit Tremml-Werner](#) and [Lisa Hellman](#), winners of the [Mattingly Award 2020](#) for their co-written article *'Merely "Ad hoc" Diplomacy? A Global Historical Comparison of Early Modern Japanese-Spanish and Qing-Russian Foreign Relations'* (Diplomatic Vol. 2, Issue 1, 2020)

*How did you get into your current research field?*

BTW: During my PhD research on global trade in early modern Manila I was frequently confronted with historical studies emphasizing the different approaches to governance and foreign relations in East Asia and Europe. However, when looking at actual encounters between representatives of both cultural realms and when studying negotiation processes on the spot, this narrative of exceptionalism did not hold. In fact, what concerns Hispano-Japanese relations in the sixteenth and seventeenth century it was fundamentally wrong. Yet, while new diplomatic history has advanced our understanding of negotiation processes, versatile diplomatic networks and the role of rituals, non-European contexts received very limited attention. Hence, during my postdoctoral fellowship at the University of Tokyo I started to focus explicitly on cross-cultural diplomacy and to systematically compare Japanese, Chinese and Renaissance European diplomatic practices and the languages and concepts that shaped them. Over the years other aspects, such as knowledge transfer or the thorough study of indigenous people as crucial diplomatic in insular Southeast Asia, have been added to my research profile.

LH: My route into this field was also based on a frustration with the current narratives, in this case primarily those of global history. When writing my first book on cross cultural relations in the foreign quarters of Canton, I was struck by how many narratives of early modern global history used examples from encounters in Asia, examples that often involved one West European – often colonial – power. To me that seemed to not only privilege maritime encounters, but also create a history of international relations that was interpreted according to a European blueprint. As I moved into new projects I therefore focused on overland contacts, specifically those taking place in Central Asia, and found that they have much to offer the early history of diplomacy. Nevertheless, in scholarship on early Russian foreign relations, the idea recurs that somehow such political ties were not structured, or part of and based on a long-term knowledge gathering on how best to conduct foreign relations, but rather that the actors would have played it by ear. This is not only a matter of understanding Russia better: I think that paying attention to their contacts with Central and North Asian groups prove ample opportunity to dispel any notion of a homogenous 'European' model of diplomacy.

*What have been the main challenges for the kind of research that you do?*

BTW: For studying diplomatic relations outside Europe the main challenge is certainly the state of the archive of foreign relations. By that I mean not only the inequality of available sources or the everyday difficulties in decoding scripts in multiple languages but the complexity of the archive of foreign relations with sources of different genres (e.g. administrative records, religious and literary texts, maps, material objects such as gifts or coats of arms) and how they were processed in other accounts over the centuries. I suppose one could speak of an organic and constantly changing archive.

LH: I can only concur with Birgit's view: when talking about these types of intercultural and global analyses, and their difficulties, we often focus on what is called a lack of sources and the challenges of multilingual material, but it actually comes down to much larger issues such as the differences in archival building and different notions of a record is constituted of. Part of the solution I think is inherent in the approaches of new

diplomatic history: it is this paradigm shift that also allows scholars to incorporate other types of sources and thereby enable the inclusion of other stories. from other regions and involving other types of actors.

BTW. What is more, diplomatic history even when applied in more local frames is by nature multi-disciplinary and should ideally be done in constant dialogue with related research fields such as legal history, international relations and anthropology. For regions outside Europe, not only the notorious area studies but thriving research areas such as borderland studies, religious studies or even linguistics need to be considered. It goes without saying that one single scholar is unable to do justice to all related fields, but experience has shown that just like with diplomatic relations to start a conversation with people beyond a perceived boundary is often half the battle.

LH: Indeed, the multidisciplinary is a challenge, but also a presupposition. I would like to stress the risk for tension between area studies and global history. While the latter absolutely benefits and draws from the former, there has been some understandable hesitance on the side of area studies, that global history would somehow provincialize the area in question. Another difficulty is of course that of creating reasonable and fruitful comparisons across time and space without losing the specificity of the region and its historical context, while still staying general enough to be able to actually find similarities and differences in the two cases. There again I think the New Diplomatic History Network is paving the way, showing how it is possible to think broadly about political relations without getting bogged down in definitions about exactly what can be considered the local or historical equivalent of a certain type of actor or relation.

*Did the article for Diplomatica make you think differently about your research?*

BTW & LH: Indeed it did, both on an empirical level, where we were both struck by the similar ways in which the non-European political relations had been described, but also on a more structural level: this article for Diplomatica was our first co-written text and thus a particular experience. Crafting and organising an argument in a dialectic process was a very stimulating experience as scholars, but perhaps particularly for us as global historians. It made us realise that if we do want to employ comparison as an approach to answer bigger historical queries, such comparisons are only possible through in-depth collaborative research. That the article was so well received is also something which we see as a sign of something larger: in this age of academic precarity, scholars are often told to be aware of co-authored articles. This is a bit unfortunate, as these kinds of collaborations have the opportunity of providing real gains for scholarship. In that respect the Mattingly Award is a truly encouraging token of appreciation of our work, as well as of collaborative efforts in general.

Working on this article also made us keen to continue the joint work and to extend this approach to other projects as well – one could say that this article started a whole set of other collaborative ventures. For example, over the past years we have worked with scholars all over the world to promote diplomatic history beyond Europe. Together with Guido van Meersbergen we have launched the [Global Diplomacy Network](#), with a focus on global connections and comparisons, ca. 1400-1900. We are currently also experimenting with new formats in which scholars can write together, and introduced a conversation blog on [Diplomacy in Asia](#) in collaboration with the International Institute for Asian Studies. The blog aims at starting new conversations in the realm of diplomatic history beyond periodic, spatial, and conceptual boundaries. Once again, the Mattingly Award is a wonderful encouragement, showing that it is worthwhile and welcome to look beyond Europe and to do so through collaborative work.