Embassies and Tributes.

Three Centuries of Portuguese Diplomatic Missions in China

"...the Portuguese Crown does not pay tribute to any Monarch in the world. On the contrary, in Asia it receives them from many Kings"

Francisco Pacheco de Sampaio,
Ambassador in China to the Mandarins of Canton, in 1752.

Until the middle of the XIXth century, because of the scarcity or the sheer lack of links or other kinds of relations – cultural, commercial or social – the history of relations between the West and China is dramatically reduced to the dynamics and accidents of diplomatic history.

But we must note that several of those diplomatic missions are anything but accidental – missions which were clearly conceived as a more or less coherent though peculiar process of making contact between States. For example, whereas in the history of European diplomacy in China in the XVII and XVIII centuries England’s role is of minor importance (considering the epoch and the political context which motivates it) we cannot say the same of Russia, Holland, and, particularly, Portugal. The latter’s diplomatic prominence can be put down to a wide range of reasons.
In the first place, there was a considerable number of diplomatic missions — most of them effectively considered at home as *regular* embassies — which, successful or not, show from very early on the style Portugal considered to be the appropriate way to handle relations with the Empire. Without even considering some of the lesser, regional initiatives prepared in Macao or Goa, we can make an inventory of six important diplomatic missions conceived and decided upon in Lisbon and (perhaps with the exception of the last one) officially received in the Imperial Court as *embassies* in the very strict limits of the term as it was understood within the Chinese tributary system. These were the embassies of Tomé Pires (1515), Manuel de Saldanha (1667), Alexandre Metelo de Sousa e Menezes (1726), Francisco de Assis Pacheco de Sampaio (1752) and the diplomatic missions of Father Francisco Cardoso S.J. (1710) and D. Fr. Alexandre de Gouveia, Bishop of Peking (1785). Officially considered by the Imperial Government as an “embassy” (and as that duly registered in the Chinese chronicles), was Bento Pereira de Faria’s 1678 diplomatic mission to Pequim, even though it was the product of a simple initiative of the Government of Macao, and, for that reason not included in the list of the “royal embassies” prepared from the XVI to the XVIIIth centuries.

In second place, regardless of what they could gain in Beijing, all the Portuguese embassies had a particular interest. This was due to the complexity of interests and the dynamics that motivated those missions: pre-existent commercial and religious interests, carefully cultivated protocol, and, the most powerful factor, the omnipresence of a secular Portuguese establishment in Macao.

This last factor brings us to the necessary distinction between two styles of “diplomacy” employed by the Portuguese in China. The first style was to act directly, in the strict sense of the word, from the Portuguese centres of power, which resulted in the formation of solemn embassies such as those of Saldanha, Metelo or Sampaio. In other words, missions with “State targets”, justified by an alleged “sovereign to sovereign” relationship, which deliberately kept a distance from the old campaign for the local interests of Macao contended in Beijing. And we must note that this avoidance can be explained by several factors. First of all, the legitimacy of the Portuguese establishment in Macao was an extremely sensitive issue. Secondly, there was a lack of European interests at that time that could settle a discussion of that legitimacy. Furthermore, extreme care was taken to avoid obfuscating the main targets of