

## The Development of British Timepieces in China During the Qianlong Period (1736-1799)

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### Abstract

This article studies the development and impact of the British timepieces trade in China during the Qianlong Period (1736-1799). In the first part of the article, I explore the inherent relationship between British timepieces and the Chinese art market, including the purpose and social background of introducing British timepieces into China. Afterward, I examine the influence of British timepieces on the Chinese upper class, thereby interpreting the application and significance of Western culture and technology in Chinese court life. Finally, I analyze the characteristics of British timepieces in the Chinese market and summarize their adjustments to cater to the needs of the Chinese market. This study provides an essential reference for investigating the trade history background of cross-cultural material exchanges between China and Britain in the eighteenth century.

**Key words:** British timepieces; Chinese art market; Cross-cultural material exchange; Qianlong Period; Globalization

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

This study explores the underlying mechanism of cross-cultural exchanges between China and Britain during the

Qianlong period (1736-1799) by examining the historical development of the Sino-British timepieces trade. In this article, I present a new academic perspective on Sino-British trade and material cultural exchanges, and enhance the methodology of global history research. In detail, this study provides a theoretical framework for analyzing how Sino-British trade surpasses material aspects and serves as a conduit for cross-cultural conversation. Sociologist Marcel Mauss proposed that cross-material exchange is not just an economic behavior, but also includes social obligations and cultural significance. (Mauss, 1968) This illustrates that in cross-cultural exchanges, material culture carries a society's values, aesthetics, and belief system. After entering the Chinese market, the meaning of British timepieces transformed. They functioned not just as timekeeping tools but also as symbols of identity and a medium for cultural exchange. Furthermore, sociologist Pierre Bourdieu pointed out that material goods can function as cultural capital, exerting influence across many societies and cultures. (Bourdieu, 1996, pp. 81-83) Cultural capital is a social attribute of material products that can confer power and status on social groups and is sought after by specific communities. The exquisite craftsmanship of British watches and clocks garnered the admiration of the Chinese elite, thus shaping the cultural capital status of British timepieces in China. Eventually, tribute timepieces became a means for Britain to establish diplomacy with China. At the same time, this study also offers an important case for comprehending how early modern globalization shaped the interaction between different cultures. Philosopher Herbert Marshall McLuhan proposed that in the process of globalization, material products, as cultural carriers, promoted cultural hybridity and cross-cultural dialogue. (McLuhan, 1964) For example, British timepieces combined with traditional Chinese decorative elements are a manifestation of cultural hybridity. Therefore, through this study, I further reveal how cultural hybridity under early globalization

facilitates cross-cultural communication. This cultural interaction provides a novel perspective for understanding the integration and coexistence of cultures.

In the initial section of the article, I elucidate how British timepieces served as a tool for establishing Sino-British diplomacy and economic trade. Based on the market demand of the two countries and the historical context of China's tribute system, I reveal the role of British timepieces as a luxury product in promoting British diplomacy with China and its significance as an economic strategy. In the second section of the article, I analyze the perspectives of the Chinese elite, including the emperor, nobles, and officials, regarding British clocks and watches, and then explain the impact of British timepieces on Chinese society. For the Chinese elite, British timepieces were not only practical objects and symbols of taste and status, but also a window to learn advanced Western technology and culture. In the last section of the article, I explore the main characteristics of British timepieces in the Chinese market through case studies. The adjustments in the design and function of British timepieces, such as the combination of Chinese aesthetic elements and symbols, show the process of cultural mutual adaptation between China and Britain in cross-cultural trade. This dynamic interaction reveals the globalization trend of cross-cultural collecting and consumption in the eighteenth century, and brings new dimensions to exploring the development of relations between the two countries in history.

This study uses historical archives and documents, including the Western timepieces records from the Palace Museum in Beijing, *Chronicle 1-2 of East India Company's Trade with China* (1635-1834), and *Records of the Qing Emperor Gaozong* 清高宗实录 to provide a solid historical foundation for the research. At the same time, these materials also furnish empirical evidence to support Sino-British cultural and trade exchanges from a multicultural perspective. For example, the Western timepieces archives in the Beijing Palace Museum offer a direct record of the Qing court's demand for British timepieces; *Records of the Qing Emperor Gaozong* illustrate the political and economic dynamics during the Qianlong period and the royal family's attitude towards Western-imported goods; and *East India Company's Trade with China* provides a record of the Sino-Western clock and watch trade from a Western perspective. In this study, I summarize the essential information about the Sino-Western timepieces trade and cultural exchanges in these historical documents through literature analysis. Furthermore, I focus on cross-document comparative analysis, thereby revealing the potential motivations and trends in trade activities. In addition, I use image analysis to investigate the design details of British timepieces in the archives, thereby exploring their craftsmanship and characteristics. For example, I analyze how the decorative

style of British watches combines Chinese aesthetics with Western technology. However, these archives inevitably have omissions in their description of the history of the timepiece trade between China and Britain, making it challenging to accurately represent the commercial dynamics or cultural interaction of the eighteenth century. At the same time, since historical archives are mainly derived from official records, there is a possibility that they would glorify transaction results or ignore diplomatic issues. Therefore, I also combine relevant secondary materials in the article, such as contemporary scholars' tracing of Sino-British trade and China's local chronicles, to supplement the gaps and biases in historical archives.

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## 2. BRITAIN EXPANDED THE TIMEPIECES MARKET IN CHINA

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The eighteenth century was a critical period for the development of Sino-British trade relations. Britain relied on its maritime prowess and industrial advances to expand its trade relations with China. (Deane, 1962) During this period, British merchants introduced a substantial quantity of wool products, metal utensils, clocks and watches, and other commodities into the Chinese market through transportation agencies such as the East India Company. (Pritchard, 1957; Porter, 2000) British timepieces were first transported into China in the seventeenth century, and Chinese people cherished them for their exquisite craftsmanship and cutting-edge mechanical technology. (Heule, 2021; Zhang, 2012, pp.565-567) During the eighteenth century, British timepieces occupied a large proportion of Sino-British trade. Throughout the Qianlong era, China imported tens of thousands of British timepieces, mainly as commercial commodities and ambassadorial gifts. (Symonds, 1947) Through the study of James Cox's clocks and Macartney's Mission, we can understand how the British introduced watches and clocks as commodities and tributes to China. These British timepieces were not only disseminated as commodities in trade, but also presented to the emperor and officials in the form of tribute to meet the demand for luxury goods in the Chinese court at that time, thereby enhancing diplomatic relations between China and Britain. These historical examples illustrate that the British successfully expanded the clock and watch market between China and Britain by combining trade with diplomatic strategies, and deepened the exchanges and connections between China and Britain in the cultural and economic fields.

### 2.1 James Cox

James Cox (1723-1800) was a prominent British watchmaker who played an important role in shaping the Sino-British timepiece trade and influenced diplomatic and cultural exchanges during the Qianlong period. In the

eighteenth century, Cox targeted the Far East markets, especially China and India. Although there are few records of Cox's timepiece shipments, I learned from the East India Company's archives that the East India Company was one of Cox's main agents for shipping timepieces to China. (Morse, 1926, pp.85, 141-142, and 187; Cheng, 2021, pp.94-97) In 1766, Cox successfully signed a contract with the East India Company to make two robotic doll clocks for the Qing Emperor Qianlong as a diplomatic gift from the British government to China. (Cheng, p.95) Thus, we can see that Cox's timepieces were not only commodities, but also a means of diplomacy. The clock depicted in Figure 1 is one of the two diplomatic clocks (Fig. 1). (Corbeiller, 1970, pp.351-58; Pointon, 1999, pp. 423-451) Cox incorporated symbolic Chinese elements and cutting-edge British technology into this watch design to cater to the Chinese people's interest in exotic culture and traditional aesthetics. (Pagani, 2001, pp.100-101; Merlin, 2018, pp.125-126; Smith, 2000, pp.353-361.) At that time, Cox had already noticed that timepieces, as cross-cultural material, required an emphasis on cultural integration and innovation. The integration of cross-cultural elements could not only show the unique charm of different cultures, but also enhance the diversity of the design.

The clock features a brass movement with a white-glazed porcelain dial. This hybrid design showcases Britain's advanced mechanical technology while combining the material characteristics of Chinese porcelain craftsmanship. This fusion of technology and materials is a cross-cultural expression of innovation. The carriage held up a three-layer parasol. The parasol is a symbol of power and majesty in China, and it also widely reflects the exoticism of the East in the West. Various Western artworks, such as maps, paintings, sculptures, and decorations, have used parasols to reflect the exoticism of China in the eighteenth century. (Schmidt, 2011, pp. 50-53) Therefore, the emergence of the parasol not only caters to the Chinese royal family's emphasis on power, but also reflects the West's impression and expression paradigm of the East. An elegant British aristocrat leans gently on a carriage, accompanied by a King Charles Spaniel. She holds an exquisite fan in her hand and her hair is decorated with jewels, thus reflecting the elegant culture of the British aristocracy. The coachman is in the regalia of a Chinese man, wearing a peaked hat boots and a silk robe. The coachman's ornate appearance has an early rococo chinoiserie style. (Beevers, 2009) The peaked boots are typical of early rococo chinoiserie-style objects, and they can be seen in many Western paintings that have images of the Chinese. (Johns, 2016, p.41) Therefore, the shape of the coachman illustrates Britain's understanding of Chinese culture based on Western art style, and reflects the interaction between the two countries in cultures and aesthetics.



**Figure 1**  
**James Cox, Chariot Clock, Britain, 1766, height 25.4cm, Metropolitan Museum of Art.**

Cox's timepiece business reached a considerable size in China in the eighteenth century, and his timepieces became sought-after luxury items for the Chinese. (Liao, 2008; Wang and Yuan, 2017; White, 2012) Art historian Chen Lu explains, "In 1773, Cox employed 1,000 craftsmen to make timepieces specifically for the Chinese market." (Cheng, p.95) It can be seen that these exquisite timepieces played a hidden role in fostering Sino-British trade relations. In 1782, Cox established his watch factory in Guangzhou, China, as his timepieces gained widespread recognition among the Chinese upper class. Guangzhou was an important hub for Sino-British trade for geographical and political reasons. (Dyke, 2005; Rawski and Naquin, 2018, pp.491-514) Guangzhou's vibrant trade scene, political significance, and access to China's wealthy elite provided the perfect platform for Cox to further expand his business. The construction of the factory also made Cox the British watchmaker with the largest sales of watches in the Chinese market in the second half of the eighteenth century. (Pointon, 1999, pp. 423-450) It is worth mentioning that the success of Cox's Guangzhou factory has contributed to the enduring trade relationship between China and Britain. The Guangzhou firm of James Cox and his son was the earlier incarnation of the venerable trading company of Jardine Matheson Company. (Pagani, pp.101-102) By the middle of the nineteenth century, the Jardine Matheson Company had become the largest Western guild and foreign trade group in China, with offices in all the important Chinese cities as well as in Yokohama, Japan. (Dong, 2001; Jardine, 1947) The Jardine Matheson Company continues to shape

important chapters of Sino-British trade to this day. By combining art with diplomacy, Cox's transnational timepieces business laid the foundation for the evolution of Sino-British trade relations and demonstrated how material culture could serve as a bridge for international exchange. To this day, his timepieces remain an enduring symbol of the interplay of aesthetics, technology, and cross-cultural dialogue between China and Britain.

## 2.2 Macartney's Mission

As Britain had been trading at a disadvantaged position with China in the eighteenth century, the purpose of the Macartney Mission's visit to China was ostensibly to celebrate Emperor Qianlong's 80th birthday, but in reality, it was to consolidate diplomatic relations and reverse the trade situation. (Chen, 2023; Morse, 1926; Williams, 2013, pp.85-107) Politically, the Mission won the Chinese emperor's favor by contributing precious gifts, including timepieces. By presenting clocks and watches, the Mission attempted to demonstrate Britain's technological strength and cultural value to Emperor Qianlong in order to gain more treatment for the subsequent diplomatic negotiations, such as opening more ports to Britain and supporting Britain in establishing a permanent embassy in China. Economically, the Mission aimed to transport emerging industrial products like watches and clocks to China, thereby stimulating China's demand for British timepieces and expanding Britain's export economy.

Although the Macartney Mission to establish diplomatic relations with China in 1792 failed due to many political reasons, Macartney's motivation for choosing clocks as gifts provides us with a more comprehensive perspective on how Britain valued the timepiece trade between China and Britain. (Macartney, 1963, p.63) The gifts from the Mission, including timepieces, not only became an important part of the court collection, but also influenced the perception of luxury goods among the Chinese upper class to a certain extent. British timepieces gradually became a symbol of identity and status in China, driving the demand for such items in Chinese society. The fact that British timepieces were brought to China as gifts by the mission also marked that the global luxury goods trade in the eighteenth century had become part of diplomatic etiquette.

At the same time, the Western products, including British timepieces, brought by the Mission also reflected the process of the Chinese art market gradually shifting from being dominated by local demand to accepting global products. This transformation reflects the openness and adaptability of Chinese society in global trade in the eighteenth century. (Rosenthal and Wong,

2011; Hua, 2021) British timepieces became an important medium connecting Chinese and world culture, further promoting the globalization of the Chinese art market. Furthermore, the advanced technology and exotic culture contained in British timepieces inspired the imitation and innovation of local Chinese crafts. According to the research of historians Tang Kaijian and Huang Chunyan, "Many Chinese local clock and watch factories were opened in Guangzhou during the reign of Emperor Kangxi (1662-1722). By Emperor Qianlong's era, Chinese craftsmen were already able to skillfully integrate Chinese elements with Western art styles, and thus Guangzhou timepieces became a favorite collection of Chinese dignitaries and Western tourists." (Tang and Huang, 2005, pp.304-332) Cross-cultural exchanges not only improved the quality of Chinese local craftsmanship, but also enriched the creative diversity of the Chinese art market, thereby further promoting global trade between China and the West.

Figure 2 presents a British clock, one of the birthday gifts presented to the Chinese emperor by the Macartney Mission (Fig. 2).<sup>1</sup> This exquisite clock is the largest Western clock in the Beijing Palace Museum, which is a four-story pavilion with gold-plated copper. The pavilion's decorative patterns are small and gorgeous, with Western-style Roman columns and sculptures of traditional Chinese animals. At the lowest level is a British man wearing traditional British clothing and holding a brush. When the clock is turned on, the man would write a Chinese couplet of "Ba Fang Xiang Hua, Jiu Tu Lai Wang 八方向化，九土来王" on the paper, which means every country comes to meet the Chinese Emperor. Therefore, the design of this clock distinctly seeks to emphasize China's prominence as a global power. Simultaneously, the person's head would follow the movement of his hand. In the circular pavilion on the top floor of the attic, two people hold a cylinder in their hands. After the clock is started, the two turn away from each other, and the cylinder is expanded into a banner, which writes "Wan Shou Wu Jiang 万寿无疆". This idiom means longevity in Chinese. Therefore, this timepiece not only embodies Britain's advanced technology but also incorporates China's profound calligraphy culture to express blessings. After reading the tribute list presented by the British envoy, Qianlong specially invited the craftsmen who work in Zuo Zhongchu 做钟处 (a place that makes clocks in the court) to come and learn skills in clock installation. (Qing, n.d.) This historical record reveals the Chinese Emperor's satisfaction and love for these British timepieces.

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<sup>1</sup> Catherine Pagani, 118.





**Figure 2**  
**Timothy Williamson, Clock with Western Figure Writing Chinese Characters, Britain, 18th Century, gilded bronze, 231x77x77cm, The Beijing Palace Museum.**

### 3. THE MAIN CLIENTELE OF BRITISH TIMEPIECES

Most of the European timepieces imported into China found their way into the collection of the emperor, the members of the imperial family, and officials. According to a record in the *Chronicle of East India Company's Trade with China*, in 1793 Britain paid tribute to the Chinese court with clocks and watches worth about 100,000 taels of silver. (The Palace Museum, 2004) This illustrates that the Chinese court had a great demand for British watches at that time. In *An Embassy to China: Lord Macartney's Journal 1793-4*, Macartney states, "In the forty or fifty palaces I've seen, especially in women's rooms, I accidentally found that the British timepieces are displayed and collected are particularly rich...(In Yuanming Yuan) ... At one end I observed a musical clock that played twelve old English tunes, Black Joke Lillibullero, and other airs of the Beggars Opera."<sup>2</sup> It can be seen that in the eighteenth century, British timepieces were widely used in the Qing court and were also a kind of etiquette for receiving important guests, thus building a bridge for communication between China and the West.

Emperor Qianlong showed enormous interest in European clocks and watches. Emperor Qianlong's collection of timepieces was extensive and derived from a wide range of sources, including tributes from foreign

missions and local officials, as well as his own purchases. (Fan, 2023) Emperor Qianlong not only regarded them as precious collections, but also studied their mechanical structures and craftsmanship in depth. He set up a clock-making department in the palace to specialize in the production and repair of timepieces, and recruited foreign missionaries and craftsmen to participate in it. (Guo, 2011, pp.225-252; The First Historical Archives of China and Museum of Chinese University of Hong Kong, 2007), p.585) Qianlong was fascinated by the various devices and mechanical functions of British clocks, such as rotating figures, astronomical measurements, and musical timekeeping. In his poems, Qianlong mentioned that it was magical that Western clocks could play music. (Ji, 2005) The Emperor's interest in the mechanical operation of clocks can also be confirmed by Joannes M. de Ventavon, a Western missionary serving in the court at the time. In 1769, French Jesuit Joannes M. de Ventavon mentioned in a letter that he had been in the palace for one year, mainly explaining the mechanical principles and device settings of clocks to Emperor Qianlong. (Fang, 2008, p.760) This indicates that, from Emperor Qianlong's perspective, these timepieces were not only exotic luxury goods that could represent identity and status, but also a medium for understanding Western mechanical technology.

Emperor Qianlong's admiration for clocks and watches also stemmed from their practicality, especially the time-telling function. Since the reign of Emperor Kangxi, Qianlong's grandfather, there has been a tradition of utilizing Western clocks as timers. (Guo, 2011, pp.225-252; The Palace Museum, 2004) For example, the emperor would use clocks to control the daily timetable. Emperor Qianlong even regarded clocks as a means of diligence. He hung a rope on the top of the bed, known as the "clock line," so that when the rope was pulled, the clock next door would tell the time, thus helping Emperor Qianlong to arrange his schedule effectively.<sup>3</sup>

Although Emperor Qianlong showed profound interest in Western timepiece technology, he viewed it as a tool to serve the country and imperial power rather than a symbol of accepting all Western culture. This attitude is best demonstrated by the fact that, although the Qianlong period was the heyday of British timepiece collecting, we rarely see Western religious content in these timepiece collections. This is largely because the emperor and his ministers, as the principal consumers, did not accept and resisted the development of Western religions in China. (Bays, 1996; Song, 2016) This attitude stems from the fact that the Qing rulers attached great importance to Confucianism as the core value of state governance, and Western Christian doctrines conflicted with Confucian ethics in many aspects. (Young, 1983; Chen, 2012) For example, Confucianism was centered on ethics and social

<sup>2</sup> Macartney, G., p.98.

<sup>3</sup> Fan, Z., p.30.

order, emphasizing the importance of family, hierarchy, and etiquette, while Christianity was centered on belief in God and advocated equality and fraternity. These conflicts made the Qing emperors and ministers wary of Western religions. The Qing rulers were worried that the spread of Western religions might weaken the foundation of centralized rule. Therefore, to successfully enter the Chinese trade market and consolidate diplomatic relations between the two countries, British timepieces rarely added Western religious elements. This selective acceptance model not only shaped the foreign trade policy of the Qing Dynasty, but also provided an important perspective for understanding the history of cultural exchanges between China and the West.

Officials were also major consumers of British timepieces and would place their favorite clocks as decorations in their residences. Unlike the emperor, who focused on the practicality and mechanical principles of timepieces, officials tended to pay more attention to their cultural capital. As anthropologist Daniel Miller pointed out when discussing material culture, it embodies “the core values of that society” and becomes the principal form for shaping social identity and cultural capital. (Miller, 2012) Based on the emperor’s preference for British timepieces rendered them a prestige symbol in Chinese society in the eighteenth century. According to *Archives of Corrupt Officials in Qianlong Dynasty* records, “He Shen, the most powerful minister in the middle of the Qing Dynasty, had been Chaojia 抄家<sup>4</sup>, and 216 pieces of Western artifacts were found in his Rehe Residence. Among those Western artifacts, there was one pocket watch, four table clocks, and one pair of wall clocks. In 1781, Governor Hang Jiahu was Chaojia, forfeiting five striking clocks, one table clock, and one watch; Governor Chen Huizu was Chaojia, forfeiting 71 timepieces. In 1782, the governor Guotai was Chaojia, forfeiting one hanging screen with a clock, four table clocks, and one watch. In 1786, Governor Fu Lehun was Chaojia, forfeiting a pair of boîte à musique with clocks, a pair of music clocks, a table clock, a pair of wall clocks... a total of 30 pieces.” (China’s First Historical Archives, 1994) The collections of these corrupt officials are not only considerable in number but also diverse in variety, further demonstrating that Chinese officials are an important consumer group of Western timepieces.

In order to please the Chinese Emperor and aristocrats, officials also collected various precious clocks and watches as tribute to the emperor. From forty-six to forty-nine years of Qianlong’s reign, more than 130 watches and clocks were attributed to the emperor by the Guangzhou Customs Supervision and other appropriate staff every year. (The Palace Museum, 2004) In fact, if

British merchants wanted to transport timepieces into the Chinese market, Chinese officials were important hubs, and sometimes these officials played a decisive role in the timepieces trade. In the eighteenth century, cross-border trade in China had to be conducted under the strict management of local officials, especially customs officials, who had the power to decide whether to allow foreign merchants to trade in China. (Shen, 1989, p. 214; The First Historical Archives of China, 2002) The British East India Company reports that almost 10% of its expenses were spent on bribing officials to allow goods to enter mainland China, including timepieces as gifts to local officials.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, through the above discussion, we can understand the real complexity of Sino-British trade. Local officials were not only the key intermediaries for timepieces to enter the Chinese market, but also affected the supply and demand dynamics of the market. Bribery even promoted the expansion of the timepiece trade in China to a certain extent, because merchants needed to use timepieces and other benefits to maintain their relationship with Chinese officials to ensure smooth transactions.

#### 4. THE MODIFICATIONS IN BRITISH TIMEPIECES

As British timepieces entered the Chinese market, they gradually integrated traditional Chinese aesthetics, forming a unique style that combines Eastern and Western characteristics. This style was not only embodied in the appearance of the timepieces, but also reflected the deep integration of technology and culture. The clocks and watches made by Britain for the Chinese market often used a variety of materials, such as colored stones and painted enamels, that the Chinese liked. These materials highlighted the luxury of British clocks and watches. At the same time, the eighteenth century coincided with the golden age of cultural exchanges between China and Britain. (Porter, 2010) The introduction of China’s political system, moral religion, and folk drama art to Britain showcased a charming oriental system. Therefore, many British timepieces were decorated with traditional Chinese landscapes, flowers, and auspicious patterns such as dragons and phoenixes.

British clockmaker James Halsted created the piece in Figure 3 for the Chinese art market (Fig. 3). The clock is in the shape of an elephant. In China, the elephant is a symbol of auspiciousness. The elephant rider is a typical oriental image. He wears a unique oriental scarf and an open-collared robe. The Chinese numbers on the dial correspond to the Arabic capital numbers. The tower is a three-story square pavilion unique to China, and each eaves corner has a god beast. The image of

<sup>4</sup> Chaojia抄家 refers to a law in which the state confiscates the property of officials because of their bribery and violations of the law.

<sup>5</sup> Hosea Ballou Morse, 122.



the Chinese winged dragon often appears in Western Baroque artworks. For example, in the Chinese court scenes depicted on tapestries produced by the French Beauvais factory in the seventeenth century, the image of the Chinese winged dragon often appears as a decoration on the eaves of buildings.<sup>6</sup> The image of the dragon is not Halsted's imagination. There is a row of similar animal statues on each eave of the Forbidden City. From right to left, they are riding a fairy, a dragon, a phoenix, a lion, a celestial horse, a seahorse, and Chiyong (the seventh son of the dragon), representing power and auspiciousness. (Jiang, 2015) Based on the images of these existing beasts and the British Romantic style, Halsted designed the dragon to have graceful curves, such as wings and tails, and a powerful posture, all of which were consistent with the Baroque style's pursuit of dynamism and decorativeness. This clock can also be seen as an example of Halsted's perfect fusion of British Romanticism and Chinese elements.



**Figure 3**  
**Left:** James Halsted, *Watch in the Center of Tower Carried by Elephant*, Britain, 18th century, gilded bronze, 43x28.5x10cm, The Beijing Palace Museum; **Middle:** The Chinese numbers on the dial correspond to the Arabic capital numbers; **Right:** Beauvais Manufactory, *Les Astronomes*, from *L'Histoire de l'empereur de la Chine* Series, Beauvais, France, 1697-1705, wool and silk; modern cotton lining, 318.8 × 424.2cm, J. Paul Getty Museum.

British watchmakers not only catered to the aesthetic needs of the Chinese market in design, but also used China's traditional religious culture and mechanical

innovation to attract the interest of Chinese consumers. For example, a clock may contain Buddhist or Taoist concepts, or feature a small mechanical puppet capable of performing dances while playing traditional Chinese music. Figure 3 depicts a British gold-plated copper clock with an elevating pagoda (Fig. 3). It is a work based on the theme of Chinese religious architecture. The tower is octagonal in shape, representing a Chinese monastery. The octagonal structure is closely related to the traditional Chinese Bagua 八卦 philosophy. The Bagua represents the changes and balance of all things in the world, and the design of the octagonal temple embodies the pursuit of cosmic harmony. (Yi and Xin, 2008; Li, 2009) British watchmakers fully understood the importance of religion in Chinese culture, so they cleverly incorporated religious elements cherished by the Chinese into the design of the clock tower. The clock dial is inlaid with colorful stones. The tower base features nine-story hexagonal towers, with balustrades adorning each floor. Six bead chains at the top of the tower connect the tower eaves. Simultaneously, this clock tower incorporates the melody of the Chinese folk music, Jasmine. The advanced mechanical principle of this clock is a highlight. When the clock started running, the tower would ascend and descend with the music. The dynamic performance of this clock further enhances the user experience and gives the watch a more vivid cultural expression.



**Figure 3**  
**Gold-Plated Copper Clock with Elevating Pagoda**, Britain, 18th century, 120x41x41cm, The Beijing Palace Museum.

In addition to the above traditional British timepieces with themes of architecture, animals, and people, Britain also directly used the appearance of Chinese objects as the main body of timepiece design. These timepieces were further enhanced with practical functions,

<sup>6</sup> "Beauvais Manufactory," Getty Museum, <https://www.getty.edu/art/collection/group/103KBK>.

including thermometers, moon phase displays, and calendars. Figure 5 shows a watch embedded in a Ruyi 如意 (Chinese traditional object) and a compass on the other side of the Ruyi (Fig. 5). The Ruyi is decorated with colorful jewels. Ruyi started as a tickling utensil in China, but was later given auspicious meaning, and it was often used in sacrifice and other significant activities during the Qing Dynasty. (Lu, 2017) The compass not only represents advanced Western science and technology, but is also an important tool in ancient Chinese navigation. The compass symbolizes direction and wisdom in ancient Chinese culture. Therefore, this design met the practical needs of Chinese consumers while imbuing the watch with more cross-cultural value and symbolic significance.



**Figure 5**  
*Watch Inlaid on A Gilded Copper Good Wish Object Decorated with Gemstones, Britain, 18th century, 45cm long, The Beijing Palace Museum.*

## 5. CONCLUSION

In the history of watchmaking dominated by the West, no country like Britain had so many intersections with ancient China in terms of timepieces. According to the statistics, there are more than a thousand timepieces in the Beijing Palace Museum, and the British timepieces are noted for the largest number and the most exquisite workmanship. (The Palace Museum, 2004) At the same time, Chinese culture and aesthetics also penetrated British society, leaving a mark on British decorative arts and design concepts.

The integration of British timepieces into the Chinese market reveals the characteristics of early eighteenth-century globalization, where luxury products became an important medium for trade and diplomacy. (Appadurai, 1986) Luxury items, such as timepieces, were more likely to serve as cross-cultural symbols and cultural capital than other material things due to their value, and were seen as tools of “soft diplomacy.” Analyzing the role of luxury goods in court diplomacy can help us understand the implicit influence of material culture in power structures and provide a new perspective on the role of material

culture in shaping cultural exchange.

With the rapid development of globalization, material culture remains an important tool for influencing international relations in contemporary society. Material culture serves as both an economic asset and a means to foster a common language among countries, thus enhancing cross-cultural understanding and cooperation. The interaction between British timepieces and the Chinese market during the Qianlong period not only allows us to reflect on the profound influence of material culture in history, but also prompts us to better understand the role that material culture may play in contemporary and future international relations.

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