

Ancient Gadgets

The Chinese obsession with horology goes way back

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Exasperated by meddlesome and clearly barbarous British trade envoys daring to intrude on the Middle Kingdom in the late 18th century, the Qianlong Emperor decided to put his vassal, King George III, in his place. "There is nothing Britain possesses," wrote the Son of Heaven, "that the Celestial Empire can possibly need." Except for one thing. Ever since Jesuits brought them to the imperial court in the late Ming dynasty, clocks and watches were the only barbarian products that interested the Chinese elite. Qianlong himself had a sizeable collection, as did his illustrious grandfather, Kangxi. Ever since, the Far East's deep-rooted fascination has shown no signs of abating.



Jins steal clock

China had forgotten mechanical horology centuries before Europe even thought of it. Its greatest achievement, the three-storey Su Song water-powered astronomical clock was completed around the year 1088. Accurate to an astonishing 100 seconds a day, its hydraulic constant-force device and mechanical escapement drove a complex armillary sphere in phase with the heavens. It was the most advanced astronomical instrument of its time.

Sadly, the invading Jins sacked the Song capital, Kaifeng, 39 years later. They dismantled the clock, took it back to their capital, Peking, but could not put it back together again. The secrets of mechanical timekeeping were buried in the dust of ensuing dynasties.

Wanli's golden hours

It was thanks to a different type of clock that a Jesuit missionary changed Chinese history in the 17th century. Matteo Ricci was one of the polymaths the Jesuits sent to China to barter Renaissance science for souls. He dressed in Chinese clothes, spoke the language and consorted with mandarins as a respected Confucian scholar. Ricci felt, however, that he needed to convert the rulers for the rest of the empire to follow. In 1601, he petitioned the Wanli Emperor to be allowed to live in Beijing – forbidden to foreigners.

Among the gifts he presented – religious objects, pictures, scientific instruments and maps – Ricci included a chiming clock. "There is very little to show," he noted in his diary, "that clocks have ever been known in China."

Bovet is back in the Chinese market with this version of its Sportster bull-head chronograph, with Chinese Zodiac signs around the dial, instead of Roman or Arabic numerals. This white-dial model with diamonds retails at SFr.16,280 (€7,400).

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Wanli was thrilled with the clock and appointed Matteo Ricci scientific advisor to the Chinese court. In the nine years until his death in Beijing, 1610, he introduced Euclidean geometry, mapped China, revised the calendar, and proved the existence of a heliocentric universe to flat-earth astronomers. Known as Li Ma Tou, he is a respected figure in Chinese history.

Although Ricci managed to convert more than 2,000 souls, clocks spread faster than Christianity.

Expensive toys

Mechanical horology and automata fascinated Manchu emperors and mandarins alike. Wealthy Chinese amassed large watch collections, but they had no use for them as timekeepers. In a country where the variable periods of daylight and darkness were respectively divided into six and five gong-strokes, the mechanical division of time into equal hours meant nothing. Most fascinating were the outlandish pictures and decorations on the case, and the mechanism that ran magically without outside intervention. "The Chinese regarded watches as exotic and expensive toys," says Vince Ho, an expert on the watches made for the Chinese market. "Save for the court astronomers, nobody

Pu Ren, brother of the last emperor, and his wife, with Vacheron's CEO Claude-Daniel Proelochs and President Franco Cologni in Beijing, September 2004. Vacheron Constantin gave him a watch in memory of those it made for his ancestors.



This watch, made by Piguet & Meylan of Geneva in around 1820 for the Daoguang emperor, belonged to his great-grandson, the artist Pu Ru (1896-1963), cousin of the last emperor, Pu Yi. Like many watches made for China, it is one of a pair. In November 2004 it was sold at auction by Antiquorum for SFr.715,750.

would buy a chronometer, a chronograph, or a calendar watch because nobody would use a watch for actual timekeeping."

However, by the end of the 19th century, there were changes in the attitude of the Chinese court towards the educational system. A variety of foreign mechanical toys were secured to entertain the baby Emperor, Guangxu (1871-1908; reigned 1875-1908), including watches. Guangxu consequently grew up with a fascination for western gadgets that influenced him in modernising the Middle Kingdom. His wicked and reactionary aunt, Cixi, the empress dowager, quashed the 'hundred days reform', imprisoned him among his watches, and had his favourite concubine, Pearl, drowned in a well.

His successor, the last emperor, Pu Yi (1905-1967), took suitcases of watches and jewellery with him when he was ousted from Beijing in 1924 by the warlord Feng Yuxian. Much of the imperial watch collections were also dispersed when foreign troops looted the Summer Palace in 1860 and the Forbidden City in 1900.



Bovet's Chinese watches

While Britain resorted to opium and gunboats to compel China to trade, a Swiss businessman found an easier way. Arriving in Canton in 1818, the 21-year-old Edouard Bovet immediately sold four watches for 10,000 francs – almost a million US dollars today.

Bovet established a watchmaking dynasty in China that lasted 80 years. It was not long before 'Bovet' became the Cantonese word for watch. He set up production in his hometown Fleurier, in Canton Neuchâtel, of the 19th century's most successful style of watch – the so-called 'Chinese-market watch'. Bovet's watches were traded throughout the empire in the currency turmoil of the crumbling Manchu dynasty.

Other Swiss companies joined the bandwagon, notably Juvet and Jacques Ullmann from Fleurier, Vacheron Constantin and Piguet & Meylan of Geneva. China continued to be a major market for Swiss watchmaking until the 1930s.

Favourite barbarian gadget

Watches are still China's favourite barbarian gadgets. Hong Kong rivals the United States as the biggest market for Swiss watches, importing more than a billion dollars' worth a year. In the rest of China, spectacular economic growth and the creation of wealthy classes are boosting watch imports more than 50% each year.

Watch brands are jostling to indulge the Chinese fascination for watches. Few watchmakers miss the opportunity of a special edition featuring creatures from the Chinese zodiac, Chinese characters or dragons.

At a junket in Beijing, September 2003, Vacheron Constantin presented a watch to the last of the Manchus, Pu Ren, brother of Pu Yi – last occupant of the Dragon Throne. No doubt this benevolent gesture will not go unnoticed by Pu Ren's watch-collecting ancestors. ○

Bovet's Chinese watches were lavishly decorated to display the highest European art skills to a distant civilization. He was the first to introduce a transparent back to display the elaborately engraved duplex movement. (Left) Very fine and rare 'Chinese Lady' silver, enamel-painted watch, with guilloché and hand-engraving, ca 1860. (Right) The case and movement of a Bovet 'Polychrome Flowers' Chinese Market pocket watch, ca 1830.