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Gift and Tribute in Early Modern Diplomacy: Afro-Eurasian Perspectives

Gifts and tribute have become a mainstay in studies of early modern diplomacy, and it is easy to see why. As a material practice, a custom laden with symbolic meaning, and an actor-driven means for configuring social and political relations, gift-exchange sits at the heart of the cluster of developments that have transformed the field of diplomatic history since the turn of the century.¹ Beyond their evident potential for illuminating a broad spectrum of topics from courtly ceremonial to inter-personal networks and the circulation of luxury goods, material exchanges have proven to be a particularly fruitful lens for the study of intercultural contacts.² Recent research has shown that a much wider and more global range of actors contributed to shaping diplomatic contacts than was traditionally assumed.³ This special issue expands on the ongoing shift away from a Europe-centric towards a global, multicentric perspective on inter-polity relations during the early modern era (ca. 1400–1800). Whilst few scholars would still contend that the rise of modern diplomacy was the preserve of a self-contained system of European sovereign states, we still remain some distance removed from a truly integrated account of the development of diplomatic norms and practices as an interactive process that unfolded around the globe against the backdrop of expanding commercial, imperial, and religious webs.⁴ Such an account, it seems to us, necessitates in-depth attention to a wide variety of actors and localities paired with a comprehensive comparative framework that draws

¹ For an overview of what has become commonly known as “New Diplomatic History”, see Sowerby, T.A. “Early Modern Diplomatic History.” *History Compass* 14 (9) (2016), 441–456. As Toby Osborne noted in this journal, New Diplomatic History is no longer “new”, however it continues to be a convenient shorthand for a range of cultural and social history approaches to the field of diplomacy: Osborne, T. “Whither Diplomatic History? An Early Modern Historian’s Perspective.” *Diplomatica: A Journal of History and Society* 1 (1) (2019), 40–45.

² A classic early example is Windler, C. “Tributes and Presents in Franco-Tunisian Diplomacy.” *Journal of Early Modern History* 4 (2) (2000), 168–199. Also see the recent volume: Biedermann, Z., A. Gerritsen, and G. Riello, eds. *Global Gifts: The Material Culture of Diplomacy in Early Modern Eurasia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017); Pitelka, M. *Spectacular Accumulation: Material Culture, Tokugawa Ieyasu, and Samurai Sociability* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2015). Further references are provided below.

³ Tremml-Werner, B., and D. Goetze. “A Multiplicity of Actors in Early Modern Diplomacy.” *Journal of Early Modern History* 23 (5) (2019), 407–422. Also see the following special issues: Gelder, M. van, and T. Krstić, eds. “Cross-Confessional Diplomacy and Diplomatic Intermediaries in the Early Modern Mediterranean.” eds., *Journal of Early Modern History* 19 (2–3) (2015); Osborne, T., and J.P. Rubiés, eds. “Diplomacy and Cultural Translation in the Early Modern World.” *Journal of Early Modern History* 20 (4) (2016); Amsler, N., H. Harrison, and C. Windler, eds. “Transformations of Intercultural Diplomacies: Comparative Views on Asia and Europe (1700 to 1850).” *The International History Review* 4 (5) (2019).

⁴ Compare the remarks in Duindam, J. “Crossing Boundaries: Diplomacy and the Global Dimension, 1700–1850.” *The International History Review* 41 (5) (2019), 1092–1099.

on the diverse linguistic and subject expertise of scholars working in different areas and traditions. The articles in this special issue form an initial step in this direction.⁵

Using diplomatic gift-giving as the lens through which to analyse a diverse set of transcultural interactions and inter-polity relationships, the authors in this issue take up four different geographical vantage points from across the extensive landmass and surrounding islands of Afro-Eurasia. Focusing on the Sahel, Spain, India, and maritime Southeast Asia respectively, their combined focus rests not on the material dimensions of the offerings presented, demanded, and received, but on their multiple functions and connotations as vessel of authority, vehicle of commerce, lubricant of relations, agent of conflict, and sign of submission respectively, as well as how these aspects overlapped. Together these explorations address the following set of questions: how were the socio-political significations of material exchanges expressed and understood by donors, recipients, and audiences both domestic and foreign? And what was the range of strategies, ties, and hierarchies configured, contested, or concealed through such acts of gift-exchange? These probes serve to frame the wider issue at stake: how did diplomatic gift-giving both reflect and affect the changing global landscape of inter-polity relations between the thickening of global connections in the fifteenth century and the global transformations that marked the turn of the nineteenth?⁶ Exploring the multiple meanings attached to diplomatic exchanges of goods, cash, and enslaved people, this issue not only illuminates the constitutive role of gifts and tribute as agents in imperial expansion, conflict management, and the negotiation of protection and patronage in different parts of the world, it also suggests that future research in the field of early modern global diplomacy stands to benefit from concerted collaborative analysis.

Global Diplomacy and Gifts

This issue focuses on what has come to be regarded as the early modern period in world history. The centuries between 1400 and 1800 saw an unprecedented blossoming of diplomatic activity both within and between world regions – an era-defining phenomenon whose nature and implications remain insufficiently understood.⁷ From imperial expansion to long-distance trade

⁵ This special issue is the product of a workshop in Venice in December 2018. We thank the University of Warwick's Global History and Culture Centre, the Free University of Berlin, and the University of Zürich for their financial and logistical support and all attendees for their stimulating contributions.

⁶ For the transformations in diplomatic relations around 1800, see Amsler, N., H. Harrison, and C. Windler. "Introduction: Eurasian Diplomacies Around 1800: Transformation and Persistence." *International History Review* 41 (5) (2019), 943–946, and the articles in the same issue.

⁷ Any periodisation is fraught with difficulties, particularly in global history. The period 1400–1800, however, represents a degree of unity as an era of increased connections on a global scale. See Bentley, J.H., S.

and religious travel, macro-processes of transregional exchange impacted all parts of Afro-Eurasia and most of the world beyond. A now sizeable corpus of studies has demonstrated just how deeply disparate early modern societies shaped and influenced one another as a consequence of cross-border exchanges – from human mobility to monetisation, and from military technology and medicinal knowledge to artistic influences and consumer cultures.⁸

This global perspective, however, is only gradually gaining prominence in accounts of the development of early modern diplomacy. Indeed, the rather uneven and fragmented state of scholarly knowledge concerning diplomacy in many regions beyond Europe long meant that trans-cultural influences remained under-explored. Such research was in part pre-empted by the conventional view which held, in simplified form, that the modern system and practice of foreign relations first emerged in the city-states of Renaissance Italy, became institutionalised in Western Europe by the time of the Peace of Westphalia (1648), and was eventually and belatedly exported to the rest of the world through European imperialism.⁹ As observed by Daniel Goffman, standard accounts of European diplomacy tended to dismiss ‘the possibility that outsiders played substantive, even essential and constructive roles’ in its development.¹⁰ In a broader sense, studies of the structures and conduct of foreign relations in different parts of the world often explained these using culturalist and regionally-bound arguments. For instance, it was long common for failures to reach agreements in Russian embassies to the Qing Empire up until 1689 to be interpreted as the result of incompatibility between two separate and virtually sealed-off systems.¹¹ Before proceeding to a consideration of gifts, it will be instructive to briefly take stock of the principal historiographical developments that frame our discussion.

In recent years, the ‘global turn’ has done much to widen the regional and thematic scopes of diplomatic history, and to dispel the notion that European diplomatic practices were

Subrahmanyam, and M.E. Wiesner-Hanks, eds. *The Cambridge World History Volume 6: The Construction of a Global World, 1400–1800 CE* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

⁸ For an overview, see Parker, C.H. *Global Interactions in the Early Modern Age, 1400–1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010) and the chapters in Bentley, Subrahmanyam, and Wiesner-Hanks, *The Cambridge World History Volume 6*.

⁹ The best-known exponents of the classic view are Mattingly, G. *Renaissance Diplomacy* (Cambridge: The Riverside Press, 1955); Anderson, M.S. *The Rise of Modern Diplomacy, 1450–1919* (London: Longman, 1993).

¹⁰ Goffman, D. “Negotiating with the Renaissance State: The Ottoman Empire and the New Diplomacy.” In *The Early Modern Ottomans: Remapping the Empire*, eds. V.H. Aksan and D. Goffman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 61–74, at 61. See also Goffman, D. *The Ottoman Empire and Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 183–188.

¹¹ Helena Jaskov’s recent study of the Jesuits as geographical knowledge brokers debunks the persistent view of the events in Nerchinsk as game changer: Jaskov, H. “The Negotiated Geography of the Treaty of Nerchinsk (1689) and the Role of the Jesuits.” *Late Imperial China* 40 (2) (2019), 45–88.

somehow unique.¹² Scholars working on commerce, cultural encounters, and imperial regimes have highlighted connections brought about by diplomatic actors and other cultural brokers in different parts of the world, stimulating new explorations of cultural commensurability, translation, cross-confessional contacts, materiality, and everyday realities of accommodation, acculturation, and conflict.¹³ The roles and agency of political communities outside Europe, including those left out from traditional state-centred diplomatic history, have attracted renewed attention, stimulated in part by disciplines other than history, such as area studies, anthropology, art history, and postcolonial studies.¹⁴

We are now in a much better position to appreciate, as Rémi Dewièrè does in his contribution to this issue, how a polity such as the Borno Sultanate located in north-eastern Nigeria linked up with wider commercial and diplomatic networks stretching northwards to Morocco and Tripoli and eastwards to Mamluk Cairo and Ottoman Istanbul, both of which functioned as major trans-regional diplomatic hubs in their own right.¹⁵ These diplomatic ties, furthermore, hooked Borno into even wider networks of exchange, as evidenced by the Christian captives received from the Beys of Tunis, or the Chinese porcelain its sultans sent back in the mid-seventeenth century, which they had most likely acquired via Egypt. The sixteenth and seventeenth centuries also saw the emergence of the first diplomatic network that truly spanned the globe, that of the Spanish monarchy. Rubén González Cuerva and José Miguel Escribano Páez in their articles demonstrate how the development of Habsburg strategies for dealing with non-Christian powers took shape as a piecemeal process through the

¹² Krischer, A., and H. von Thiesen. "Diplomacy in a Global Early Modernity: The Ambiguity of Sovereignty." *International History Review* 41 (5) (2019), 1100–1107.

¹³ See for instance Subrahmanyam, S. *Courtly Encounters: Translating Courtliness and Violence in Early Modern Eurasia* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012); Rothman, N.E. *Brokering Empire: Trans-Imperial Subjects between Venice and Istanbul* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2012); Ghobrial, J.-P. *The Whispers of Cities: Information Flows in Istanbul, London, and Paris in the Age of William Trumbull* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); Sowerby, T.A. and J. Hennings, eds. *Practices of Diplomacy in the Early Modern World c. 1410–1800* (London and New York: Routledge, 2017).

¹⁴ Examples include Floor, W. and E. Herzig, eds., *Iran and the World in the Safavid Age* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2011); Komaroff, L. ed., *Gifts of the Sultan: The Arts of Giving at the Islamic Courts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011); Meuwese, M. *Brothers in Arms, Partners in Trade: Dutch-Indigenous Alliances in the Atlantic World, 1595–1674* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2012); Yüksel Muslu, C. *The Ottomans and the Mamluks: Imperial Diplomacy and Warfare in the Islamic World* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2014); Brauner, C. *Kompanien, Könige und cobeceers: Interkulturelle Diplomatie an Gold- und Sklavenküste im 17. und 18. Jahrhundert* (Cologne: Böhlau Verlag, 2015); Grandjean, K. *American Passage: The Communications Frontier in Early New England* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015); Casale, S.A. "Iconography of the Gift: Diplomacy and Imperial Self-Fashioning at the Ottoman Court." *The Art Bulletin* 100 (1) (2018), 97–123; Heinsen-Roach, E. *Consuls and Captives: Dutch-North African Diplomacy in the Early Modern Mediterranean* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2019).

¹⁵ Yurdusev, A.N., ed., *Ottoman Diplomacy: Conventional or Unconventional?* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004); Yüksel Muslu, *The Ottomans and the Mamluks*; Bauden, F. and M. Dekkiche, eds., *Mamluk Cairo, a Crossroads for Embassies: Studies on Diplomacy and Diplomatics* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2019).

intervention of actors in numerous global sites, including the Moluccas, Manila, and Mexico, alongside Naples, Lisbon, and Madrid.

The last decades have also seen an expansion of detailed studies of political exchanges between Asian polities, urging scholars to take a fresh look at established concepts such as the Sinocentric tribute system. Based on growing empirical evidence about its internal diversity, flexibility, and propensity for change, many observers have now come to regard it, in the words of John E. Wills Jr, as ‘functional, not fossilized’.¹⁶ Work of this kind has further underscored the heterogeneous set of actors engaged in diplomatic relations in the early modern world, for instance by highlighting the key role of Central Asian caravan traders and Cossacks in early connections between Russia and the Ming and Qing empires.¹⁷ Other studies have emphasised the central role of imperial politics and commercial and religious networks in forging connections between the Ottomans and Southeast Asia, or of elite migration in the flourishing of a sophisticated South Asian diplomatic culture which drew on Iranian, Indian, and Central Asian languages of authority.¹⁸

Such research, in turn, has generated a far more complex picture of the deeply connected world which European actors entered from the sixteenth century onward, opening up new perspectives on their incorporation into, and modification of, existing diplomatic networks. Situating Iberian-Moluccan relations within struggles for power and wealth that were both local and global, Escribano Páez shows how the sultans of Ternate and Tidore drew on a variety of outside resources – Acehnese, Johorese, Ottoman, Portuguese, Spanish, English, and Dutch –

¹⁶ Wills, Jr., J.E. “Functional, Not Fossilized: Qing Tribute Relations with Đại Việt (Vietnam) and Siam (Thailand), 1700–1820.” *Toung Pao* 98 (2012), 439–478. Also see Hevia, J.L. “Tribute, Asymmetry, and Imperial Formations: Rethinking Relations of Power in East Asia.” *The Journal of American-East Asian Relations* 16 (1–2) (2009), 69–83; Perdue, P.C. “The Tenacious Tributary System.” *Journal of Contemporary China* 24 (96) (2015), 1002–1014. A recent contribution that upholds a more systemic view is Kang, D.C. “Hierarchy and Anarchy in Early Modern Asia: The Tribute System as an International System.” In *Early Modern East Asia: War, Commerce, and Cultural Exchange. Essays in Honor of John E. Wills, Jr.*, eds. K.M. Swope and T. Andrade (New York: Routledge, 2018), 197–216.

¹⁷ Bergholz, F.W. *The Partition of the Steppe: The Struggle of the Russians, Manchus, and the Zunghar Mongols for Empire in Central Asia, 1619–1758: A Study in Power Politics* (New York: Peter Lang, 1993); Burton, A. *The Bukharans: A Dynastic, Diplomatic, and Commercial History, 1550–1702* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1997); Di Cosmo, N. “Kirghiz Nomads on the Qing Frontier: Tribute, Trade, or Gift Exchange?” In *Political Frontiers, Ethnic Boundaries, and Human Geographies in Chinese History*, ed. N. Di Cosmo and D.J. Wyatt (London: Routledge Curzon, 2003), 351–372; Perdue, P.C. *China Marches West: The Qing Conquest of Central Eurasia* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005).

¹⁸ Subrahmanyam, S. “Iranians Abroad: Intra-Asian Elite Migration and Early Modern State Formation.” *The Journal of Asian Studies* 51 (2) (1992), 340–363; Farooqi, N.R. “Diplomacy and Diplomatic Procedure under the Mughals.” *The Medieval History Journal* 7 (1) (2004), 59–86; Casale, G. *The Ottoman Age of Exploration* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010); Peacock, A.C.S., and A.T. Gallop, eds. *From Anatolia to Aceh: Ottomans, Turks, and Southeast Asia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015); Eaton, R.M. *India in the Persianate Age 1000–1765* (London: Allen Lane, 2019); Kadı, I.H. and A.C.S. Peacock, eds. *Ottoman-Southeast Asian Relations: Sources from the Ottoman Archives* (2 vols. Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2020).

to fortify their own position both domestically and in relation to each other.¹⁹ Drawn into this contest, the Iberians slotted into a Southeast Asian system of tributary relations which they viewed through the prism of their own global rivalries. Similarly, Guido van Meersbergen's article details how the English East India Company (EIC) in seventeenth-century South Asia became incorporated into a system of material and symbolic exchanges through which the ruling Mughal dynasty expressed and organised its hierarchical relations with a variety of clients and tributaries. In both these cases, local political structures displayed ample capacity for accommodating outsiders, with outcomes ultimately determined less by cultural and religious difference than by (the absence of) mutual interests and power differentials. As such, they fit into a pattern that was common to most if not all parts of early modern Afro-Eurasia, with context-specific forms of adaptation and incorporation characterising the practice of intercultural diplomacy from West Africa to Japan.²⁰

As a whole, recent studies have generated fundamental insights about the 'co-production' of diplomatic genres and idioms as central to early modern diplomatic development.²¹ They have increasingly replaced a view of diplomatic systems as closed-off cultural entities with one in which the interaction between plural traditions created common diplomatic repertoires as the outcome of multidirectional processes of adaptation and accommodation. The challenge that remains is to assess whether, how, and when the various transcultural repertoires emerging in disparate contact zones linked up to shape the principles and practices of diplomatic dealings not just locally but also on a trans-regional level. As a global phenomenon with deep historic roots, gift-giving practices represent a particularly fertile area for exploring such convergences. In the words of the editors of *Global Gifts* (2017), objects exchanged in the context of foreign relations 'afford us a glimpse into the "commensurability" of shared diplomatic practices across large parts of Eurasia'.²² On the one hand, they could operate as 'key agents of social

¹⁹ About the role of long-distance diplomatic contacts in struggles against internal competitors, see Biedermann, Z. "Three Ways of Locating the Global: Microhistorical Challenges in the Study of Transcontinental Diplomacy." *Past and Present* 242 (Issue Supplement 14) (2019), 110–141.

²⁰ Clulow, A. *The Company and the Shogun: The Dutch Encounter with Tokugawa Japan* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014); Brauner, C. "Connecting Things: Trading Companies and Diplomatic Gift-Giving on the Gold and Slave Coasts in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries." *Journal of Early Modern History* 20 (4) (2016), 408–428; Metzsig, G.M. "Corals, Brass and Firearms: Material Commodities in Cultural Interactions between Edo and Portuguese in Benin around 1500." In *Material Culture in Modern Diplomacy from the 15th to the 20th Century*, eds. H. Rudolph and G.M. Metzsig (Berlin and Boston: Walter de Gruyter GmbH, 2016), 29–54; Laver, M. *The Dutch East India Company in Early Modern Japan: Gift Giving and Diplomacy* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020).

²¹ Gelder, M. van, and T. Krstić. "Introduction: Cross-Confessional Diplomacy and Diplomatic Intermediaries in the Early Modern Mediterranean." *Journal of Early Modern History* 19 (2–3) (2015), 93–105, at 103.

²² Biedermann, Z., A. Gerritsen, and G. Riello. "Introduction: Global Gifts and the Material Culture of Diplomacy in Early Modern Eurasia." in *Global Gifts*, eds. Biedermann, Gerritsen, and Riello, 1–33, 24.

cohesion’, making use of value systems that either were shared or could be presented as such. On the other hand, often precisely because their significance was understood by all participants, gifts and tributes could cause ruptures and dissonance. Gift exchanges underpinned and embodied the formation of unequal relations of coercion and domination, at the same time as they could subtly subvert and change such relations.²³ Together these observations constitute the point of departure for the contributions to this issue.

Gift and Tribute: Plural Categories of Exchange

From the Mediterranean to the Atlantic and the Pacific world, and from Africa throughout Asia, the offering and receiving of valuables, food, and services constituted highly significant events in the structuring of relations between political entities.²⁴ Indeed, as Harriet Rudolph notes, ‘gift-giving [...] may be considered an anthropological constant in foreign policy communication’.²⁵ This structural similarity, however, masks a world of divergent rules, meanings, and usages – a global variety of context-specific modes of material exchange that became established over time as the contingent products of social interaction, and that were therefore subject to ongoing change. Historians, anthropologists, and sociologists interested in gift-giving have continually reached back to Marcel Mauss’s foundational *Essai sur le don* (1925), and for excellent reasons. Mauss conceptualised gift exchange as an ongoing process that created mutual ties and obligations between donor and recipient. By stressing the three obligations of giving, receiving, and reciprocating, Mauss highlighted that gifts were never simply voluntary or disinterested, but embedded in a comprehensive system of social bonds

²³ Ibid, 1.

²⁴ The literature is now very vast. Examples include: Cutler, A. “Significant Gifts: Patterns of Exchange in Late Antique, Byzantine, and Early Islamic Diplomacy.” *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 38 (1) (2008), 79–101; Hämäläinen, P. *The Comanche Empire* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008); Thigpen, J. ““You Have Been Very Thoughtful Today”: The Significance of Gratitude and Reciprocity in Missionary-Hawaiian Gift Exchange.” *Pacific Historical Review* 79 (4) (2010), 545–572; Melo, J. “Seeking Prestige and Survival: Gift-Exchange Practices between the Portuguese Estado Da India and Asian Rulers.” *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 56 (4–5) (2013), 672–95; Behrens-Abouseif, D. *Practising Diplomacy in the Mamluk Sultanate: Gifts and Material Culture in the Medieval Islamic World* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2014); Heal, F. *The Power of Gifts: Gift-Exchange in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014); Casale, S.A. “The Persian Madonna and Child: Commodified Gifts between Diplomacy and Armed Struggle.” *Art History* 38 (4) (2015), 636–651; Talbot, M. *British-Ottoman Relations, 1661–1807: Commerce and Diplomatic Practice in Eighteenth-Century Istanbul* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2017), 105–140; Harrison, H. “Chinese and British Diplomatic Gifts in the Macartney Embassy of 1793.” *The English Historical Review* 133 (2018), 65–97.

²⁵ Rudolph, H. “Entangled Objects and Hybrid Practices? Material Culture as a New Approach to the History of Diplomacy.” In *Material Culture in Modern Diplomacy*, 18. One well-documented area for early gift exchange patterns in the context of relations between political entities was that of the ancient Silk Roads: Hansen, V. *The Silk Road: A New History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

and debts.²⁶ Rather than mapping out a series of universal truths, Mauss offers us a set of precepts to think with. By approaching gifts as ‘relational constructs’ one can begin to interrogate how transactions, the significance they held, and the relationships they shaped, were negotiated and in flux.²⁷ The questions demanding careful reflection in each context, as Natalie Zemon Davis observed with regards to gifts in sixteenth-century France, are ‘[w]ho presented what to whom, when and why, and what did it mean?’²⁸

As is increasingly clear, the multiple possible significations of material transactions as sign of amity or symbol of submission, as freely given or enforced, as unprompted or coordinated, not only left room for disputes and misunderstandings, but also created a productive sphere of ambiguity which allowed for different meanings and purposes to co-exist.²⁹ In his classic study, Christian Windler described how the eighteenth-century Beys of Tunis regarded the presents they received from Christian states as tribute even if the French and British cast them as voluntary gifts. By settling on a form of exchange that enabled multiple interpretations, both sides experienced sufficient latitude to spin it to their purposes.³⁰ This principle was not unlike that which structured relations between the Dutch East India Company (VOC) and the Tokugawa Shogunate in Japan. Here, the journeys to the court in Edo which the Dutch were required to undertake on a yearly basis rendered them as tribute-bearing vassals comparable to the *daimyo* or feudal lords subject to the Shogun.³¹ The regulated gifts presented during this public performance of submission, however, could be explained by the Company as a form of tax payable for the right to trade in Japan.³² In the Persianate world of West, Central, and South Asia, the multivalence of material transfers was embodied in the concept of *pishkash*, which referred to a variety of offerings made to the ruler or his officials by their subordinates, including objects presented on special occasions, tribute paid by provincial governors, and

²⁶ Mauss, M. *The Gift: Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies* (London: Cohen & West, 1954). About the political and intellectual context of Mauss’ essay, see Liebersohn, H. *The Return of the Gift: European History of a Global Idea* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 139–163.

²⁷ Algazi, G. “Introduction: Doing Things with Gifts.” In *Negotiating the Gift: Pre-Modern Figurations of Exchange*, eds. G. Algazi, V. Groebner, and B. Jussen (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2003), 9–27, at 22.

²⁸ Davis, N.Z. *The Gift in Sixteenth-Century France* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 14.

²⁹ Windler, C. “Performing Inequality in Mediterranean Diplomacy.” *The International History Review* 41 (5) (2019), 947–961.

³⁰ Windler, C. *La Diplomatie comme expérience de l’autre: Consuls français au Maghreb (1700–1840)* (Geneva: Droz, 2002); Windler, “Tributes and Presents.”

³¹ For an investigation of Tokugawa authority, including the performance of obedience demanded from *daimyo*, see Roberts, L.S. *Performing the Great Peace: Political Space and Open Secrets in Tokugawa Japan* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2012).

³² Clulow, A. “Gifts for the Shogun: The Dutch East India Company, Global Networks and Tokugawa Japan.” In *Global Gifts*, eds. Biedermann, Gerritsen, and Riello, 198–216; Laver, *The Dutch East India Company*, 19–35.

levies and dues exacted from the population.³³ The term *pishkash* also came to be applied to the annual “present” which the EIC paid into the Mughal treasury in Bengal in recognition of its privilege of customs-free trade in that province, in a process reminiscent of the Tokugawa *bakufu*’s incorporation of the VOC into its domestic order. What the English chose to represent as a lumpsum payment in lieu of tax, Van Meersbergen shows, also roped them into an established framework for managing political relations between the imperial centre and a wide spectrum of local communities and powerholders.³⁴

A final comparison concerns the relations between European traders in Canton and the Qing emperor, in which the set ‘gift to the emperor’ that was required for the right to trade placed those traders within the Qing tributary system.³⁵ As the article by Dewière also demonstrates, to make use of the concept of ‘gift’ was a flexible way to circumvent the issue, when the aim was profitable exchange.³⁶ Indeed, the differences between a system of taxation and a tributary system often appear not that stark in practice: the two systems could have worked and been perceived very similarly in their respective contexts.³⁷ The importance lies rather in how the perceived or presented difference was put to work in domestic and foreign relations. To capture the plural and shifting meanings of gifts and tribute in a variety of contexts, the discussions in this special issue engage with the broad category of exchanges in cash or kind occurring in the context of relations between political entities. The varied instances they cover can be grouped under five headings: vessel of authority, vehicle of commerce, lubricant of relations, agent of conflict, and sign of submission. Let us survey each in turn.

To start with gifts exchanged between political actors as a means for projecting power and authority. In its relations with extra-European rulers following the Iberian Union of the Crowns (1580), González Cuerva shows, the Spanish court used gift-giving to project a hegemonic image of the king and rank other powers vis-à-vis itself and each other.³⁸ As a

³³ Lambton, A. “*Pīshkash*: Present or Tribute?” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 57 (1) (1994), 145–158.

³⁴ Van Meersbergen, G. “Intirely the Kings Vassalls’: East India Company Gifting Practices and Anglo-Mughal Political Exchange (c. 1670–1720).” in this issue.

³⁵ See the argument for a careful use of the concept of tribute in Cranmer-Byng, J.L. and J.E. Wills, Jr. “Trade and Diplomacy with Maritime Europe, 1664–c. 1800.” In *China and Maritime Europe, 1500–1800: Trade, Settlement, Diplomacy, and Missions*, ed. J. E. Wills Jr. et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 183–254, at 251.

³⁶ Dewière, R. “‘Ismael begged Osman to give him a few Christians’: Gift Exchanges and Economic Reciprocity in Trans-Saharan Diplomacy (16th–17th c.)” in this issue.

³⁷ A classic work by E.A. Cheong actually refuses the conceptual distinction and calls it a ‘tribute tax’: Cheong, E.A. *Hong Merchants of Canton: Chinese Merchants in Sino-Western Trade, 1684–1798* (Richmond: Curzon, 1997), 225.

³⁸ González Cuerva, R. “A Diamond or a Bear: The Spanish Court’s Practices of Gift-Giving with Extra-European Embassies.” in this issue.

practice governed by the Spanish monarchy's universalist pretensions, the latter seriously curtailed the Habsburg kings' ability to formally engage in a sphere of competing universalisms. Concerns of gift exchange being construed as a tribute-paying relationship led to the abandonment of a planned mission to Ming China in the 1580s and meant that, unlike France, England, Venice, or even the Holy Roman Emperors, the Spanish kings did not dispatch formally accredited diplomats to the Ottoman Porte until the late eighteenth century. Rather than creating a deadlock, the unwillingness of either side to publicly abandon their claims to superiority fuelled an informal sphere of covert interactions between Habsburg and Ottoman officials, sealed by "personal" gifts presented to or by these officials directly, instead of on behalf of their sovereigns. Considerations of prestige and precedence also guided gift-giving in the Spanish court's relations with smaller powers, such as Morocco and Algiers. Besides Spanish aggrandizement, the size and value of gifts in these interactions was determined by competition between the incoming envoys, offering further proof that gift-giving mattered not just in the immediate context of a bilateral relationship but as a medium for communicating and asserting status within a wider diplomatic community as well.³⁹

The overlapping of symbolic and monetary value attributed to gifts takes us into the second category, one in which diplomatic gifts and commercial goods are closely intertwined. Although price data for the early modern trans-Saharan trade are limited and fragmented, Dewièrè finds evidence suggesting that gifts of enslaved people and gifts of horses exchanged between the rulers of Tripoli and Borno were balanced in terms of market value when price differentials are taken into account. Caravans bearing diplomatic gifts were likely of similar size to commercial caravans and would often have been indistinguishable from them, another indication that trans-Saharan diplomatic networks were superimposed onto older economic networks. Beyond diplomacy's evident role in establishing frameworks for trade, the gifts exchanged on diplomatic missions also functioned as signalling devices to promote commercial goods and advertise access to markets.⁴⁰ Gifts likewise shine light on the interrelationship between diplomacy and trade in two other contexts discussed in this issue, that is, India and the Moluccas. Within the gift repertoire the EIC presented to Mughal

³⁹ Compare the quality of robes received at the Ottoman court as a 'common currency in the economy of honour and symbolic distinction': Vogel, C. "The Caftan and the Sword: Dress and Diplomacy in Ottoman-French Relations Around 1700." in *Fashioning the Self in Transcultural Settings: The Uses and Significance of Dress in Self-Narratives*, eds. C. Ulbrich and R. Wittmann (Würzburg: Ergon Verlag, 2015), 25–44, at 32.

⁴⁰ Dewièrè, R. "Ismael begged Osman to give him a few Christians': Gift Exchanges and Economic Reciprocity in Trans-Saharan Diplomacy (16th–17th c.)." in this issue. The entanglement of commerce and foreign relations as applied to European actors has been studied under the heading of 'business diplomacy': Antunes, C. "Early Modern Business Diplomacy: An Appraisal." *Diplomatica* 2 (1), 20–27.

dignitaries, prestigious Asian consumption goods mixed with specimens of European technology and standard items from the Company's commercial assortment such as broadcloth. Iberian-Moluccan relations, in contrast, revolved around spices, and hence cloves were the Sultan of Ternate's gift item of choice when seeking to establish relations with the Spanish in Manila, as well as the currency in which the Sultan of Tidore paid the Portuguese in exchange for military protection. The Chinese silks and Castilian velvets the Spanish presented on their part can also be seen as commercial goods that doubled as diplomatic gifts.⁴¹

Such commercial and diplomatic transfers could serve as the lubricant that greased relations but also as agents of conflict, constituting the third and fourth categories outlined above. The gift as a symbol of amity might well be its oldest and most widespread connotation. To name just one context, gift-giving features widely as a preferred medium for establishing cross-cultural friendship and trust in accounts of European overseas expansion.⁴² When not explicitly cited as a means to proffer or consolidate friendly relations, English considerations regarding gift-giving in Mughal India suggest that transfers of cash and objects could be intended to avert displeasure, ease tensions, or procure an official's compliance. However, gifts also played active parts in amplifying friction and fuelling violence. They might be designed to convey threats, demanded or withheld to deliver a threatening message, or, as in the case of the gifts of military equipment received by Ternatan Sultans, be perceived as threats by outside observers such as the Spanish authorities in the Philippines. Crucially, as Escribano Páez argues, sixteenth-century Iberian-Moluccan conflicts sparked by gift exchange sprang from a combination of factors. The latter included information asymmetry and misunderstandings, but conflicts drew in equal measure on shared understandings of the functions of gifts and tribute as markers of hierarchical relations.⁴³

Material exchanges such as tribute payments did not just function as symbolic acts that could render distinct political structures mutually translatable, they also operated as the means by which multiple configurations of power and patronage could intersect and be superimposed onto each other.⁴⁴ For instance, Sultan Gapibaguna of Tidore maintained authority over vassals

⁴¹ Escribano Páez, J.M. "Diplomatic Gifts, Tributes and Frontier Violence: Circulation of Contentious Presents in the Moluccas (1575–1606)." in this issue.

⁴² Harbsmeier, M. "Gifts and Discoveries: Gift Exchange in Early Modern Narratives of Exploration and Discovery." in *Negotiating the Gift*, eds. Algazi, Groebner and Jussen, 381–410; Smith, V. *Intimate Strangers: Friendship, Exchange and Pacific Encounters* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

⁴³ Escribano Páez, J.M. "Diplomatic Gifts, Tributes and Frontier Violence: Circulation of Contentious Presents in the Moluccas (1575–1606)." in this issue.

⁴⁴ This followed a logic which Zoltán Biedermann has described as 'the matrioskha principle': Biedermann, Z. *(Dis)connected Empires: Imperial Portugal, Sri Lankan Diplomacy, and the Making of a Habsburg Conquest in Asia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

in the Moluccan archipelago whilst paying homage to a distant overlord (here, Philip II of Spain) in a system of ‘layered or nesting suzerainties’.⁴⁵ Most attention, as in Zoltán Biedermann’s work on Portuguese relations with the Sri Lankan kingdom of Kotte, has been paid to Asian rulers and communities becoming tributaries to European powers. However, as suggested by the aforementioned relations between the Tokugawa Shogunate and the VOC, the notion of layered suzerainties also helps explain the processes by which Asian or African rulers placed European actors into existing political orders. Hence, by showing that Anglo-Mughal gift-giving operated alongside petitions and ceremonial performances as a series of connected signs of submission, Van Meersbergen highlights how the Mughal authorities configured their hierarchical relationship with the East India Company through an established discourse of imperial service and protection.⁴⁶

The hybrid and adaptive character of trading companies aided their integration into foreign political structures and blurs distinctions between historiographical categories of lobbying and diplomacy, internal and external relations, and state and non-state actors.⁴⁷ Indeed, as a relationship between political entities that does not fit a strict definition of foreign relations, the Anglo-Mughal case prompts one of the central questions that scholars of early modern diplomacy have grappled with: ‘what is inside and what is outside?’⁴⁸ It seems to us that comparing the modes by which political groups were rendered vassals, clients, or protected communities in a variety of global settings will offer a particularly fruitful avenue for studying the interaction and intersection of different registers for managing relations between political entities across the early modern world. Such research will further illuminate how analogous and broadly translatable instruments and practices came to be shared across a wide range of early modern political communities, enabling actors from different parts of the globe, as Lauren Benton and Adam Clulow have argued, to establish common rubrics and repertoires for dealing

⁴⁵ Biedermann, “Three Ways of Locating the Global.” 119. On the Moluccan context, see Andaya, L.A. *The World of Maluku: Eastern Indonesia in the Early Modern Period* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 1993); Widjojo, M.S. *The Revolt of Prince Nuku: Cross-Cultural Alliance-Making in Maluku, c.1780–1810* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2009).

⁴⁶ Van Meersbergen, G. “‘Intirely the Kings Vassalls’.” in this issue.

⁴⁷ Veevers, D. and W.A. Pettigrew. “Trading Companies and Business Diplomacy in the Early Modern World.” *Diplomatica* 2 (1) (2020), 39–47.

⁴⁸ Kołodziejczyk, D. “What is Inside and What is Outside? Tributary States in Ottoman Politics.” In *The European Tributary States of the Ottoman Empire in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, eds. G. Kárman and L. Kunčević (Brill: Leiden and Boston, 2013), 421–423.

with and clashing over questions of protection, jurisdiction, tribute, and the expected protocols of inter-polity exchange, gift-giving included.⁴⁹

Future Steps

The comment by Christian Windler that closes this special issue serves as an invitation both to reflect on the conceptual and methodological trajectory of New Diplomatic History over the last several decades, and to turn our vision towards its future development. Taking as his starting point the importance of anthropological and micro-historical approaches to the field's evolution since the 1990s, Windler reminds us of the continuing necessity of attending to processes of meaning-making as they played out within specific contexts of socio-political interaction. Central to his account of the 'polysemy of the gift', or the capacity of material transfers to carry multiple meanings, is precisely the productive potential of such ambiguity. As his argument goes, in global settings where the relationship between donors and recipients was open to different interpretations, ambiguity frequently operated not as a stumbling block to, but as an important 'key to success' in, inter-polity relations.⁵⁰ It might be actively fostered rather than avoided by diplomatic actors operating between diplomatic regimes otherwise divided by conflicting worldviews or competing universalistic claims. Practices of gift-giving thus offer an entry point for tackling the broader question of how parallel, overlapping, and competing diplomatic norms and frameworks interacted or clashed with one another on a global scale. Such work necessitates, as Windler notes, close attention to the backgrounds and strategies of the individuals involved in inter-polity exchange, including a much stronger focus on the guiding roles of non-European actors and perspectives than has hitherto been the case.

Yet to truly decentre the European experience in early modern diplomatic studies requires not just a shift in the settings we study, but an adjustment of our conceptual lenses too. Whilst historians of early modern foreign relations in Europe have become accustomed to think outside the model of the sovereign state, Windler suggests, 'the global history of diplomacy tends to adopt concepts inherited from nineteenth century, state-centred European historiographical traditions'.⁵¹ This leads to the important question of whether actors in different parts of the world would have recognised what historians retrospectively defined as diplomatic exchanges as an activity distinct from the broader webs of social relations in which

⁴⁹ Benton, L., and A. Clulow. "Legal Encounters and the Origins of Global Law." In *The Cambridge World History Volume 6: The Construction of a Global World, 1400–1800 CE, Part 2: Patters of Change*, eds. J.H. Bentley, S. Subrahmanyam, and M.E. Wiesner-Hanks (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 80-100.

⁵⁰ Windler, C. "Gift and Tribute in Early Modern Diplomacy: A Comment." in this issue.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

they were often embedded. In other words, a thorny issue future work will need to address is whether the shorthand label of ‘diplomacy’ is always the most appropriate category for thinking through the complex and richly textured field of relations between political entities, particularly at a global level. We would like to end here on a plea for concerted exploration of the conceptual frameworks and terminologies that informed early modern actors’ own plural, shifting, and contested understandings of political authority, hierarchy, and political space. If the aim is to go beyond simply recognising that European actors and ideas were not the sole or principal driving forces in shaping the dynamics of early modern diplomatic interactions, a much fuller understanding of the nature and impact of non-European concepts and practices is needed. To attain this, future scholarship ought to include an expanded range of voices, sources, and languages, as well as more sustained collaborations.

A fitting means to achieve the latter would be the establishment of a Global Diplomacy Network that brings together scholars working in separate areas and traditions in a systematic attempt to conceptualise how increased travel, exchange, and circulation of knowledge affected and shaped the frameworks and practices of early modern inter-polity relations in Afro-Eurasia and beyond. The network would seek to assess how multiple overlapping frameworks for managing relations between political communities operated and developed in interaction with each other. It might examine, for instance, where and how intercultural entanglements led to an increased harmonisation of diplomatic forms and legal principles, how historical actors navigated the theoretical and practical challenges of establishing authority in situations of divergent frameworks of law, and how diplomacy as practiced in Europe was transformed through sustained contacts with the wider world. Focusing on concrete practices such as diplomatic gift-giving provides a methodological tool for examining not only the dynamics of inter-polity relations within a given time and place, but also for mapping their development over time. Such an approach enables the tracking of when and why one meaning of a practice gave way to another, how and when diplomatic traditions converged, and which diplomatic frameworks remained distinct and why. Ultimately, such research would seek to elucidate when, where, why, and how global entanglements affected the structures, norms, and practices of inter-polity relations during an era of intense trans-regional exchanges on a global scale.