

# Disappointing Gifts: Dialectics of Gift Exchange in Early Modern European-East Asian Diplomatic Practice

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Some sort of gift exchange has been part of every recorded instance of diplomatic encounters between countries in Asia and Europe. Ceremonies for the reception of presents in tribute embassies were the only substantial elements of pre-Han diplomacy incorporated into Tang dynasty and later practice (Wills 1984: 6). Such exchanges rank in importance only behind the primary exchange of oral, or more usually written, messages between rulers. By definition here, a 'diplomatic encounter' is one between rulers, in which one is represented by a travelling envoy to the other, whether the rulers are sovereign and in principle equal (as in Europe after the 1648 Treaty of Westphalia, and more so after 1815) or, as in the majority of Asian cases, between rulers at various levels of more and less inclusive hierarchies. The embassy is frequently reciprocated by a return visit, although never by the Chinese until the late 19th century. Diplomatic exchanges are instances of long-distance giving across, and leapfrogging borders, seas and oceans. They transcend and constitute cultural and political differences. They create, maintain and distribute mutual knowledge and ignorance. We are dealing with historical states and empires. We therefore have a high degree of complexity, hierarchy and literacy (see also Turton 1997 and 2001).

This essay reflects on the concerns and perspectives of my book, with Volker Grabowsky (2003), *The gold and silver road of trade and friendship: the McLeod and Richardson diplomatic missions to Tai states in 1837*, and draws more or less implicitly on a number of theoretical perspectives. My empirical field of interest, and chief source of ethnographic (or 'implicit ethnographic', see Schwartz 1995) data, is European diplomatic *contacts* with Southeast Asian states and to some extent with China (and Chinese relations with Southeast Asian states) from the early 16th and, in particular, the mid-19th centuries. My particular focus is on British relations with the Siamese and other Tai states. Within this extended period, European diplomatic practices changed from late feudal/absolutist monarchies, through mercantilism and early colonialism to the ideas of sovereign national states and early forms of imperialism.

There is considerable first-hand written evidence of diplomatic gift exchange. Second-hand commentaries are also abundant. Synthesis and comparative analysis are rare, however. The hegemony of Chinese imperial practices on the one hand, and on the other, the relatively consistent European modes of diplomatic conduct, permit a certain amount of longitudinal comparison. This is the more permissible and effective, the more focused the comparison is on particular times and locations. Hence the main focus is on a sequence of episodes in Anglo-Siamese relations between 1822 and 1857.

I chose the title, ‘Disappointing gifts’, in order to reflect on the assessment of gifts by either, or both, parties to a diplomatic exchange and on the success or failure of such exchanges within power laden contexts. I had in mind partly some English colloquialisms concerning gift giving, such as: ‘Oh, well, it’s the thought that counts’; ‘one man’s meat is another man’s poison’; and the translingual Anglo-German pun, ‘one man’s *Gift* is another man’s poison’. My other source of inspiration is an episode from one of the Pooh Bear stories of A. A. Milne (Milne 1973). These children’s stories may be unfamiliar to some readers, but I shall not elaborate here except to say that the episode concerns two well-intended gifts from a small bear and a piglet to their sceptical and lugubrious friend, a donkey. The gifts are almost totally consumed or destroyed before they reach their destination, but the remnants are eventually handed over and somehow things end up satisfactorily enough. The story is used brilliantly by Benjamin Hoff to illustrate the Chinese concept of *wu wei* (which he transforms into ‘Pooh Way’) within Taoist thought, in his book *The Tao of Pooh* (Hoff 1982). Taoist ideas are very pertinent to Chinese and related East Asian diplomatic practices. Hoff’s insight is therefore highly suggestive for considering diplomatic gifts and the notion of ‘disappointing gifts’.

I offer two strongly contrasting examples as a way of thinking about this. One is the well known Macartney mission to the Qianlong Emperor in 1793 – a home win for the Chinese – and the Bowring mission to Siam in 1855 – an away win for the English, or a high score draw, depending on how you view it. First, I wish to make a rather wide-ranging introduction to the topic of ‘diplomatic gift giving’.

### To all and singular to whom these presents shall come

By definition, a diplomatic mission, a *mobile* embassy in ancient and early modern times, is an exchange, and probably part of a wider bilateral sequence of exchange. And the whole of it is a kind of exchange. Of course, there are limiting cases of embassies being turned back at the frontier or being refused an audience at the capital. Lord Amherst left Peking (Beijing) the same day he arrived in 1816, although the Chinese kept at least some of his gifts. In Asia, there are numerous instances of ambassadors being killed, despite a fairly widespread convention of immunity for heralds and envoys, or potential exchange partners, as the Trobrianders found even among headhunting Dobuans (as cited by Mauss 1950: 278). The older embassies did not, however, benefit from the greater certainties of today’s rules of sovereignty and immunity concerning resident embassies. So their status was always precarious and negotiable. Any part and all of the embassy was part of an exchange in which mutual ignorance, fear, and suspicion had to be limited or overcome with dialogue, sharing of information, offering tokens of respect, honour, dignity, offerings of substantive worth and value, and promises of future conduct. The status of the embassy was of primary importance, notably whether it was directly sent by, and bearing a letter from, a ruler and with what delegated powers. The size, rank and composition of the embassy, their mode of transport, their dress, comportment, language skills and weapons were among key variables to be displayed and assessed. Similar details of the reception of the visiting embassy were likewise noted. The personal behaviour of the ambassador constituted a large area for manoeuvre. On

the whole, we find the English selecting as ambassadors those with an affable, mild and conciliatory manner, for all that they should also be experienced negotiators and firm in their dealings, and so on. The gifts constituted another area for endless orchestration.

In this article I try to focus mainly on the chief gifts between rulers. In a sense, the highest gift, the most honoured by the recipient and the most lavishly wrapped and so on, was the royal or imperial letter. But this was always accompanied by what I dare call gifts in the most obvious sense: portable (even if cumbersome, such as cannon) or 'self-mobile' (e.g. horses) objects. They are multiple, divisible, mostly durable, but some also more immediately consumable. Royal gifts usually contained at least some objects, or materials of the highest possible value, such as: gold, silver, diamonds, other precious stones, crystal and jewellery, ivory, rhinoceros horn, animal skins and furs, silk, elephants, horses, imagery, weapons, scientific instruments, etc. In earlier epochs, and in personal return gifts to members of missions, such high value and relatively long-lasting consumables as honey, wine, dried meat and so on, figure more.

There was an assumption that royal gifts would consist of objects originating in the sending country. The Chinese term *gong*, Hevia (1993) notes, is usually translated as 'tribute', but may be glossed as *fangwu*, local products, implying a movement from periphery to centre rather than from one centre to another. Echoing the Chinese protocol, the Siamese resented the American envoy, Joseph Balestier, in 1850, who was guilty in their eyes of many others breaches, bringing them objects which had clearly been bought in Hong Kong on the way. He was denied an audience. The English were aware of this expectation, although Arthur Phayre, at the Burmese court in 1855, records Burmese puzzlement at 'two fine gold-wrought suits of Hindustanee mail, plate and chain', pointing out that 'they knew it was not English practice to wear them'. Of course the gifts were likely to include items that were even more unfamiliar, if 'local' to the sending country:

"A splendid silver centre vase, or wine cooler, was set down in their list as a spittoon, to which constant concomitant of their own dignitaries it bore a nearer resemblance than to aught else in their cognisance" (Yule 1858, original emphasis).

There are many related topics with which this article cannot deal, but which might usefully be brought to mind for future discussion. One is further consideration of what was not permissible as a gift. One potential item, which I have found in no East Asian exchange, is slaves. Perhaps the most important criterion for determining what may not be given might be that of strategic value. But, nonetheless, almost any item one can think of – excepting manpower – may be given, at least in token amounts: elephants, weapons, scientific instruments, maps and itineraries, texts of chronicles and dynastic lists, and so on. These are tantalising instruments of potential espionage and aggression. Sometimes they are given, sometimes withheld, sometimes requested and denied. McLeod asks for some manuscripts at Chiang Rung and is met with a rhetorical answer as to 'whether I [McLeod] wished he [the Tai official] should lose his head' (Grabowsky and Turton 2003: 397).

The question of weapons as gifts is intriguing. They are about as constant in gift

presentation from Europeans as tea is from the Emperor of China. They are, of course, items of rank, of beauty, endlessly added value, capable of bearing most other valuable materials (on scabbards and the like), signs of superior technology, and naturally a good advertisement for the commercial trade of arms. Sometimes substantial gifts of weapons are given (say hundreds of muskets) or a few choice items (multi-barrelled and multi-shot guns). But the Asian courts also sent weapons. The Siamese sent weapons as gifts in at least two of their 17th century missions to Europe: to Holland in 1608, they sent two arquebuses (elephant guns), two swords, two spears and two pikes; and they sent cannon to Louis XIV.

In classic Maussian terms, there was an absolute '*obligation to give*' such gifts. The English East India Company sent traders to Siam in the late 17th century without royal letters or gifts – despite earlier conformity when King James I had sent a letter and gifts to 'his brother the King of Siam'. The Dutch warned and advised the English otherwise. And of course it was not just royal gifts. Gifts went all the way up, as they came all the way down. Gifts were required at many levels of the local hierarchy, whether these could be described as opening gifts, sweeteners, bribes, customs/customary dues, extortion or whatever. There might also be direct payments for services in cash, by the visitors.

Return gifts to the sending ruler tended to be calculated at the end of the mission, when some sort of compromise could be made between reciprocating equivalent value – or perhaps more or less according to the assessment of the success or value of the mission. Return gifts to members of the embassy feature even larger in accounts. The Chinese had two clear categories of 'bestowal' (*ci*) and 'reward' (*shang*). These were calculated, as were all gifts we are discussing, in terms of hierarchies of rank and value.

If we deduct the cost of transporting an embassy to and from its destination, the cost of any particular embassy might be approximately the same for either side. A foreign embassy was usually attended by resident nationals of other countries, and by simultaneously visiting embassies. This gave an added value for the host country. The display was a public relations coup, in modern terms. The cost of holding large banquets and entertainments could be enormous. In terms of the gifts themselves, the Siamese, at least, had a clear sense that this was a question of fairly strictly balanced value (Thailand 1936).

It was an Asian practice to provide for the subsistence of a visiting embassy. They were guests in a sense. The Thai term *khaek muang* (guests of the state), used in records of foreign missions, illustrates this. It echoes the Chinese *bin li*. In the Siamese case this took various forms. At every moment of this giving, which is itself a kind of, or part of a 'gift exchange', there were opportunities for manipulation. On arrival, even before landing, ships were presented with fruit, sugar and tea. The port governor – who had the most exceptional experience of foreign visitors – could entertain foreign guests using Western furniture, table settings, wine and cuisine, which were not always available further upstream. As the mission progressed, there would be additional supplies of this kind, including live animals for meat, and later, for the Americans especially, milk and coffee.

In part, according to particular assessments of missions, and later as a general trend, the Siamese offered increasing benefits to foreign missions, from details such as quality,

type and dimension of beds, bedding, mosquito nets, etc., to the number of out-of-town excursions. Form of transport was an important sumptuary variable. John Crawford, the British envoy to Siam in 1822, was understandably offended by being offered only a soft hammock carried by two people as his main means of diplomatic carriage – it was probably hard to maintain European standards of high dignity in such a mode. Later envoys had a litter carried by eight people. The English requirements, as interpreted by the Siamese, set the style for a series of Western missions after 1855. Other offerings, or concessions, on the Siamese part, included dressing the Siamese military, rowers and officials in shirts and trousers – to obviate foreigners' charges of 'nakedness' – cleaning and clearing the streets to be passed by the embassy, and so on.

I have mentioned some forms of hospitality as parts of the entire exchange process. This could be an area of some calculation and manipulation in the case of problematic embassies. The Siamese, again probably echoing Chinese practice, expected to have to bear the subsistence costs of the visiting embassy. They were usually generous in their supply of tea, sugar, fruit, livestock and other basic requirements. The Siamese system of farming out produce tax worked well for them here, as the King merely ordered local concessionaires – usually Thai-Chinese tax farmers who held concessions for various products – to furnish what was necessary. The visitors seem to have welcomed and appreciated this. What was seldom welcome, however, was the royal gift of money, or silver, for subsistence expenses (*phrarajathan bialiang*, or in ordinary Thai also used in the official Siamese account, *kka kap khao khong kin*). This was couched in the same terms as funds provided for senior Siamese officials: 240 *ticals* per month, though in Henry Burney's case the Vice-Roy added a further 120 *ticals* 'as we lived so much upon animal food' (Burney 1910-14, Vol. 1: 48). But even so, Burney says this practice was 'unpleasant to European feeling'. However, it is noted that in the first Siamese mission to Europe (Holland in 1608), the Dutch gave them 100 guilders for travel expenses. The British, seem to have resented this especially. This was partly, I think, because it put them under a more obvious form of obligation and dependency; also because it was in cash, and not a very large amount in their eyes in any case. It was frequently referred to as 'bazaar expenses', and attempts were made to refuse or return it. A somewhat similar, but in a way inverted, version of this was when a large present such as a horse or elephant was offered, in which case some attempt might be made to offer a modest or token sum in (part) payment. These are examples of a limit to the '*obligation to receive*'.

For the most part, foreign envoys were required to, and did, accept all gifts. The local ruler's gifts were held in such esteem by some ambassadors from Asian countries that they bore them on their heads, even when moving on all fours. The Siamese Ambassadors to London in 1857 approached Queen Victoria, in her audience hall at Windsor, 'in a position between crouching and crawling', as the press put it, while pushing the gifts in front of them on gilt trays. It was customary for recipients of royal gifts to wear garments, if these were among the gifts, or otherwise bring to court and display personal objects received in order to bring honour to the donor. McLeod happily put on a long Chinese robe and necklace of office at the Tai court of Chiang Rung in Yunnan. King Mongkut proudly wore the gold and diamond watch given by Queen Victoria.

But 'reception' of gifts could also be orchestrated to enhance or diminish their

perceived diplomatic value. At the fullest extent, all gifts would be displayed in the audience hall, treated honorifically, and a full list read out in mutually agreed languages. But this might be selective, or the ruler might not even set eyes upon the gifts before the audience. Little has been written about what happened, or was supposed to happen, to gifts after their acceptance. A limited period of display is clearly *de rigueur*. The number of gifts may be designed to permit sharing and onward distribution. Senior officials will have received their own personal gifts, but there would always be a number of wives and relatives to whom they might be given. At least some of the English gifts seem to have been designed to appeal to an assumed feminine taste. There are instances of diplomatic gifts being displayed over many years in palaces, national museums and the like. Siamese cannons, given to Louis XIV are to this day displayed in the National Army Museum in Paris. Members of French and British missions sometimes raffled or auctioned their personal presents, which were often in the form of commodities, such as tin, wood, ivory, cloth, pepper, tea, etc. The senior envoys might be obliged to treat their gifts as public goods, and these might be auctioned to defray expenses from the public purse. Within days after the return to Moulmein of the McLeod and Richardson missions to Tai states in 1837, the Moulmein Chronicle lists for public auction the items that they brought back with them (Grabowsky and Turton 2003: 109-10). Some of the presents intended for the Chinese Emperor from the failed Amherst mission of 1816 were bought by the Scottish trader Robert Hunter, who was in Bangkok from 1824 for some twenty years. David Richardson, on his mission to Bangkok in 1839, noticed a musical clock in the Siamese audience hall that Hunter had bought in a sale of diplomatic gifts and presented to the King of Siam as a personal gift (Richardson 1840: 228). In the case of the Chinese, imperial bestowals often contained goods that had been previously received as tribute; bestowals did not have to obey the logic of the tribute (*gong*) itself in being local produce.

We have seen some instances of gifts being depreciated. The Persian embassy to Ayutthaya in 1686, complained about the meanness of the King's gifts, for which they blamed his chief minister, Constantine Phaulkon, a European expatriate. The French mission of the previous year was favoured by this official, however, notwithstanding that he cast doubt (ironically perhaps) on whether their gold might not be copper. They received so many gifts that they could not transport them all back to France, and had to leave some elephants and bales of cloth behind. The American envoy Edmund Roberts, visiting Bangkok in 1833, reports officials checking to see whether his gifts were appropriate to give the King. They complained that the colour of some silk was not best chosen to please His Majesty. Roberts (1837) also records that some 'painted boxes' brought by Burney in 1826 had not been accepted, as being 'not suitable'. This is a nice instance also of the cross-referencing that went on between missions. King Mongkut searched the records of the lavish 17th century French embassies to Ayutthaya in order to see if he could make Sir John Bowring's embassy in 1855 even more welcome (Thailand 1936: 227).

A variant of the less than wholehearted acceptance of a gift is to say something like: 'Thanks, but next time could I have ...' Several instances of this occur in McLeod's missions to Tai states in 1837, when he was asked for reading glasses, or wine glasses

or speciality hand guns, etc., even for garden seeds. A nice instance is recorded in the mission of Van Wuysthoff to the King of Laos in 1641:

“The King was delighted with the presents, but begged that next time they would send him some water-dogs, and other big dogs, cockatoos, Agra doves with peacock tails, with different kinds of rabbits, large carpets and fine linen.” (Van Wuysthoff 1987: 376)

### China 1793

The Macartney mission to China in 1793 was quite large and grand by British standards, with a total of 95 members (including a military detachment, artisans to set up the gifts, German musicians, and so on), not counting those who stayed behind in Canton (Guangzhou) (see Hevia 1995 and bibliography therein). It was not such a big deal for the Chinese authorities, who annually received embassies of 200 or more people. In fact, 200 was an upper limit imposed at times. Embassies of 1,000 or more people (with a further 2,000 remaining at the frontier) are recorded.

The presents (as the English usually called them) taken for the Emperor (and to a lesser extent his officials) were considerable. They were valued at £15,610. They were packed in 600 ‘packages’, which required 3,000 ‘coolies’ (workers, porters), 200 horses, 90 wagons and 40 barrows to transport them from Canton to Peking. It is of interest to consider, therefore, why the somehow disappointing nature of the gifts should feature so large in explanations of the difficulties and overall failure, from the English point of view, of the mission. Of course, there were other aspects of protocol that exacerbated relations. And there were, no doubt, even more substantive, conjunctural political issues involved. Here were two expanding empires that had recently become neighbours. Specifically, the Chinese were suspicious about the East India Company’s possible involvement in the current Chinese war with Nepalese Ghurkhas in Tibet. But England was, after all, China’s major Western trading ‘partner’.

The status of the gifts was linked to the main problem of protocol for the English, which was that of upholding sovereignty and equality of status with the Chinese. This was, in a sense, a contradiction in terms and insurmountable – and yet, maybe avoidable; there’s the rub. But this was not, in fact, an overriding issue for the English. The Chinese attached triangular paper flags to each of the packages before transmission, which announced that they were ‘English tribute articles’, which the English had translated to them, and so acquiesced.

Lord Macartney was asked on arrival at Canton for a list of the gifts. This was standard practice in most, if not all, Asian states. Either side could, if they wished, make heavy weather of this moment in the protracted *rite de passage* of an embassy. It was hardly surprising since the gifts were, like any trade goods, or more so, carefully packaged and sealed. The questioning provided knowledge that could help prepare for their reception and display, their size, value, requirements for setting up, and for distinguishing ‘warlike stores’ (both those intended as gifts and others). Such a customary/customs declaration could also serve as a kind of insurance against loss and

legitimate claims for compensation against the host country.

Macartney seems to have caused offence and thrown the mission as a whole off balance from the very start. The Chinese accounts record him as being uncooperative, arrogant and boastful. He exaggerated the value, originality, ingeniousness and Englishness of the main gifts (including, as a centrepiece, an orrery or planetarium) and the time needed to assemble them (one month) and the impossibility of dismantling them thereafter. The latter assertion was challenged in quite empirical terms by the Emperor. Most of the diplomatic damage seems to have been done before any package had even been opened. On arrival in Peking:

“... Macartney was taken on an extensive tour of the palaces in Rehe,<sup>1</sup> shown a profusion of European spheres, orreries, clocks, and musical automatons, and told that this was only one portion of the emperor’s collection of such devices. The ambassador commented, in fact, “that our presents must shrink from the comparison and ‘hide their diminished heads’”. Macartney’s signs of modesty at this point appear, however, to have come too late to actually affect the court’s evaluation of his character” (Hevia 1993).

Whether or not Macartney’s behaviour increased Chinese suspicions of some underlying British intentions is one matter, but clearly the issue exacerbated the imperial attitude to ‘*gong*’ as basically ‘local products’ presented as a part of an unequal but harmonious and consensual political relationship. The Emperor was thus moved to write to King George III, in these much-anthologised terms:

“The Celestial Empire, ruling all within the four seas, simply concentrates on carrying out the affairs of Government properly, and does not value rare and precious things ... we have never valued ingenious articles, nor do we have the slightest need of your Country’s manufactures.” (Hevia 1993: 57)

Elsewhere, the imperial rhetoric speaks of wanting envoys to come empty-handed and return fully laden (*hou-wang po-lai* cited in Sarasin 1977: 149). In practice, substance was no doubt also appreciated as well as form and intention.

The Chinese did, however, accept the English gifts. When the British military invaded China in 1860, they looted the Yuanming Garden in Peking. Amongst the loot were cannons presented by Macartney in 1793. They are said to have been returned to the Woolwich Arsenal in London where they had been made. This could stand as an extreme case of the negation of a gift, the forcible retaking in circumstances of humiliation.

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<sup>1</sup> Now Chengde in Hebei province.



## Siam 1822-1857

John Crawford adopted a comparably haughty manner in 1822 on the occasion of the first major European embassy to Siam for about 140 years. He refers in his journal to the conversation concerning gifts with the governor of the port at the mouth of the Chao Phraya River, as:

“... a good specimen of the indelicacy and rapacity which we afterwards found so characteristic of the Siamese Court and its officers.” (Crawford 1967)

And when later the more portable presents were displayed at the main audience, and a list read out:

“I make no doubt they were represented as tribute or offerings, although of this it was impossible to obtain proof. The letter of the Governor-General was neither read nor exhibited, notwithstanding the distinct pledge which I had been given to that effect.”

Crawford also notes with distaste that whereas a shortfall of four pieces of muslin cloth had been noted, the over delivery of two more valuable pieces of velvet cloth had not. Crawford's assistant, Lieutenant Finlayson, also refers to the officials' 'greed for presents', a phrase which becomes a standard trope on the English side (Finlayson 1826).

Crawford's mission was regarded as pretty disastrous by the English as well as the Siamese. The latter would not concede trading benefits; the former would not trade weapons (which the Portuguese and Americans were prepared to do). He did nonetheless present 300 flintlocks with bayonets and a twin-barelled shotgun. He returned to Calcutta (Kolkata) with a flea in his ear, with gifts of ivory, gum benjamin, cardamom, tin, refined sugar and gambodge and a letter from the King to the Governor of Bengal, in which he says: “The Governor of Bengal, with good-will chose to send Mr Crawford to convey *offerings* to his Majesty ..” (Italics in English original). Prince Chetsada, the future King Rama III, also sent return gifts in his capacity as the King's officer in charge of royal trading. All this notwithstanding, the Siamese records (Thiphakorawong 1961) describe Crawford's behaviour in much the same terms as the Chinese did Macartney, as 'intimidating', 'proud', 'ensorious' and 'excessive'.

Four years later, it was a different story. There was a new King on the Siamese throne. The English were engaged in a war with the Burmese empire. Each side needed the other. Henry Burney (whose patience and personal charm contrasted with Crawford's manner) headed a second, longer mission in 1826. By the end of the mission, the war had been concluded in the British favour, as had the embassy itself. However, note the striking differences in British approach to protocol. Burney had learned enough Thai to know what was going on and to make an honorific speech before the King. He sent to the port governor, in advance, from Singapore, and in Thai, a full list of members, credentials, gifts and 'Warlike Stores'. They had the benefit of advice from the Scottish

merchant, Robert Hunter, who had set up residence in Bangkok a year or two earlier and was obligingly trading arms to the King of Siam. Burney's armed merchant ship was permitted to proceed upriver to Bangkok with its guns aboard; with shot and powder left behind at the river mouth as a compromise.

There is a continual theme of gift exchange in Burney's journal. One senior Siamese official requested gifts and failed to reciprocate; he also mocked a gift of emeralds for being made of glass. Burney exceeded custom by making some additional parting gifts of jewels. The King showed exceptional friendliness and informality by requesting to see Burney's six-year old son, to whom he gave 'a number of Toys and other Articles'.

Sir James Brooke, the 'sultan of Brunei' (or as the Thai saw him 'the governor of Labuan', made an attempt at a mission in 1850. It was a bad time as the King (Rama III) was ill, and the succession was still being debated. His entourage was more appropriate than that of the American, Joseph Balestier, with two private ships, gifts and a retinue of army officers. Brooke was not given an audience, however, and he took his gifts home with him. In addition to these disappointments, he had found the accommodation offered to him beneath his dignity. It was, in fact, a substantial bamboo structure such as the highest ranking prince or official of the state might have built especially for him. Brooke found a brick-built (*pukka*) house while his retinue used the bamboo house. As with the payments of per diem, the British side misunderstood Siamese practices.

The Bowring mission to Siam in 1855 – with a return Siamese embassy to London in 1857 – marked another watershed moment in Anglo-Siamese relations. Whereas the 1826 mission could be said to represent a late mercantilist moment, 1855 was an early imperialist moment (Hobsbawm 1969: 138-9). Sir John Bowring – knighted just before and specifically for the event – was Governor of Hong Kong. This was a Foreign Office responsibility. The earlier missions had come from the East India Company in India, sent by the Governor of Bengal (the East India Company was to be dissolved in 1858) and so were not regarded as true 'royal embassies' by the Siamese side. King Rama IV (Mongkut) had succeeded in 1851, the year of the last Siamese tribute mission to China. He was a highly educated and astute man, very interested in European as well as Buddhist culture. He had been present at the earlier British missions from 1822 and spent many years as abbot of a famous temple in Bangkok. He was both 'modernising' and absolutist. He corresponded, in his own excellent English, with Bowring for more than a year before the mission in 1855. The Siamese state was confident and still expansionist. The British had fought a war with China (1839-42), one outcome of which had been the concession of Hong Kong. In 1852, the British had annexed Pegu (Bago) in central Burma (Myanmar), reducing further the power of the Burmese kingdom, which had for centuries been a Siamese security concern. When Bowring arrived, Siamese troops were being drilled in English by English instructors, and the audience hall was decorated with pictures of the Pope, Queen Victoria and the King of Portugal, and images of the Great Exhibition in London of 1851.

Bowring knew in advance that his mission was welcome. One might almost say it was a success waiting to happen, although there was much negotiation and some cliffhanging moments during the relatively short progress of the mission. Bowring obtained – not without some resistance – a number of protocol concessions, two of

which he reminisced about frequently in later years. One was being able to wear his sword at the royal audience (and thus appear before the King just as he had before Queen Victoria, as he put it). The second was permission for an armed British warship to be allowed to travel upriver to Bangkok, the first time apparently in Siamese history that this had been allowed. The King showed great intimacy, allowing a ‘private’ audience (the word passed into the Thai language), and reportedly offering and even lighting Bowring’s cigar.

But oddly, Bowring makes no mention anywhere, as far as I can tell, of any presents. They had been delayed and partly destroyed when the ship carrying them sank after leaving Singapore. They were finally presented some six months later when a junior member of the mission – Harry Parkes, later to be Ambassador to Japan – returned from England with Queen Victoria’s letter ratifying the Treaty. King Mongkut acknowledged receipt of the gifts in a letter devoted entirely to the matter, dated 7 May 1856. This lists those gifts received in good order, those in an ‘injured state’ or ‘irretrievably damaged’, and those ‘completely destroyed’ (see Appendix). The King writes:

“We do not blame Mr. H. Parkes in any term for the portion of the presents designed for Us by Her Gracious Britannic Majesty some being entirely lost some very injurious in being of no use and losing their fine appearance, for the stated unfortunate accident is believable and heard by Us from many others, and such an unforeseen accident is in difficulty of human power to promptly prevent; merely we are thankful to Mr. Parkes for his great endeavour to reobtain their portion for Us.

... We are not sorry for being lost and injurious of the portions of these valued presents.”

A much longer letter (dated 15 May 1856), mainly dealing with other matters following on the Treaty, refers to Parkes in exceptionally complimentary terms, and includes the following:

“...he has repaired several articles of the Royal presents sent to us from Her Britannic Majesty according to his ability, and the conveniences obtainable here, and has delivered us a certain portion thereof in due times, at the last of which times he has a sealed written document from us in their receipt, in which we have stated that he is harmless or blameless indeed, for the articles being lost and injured of the Royal presents entrusted to his care for us, from Her Britannic Majesty, in an unforeseen moment, an accident which he met off Singapore at the time of the transshipment of those articles on board the Steam Frigate “Auckland” etc. We have expressed our sincere thanks to him, by bestowing upon him two bat eye rings, manufactured in Siam, and a few articles of gilt, silver cigar case, plates and water pot together with a long pipe of ‘Rajawangse’ bamboo, which are the same articles for the insignia of our ministers of considerable rank here” (Coèdes 1927-8).

Some of the English gifts are still to be seen in the National Museum in Bangkok.

It is interesting to note that even the most damaged gifts continued to be treated with a certain reverence and did not lose their status as royal gifts, whether or not some of them were subsequently repaired. The incident was not allowed to detract from the auspiciousness of the rest of the proceedings. The overriding importance attached to the Royal letter is marked by the fact that King Mongkut travelled in person to the mouth of the Chao Phraya River to greet it on arrival, as if it had been Queen Victoria in person. The emphatic exculpation of Harry Parkes reminds us that, at other times and places, an ambassador might well have been punished for neglect of royal presents.

Bowring continued to be a frequent correspondent and adviser to King Mongkut. He was to receive an honorific title, which in the Thai language is also a 'royal gift', of *phraya siammitre mahayos* with *sakdina* rank of 2,000, and received a cash gift of £1,000 (which he said was not enough!). The title roughly translates as Most Honoured Lord Friend of Siam. His relationship with King Mongkut is part of what a distinguished Thai scholar and diplomat has called Siamese Anglo-*philia* in the second half of the 19th century (Theerawat 1993). The fact that Bowring was, at least earlier in his life, a republican and utilitarian, Unitarian and Europhile gives an extra piquancy to this exchange relationship.

### Conclusion

The theme of 'the disappointing gift' has served as a tool for contrasting two famous diplomatic encounters between Britain and East Asian empires. In the Chinese case (Lord Macartney's mission to China in 1793), both sides were disappointed, for different reasons. Nonetheless, the gifts were accepted, but this did not help make the mission a success. As if to mark a continuing vendetta, some of the gifts were seized by force sixty-seven years later and returned to England. In the Siamese case (Sir John Bowring's mission to Siam in 1855), neither side seems to have expressed disappointment, although there was good reason, since many of the gifts had been damaged or destroyed in a shipwreck. Even the damaged gifts were presented and accepted with exaggerated statements of disculpation. No damage was done thereby to the mission, which was regarded as a success by both sides at the time. This contrast, in turn, serves to support the view, which I share, of James Hevia, a Sinologist historian, who insists that the Chinese attitude to the question of gifts was not 'some timeless attitude of traditional Chinese culture', but 'a specific response to events going on right then in the embassy' (Hevia 1995). Of course, Chinese 'traditional culture' in this matter (specifically *bin li*, so called 'guest ritual') does have many elements of continuity, as do its refractions in the practices of tributary Southeast Asian states, such as Siam, over a period of some 600 years.

This was at least as much a set of strategies as a set of rules. In the end, it was the politics of the conjuncture, and the moment, that determined the outcome. It is interesting to recall that Mauss ends his essay on the gift on this note, 'l'art suprême, la *Politique*, au sens socratique du mot.', within the context of seeing the gift as part of a 'total social fact'. This emphasis on the context of power relations contradicts the idea of 'clash of cultures', which tends to be a Eurocentric view, and one which tends to deny agency

to the non-European side. It also contradicts the prioritising of ‘ritual’ in discussion of Asian diplomatic protocol, as in the dichotomies, politics and ritual or statecraft and ritual. Crawford sensed this, but drew the wrong conclusions, and failed to make use of this insight for his own behaviour or diplomatic strategy:

“The Siamese are a very ceremonious people, attaching, like most Oriental nations, an undue and ridiculous importance to mere form and ceremonial, breaches of which are considered in the light of political crimes than offences against mere etiquette” (1967: 349).

Burney had a finer sense of strategy, for instance when he comments, in a style that lacks the derogatory pomposity of Crawford:

“The real truth is, anything is custom or not custom, among these people [the Siamese court in 1826] according as they desire or do not desire to do it.” (Cited in Yule 1858: 119)

This is not, however, usefully thought of in terms of the notions of ‘the invention of tradition’ (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983), or even a bricolage of tradition. In Bourdieu’s terminology, there is something of the ‘mechanics of the model’ as well as ‘the dialectics of strategies’ (Bourdieu 1977: 3-9). But the latter is usually dominant. Bourdieu’s notions of the rhythm and temporal structure of gift exchanges are pertinent here. And yet diplomatic gift exchange is a distinct case that challenges at least one of Bourdieu’s ideas, namely, his notion of *méconnaissance*:

“... the operation of gift exchange presupposes (individual and collective) misrecognition (*méconnaissance*) of the reality of the objective ‘mechanism’ of the exchange, a reality which an immediate response brutally exposes.

In short everything takes place as if agents’ practice, and in particular their manipulation of time, were organized exclusively with a view to concealing from themselves and from others the truth of their practice, which an anthropologist and his models brings to light simply by substituting the timeless model for a scheme which works itself out only in and through time.” (p. 5)

The kind of diplomatic gift exchange considered here is a limiting case of this, and contradicts the idea of ‘misrecognition’. There is a certain amount of plain linguistic and other cultural ignorance on both sides, and there is some prevarication and delay in the process of the exchanges, but the gift transactions described are far from opaque or invisible, nor are their purposes lacking in transparency. The fact that they have to be completed within a limited time frame, and that the final balance of the exchange has to be somehow agreed and recorded by both sides at the conclusion of the mission (the exchange as a whole) puts pressure on both sides to show their hands.

This article has also considered aspects of the ‘social life’ of gift goods (Appadurai 1986), and their re-circulation, redistribution and re-contextualisation, which, like the

gifts themselves, operate across cultural and national boundaries.

The cultural complex ‘diplomatic gift exchange’ – or, in a less reified formulation, ‘the dialectics of diplomatic gift giving’ – is, I hope to have shown, a worthy object of comparative anthropological analysis. At their extremes, historical instances of diplomatic gift giving might be assimilable to such concepts as ‘potlatch’, ‘tournaments of value’, ‘ordeals’ and so on. At a lesser end of a spectrum and as part of established diplomatic relations, they are routine aspects of trading contacts. Diplomacy has famously been described as the conduct of war by other means. Diplomatic gift giving, in early modern times, is a significant element in the management of what Marcel Mauss felicitously calls ‘cette instabilité entre la fête et la guerre’.

### *Appendix*

This document, dated 7 May 1856, written in English by King Mongkut, is reproduced from Georges Coèdes’ partial collection of letters in English by King Mongkut that appeared in the *Journal of the Siam Society* in 1928 (vol. 21: 18-20).

F.O., Siam vol. 5.	L. S. Major Rex Siamensium	L. S. The Chinese Seal for Royal letters of the King of Siamese Kingdom who is the reigning defender and instructor of whole people thereof.
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Somdech Phra Paramendr Maha Mongkut the First King of Siamese Kingdom and its dependencies Laos and etc., and etc., to all and singular to whom these presents shall come greeting:

Whereas Mr. Harry S. Parkes the Bearer to Our Court of Her Britannic Majesty’s Ratification of the Treaty of Friendship and Commerce lately concluded with Us and Our Royal brother the Second King has reported to us on his arrival at Bangkok the accident which has befallen the presents in his charge designed for Us by Her Britannic Majesty whereby some had been injured and others entirely lost.

We have accordingly to acknowledge the receipt from Mr. Parkes of the following articles as described and numbered in the List of the Presents subjoined to the letter addressed to Us by Her Britannic Majesty.

1. A silver inkstand richly gilt with figures emblematical of science and art.
2. Two pairs of globes 36 inches in diameter.
3. Two coloured engravings representing the Coronation of Her Majesty Queen Victoria.
4. A best improved revolver pistol silver mounted in a case.

5. A gold enamelled double eye-glass with watch and gold cable neck chain.
6. A camera and complete photographic apparatus.
11. A collection of ornaments in glass, china and etc.

The above articles have been received by Us in good condition, and of the injured articles Mr. Parkes has also delivered to us.

7. Digby Wyatt's industrial Arts 2 volumes highly illuminated.
12. A collection of coloured diagrams illustrative of physiology, machinery, natural history, etc.
13. A complete set of charts of the Indian and China Seas, all of which have been discoloured or greatly damaged by the action of salt water.

We are informed by Mr. Parkes that by far the larger portion of the collection of philosophical apparatus, illustrative of astronomy, electricity and optics, numbered 8 in the List of Her Majesty's presents are irretrievably damaged.

We have received from him in good order a model of a steamer, a model of a Locomotive Engine and carriages and air pump and a solar gun.

Also a polar clock, gyroscope and stereoscope, but the three latter instruments are of no avail in their present injured state.

The arithmometer and dressing case numbered 9 and 10 in the List of Her Majesty's Presents have not been delivered to Us by Mr. Parkes in consequence, as he informs Us, of their having been completely destroyed.

We do not blame Mr. H. Parkes in any terms for the portion of the presents designed for Us by Her Gracious Britannic Majesty some being entirely lost some very injurious in being of no use and losing of their fine appearance, for the stated unfortunate accident is believable and heard by Us from many others, and such the unforeseen accident is in difficulty of human power to promptly prevent; merely we are thankful to Mr. Parkes for his great endeavour to reobtain their portion for Us.

Whatever of any kind of Britannic manufactures being the valued presents designed Us from Her Britannic Majesty, We are glad to keep for the mark of Her Majesty's kindness toward us and our highest and greatest honour through our descendants and successors that we and they should frequently or always keep in our and their remembrance the very kind favor of Her Gracious Britannic Majesty. We are not sorry for being lost and injurious of the portions of those valued presents.

Given at the Grand Palace in the City of Ratnekosindr Mahindr Auyudia in the province or district of Bangkok on Wednesday of waxing moon in the month of Visakh of the year of the Major Serpent or Quadruped Serpent bearing the number of Siamese Astronomical Era 1218, corresponding to European solar date of the 7<sup>th</sup> May in the year of the Christian Era one thousand eight hundred and fifty six which is the sixth of our reign.

L. S. (manu regia)

S. P. P. M. Mongkut R. S<sup>m</sup>.

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