

# The Watch Market in China

by  
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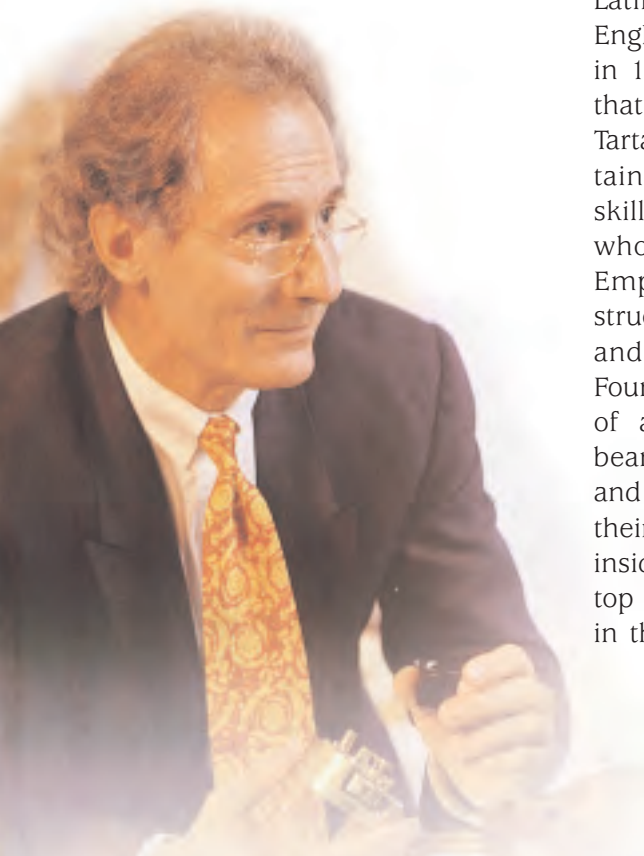
**T**imepieces have long been gifts of predilection. Symbols of power, of knowledge, messengers of culture, tokens of friendship, and gages of peace, they never failed to astonish and to please.

When the first diplomatic relations with China were established, during the reign of King Louis IX of France (1214 – 1270), animated pieces had their role to play. In 1253 Louis dispatched an ambassador to Manghu Khan, the Grand Khan of Tartary. This was the epoch of the great Mongol incursions which swept over Russia as far as Kiev, and southward as far as

Poland and Hungary. An account of the voyage by the King's ambassador, Guillaume de Rubruquis, a Flemish priest and traveler, is conserved in the British Museum. Originally in Latin, it was translated into English in 1629 and into French in 1839. This document states that among the prisoners of the Tartars at Karakorum was a certain Guillaume Boucher, a skilled goldsmith from Lyon who won the favor of the Emperor of Tartary by constructing for him a monumental and marvelous automaton. Four silver lions lay at the foot of a great tree with boughs bearing silver leaves and fruits, and mare's milk flowing from their half-opened jaws. On the inside, four conduits rose to the top of the tree and descended in the form of gilded serpents.

Out of their mouths ran precious liqueurs to fill silver vessels. At the top, an angel sounded a trumpet when the cupbearer gave the order to pour out the draught. The apparatus was activated by means of a bellows worked by a man hidden in the base of the tree. Servants replenished nearby reservoirs with the liqueurs for the respective conduits. De Rubruquis' account is the first document proving the existence of an animated scene made to order for an Oriental personage, and it illustrates the interest which this aroused.

Another important element in the history of timepieces in the Orient is the penetration of Christianity into China. Jean de Montcorvin, as delegate of Pope Benoît VII, founded a missionary center at the end of the



thirteenth century for spreading the gospel and the doctrine of Christ in China. The men who carried out their religious vocation in China also passed on the knowledge of instruments for measuring time.

Up until 1514, when routes to the Far East were opened by the Portuguese, nothing was known about clockmaking in the Celestial Empire. There were indeed water clocks in China, embellished with figures, the oldest of which date from the tenth century, but no trace of mechanical watchmaking is to be found before the middle of the sixteenth century. After the Portuguese had founded the city of Macao, they made use of it as an advanced military base and trading center, into which they funneled merchandise for export to Lisbon and to the rest of Europe.

One of the important goods of exchange they imported to China were European clocks. Father Matteo Ricci, an

Italian Jesuit missionary, left Nanking in 1599 to travel to Peking. In 1600 he was received by the Emperor Wan Li (1573 – 1620) as Portuguese ambassador. He brought with him some clocks, portable watches, a clavichord, and other curiosities. In Father Ricci's biography, written in Chinese, reference is made to two watches striking the hours, offered to the Emperor on January 28, 1601.

The commercial opportunities and trade with China instigated by the Portuguese aroused growing interest, first among the Dutch and then the English. A number of foreign expeditions discovered a market already dominated by the

Portuguese, who enjoyed a virtual trade monopoly with Canton. It was only with the fusion of French interests in 1719, under the name of the *Compagnie Française des Indes* that the watch trade with China fully prospered.

The Emperor K'ang Hsi (1662 – 1722) was aware of the primitive means used in his country to measure time and recognized the interest and the utility of mechanical clockmaking. In 1680 he ordered horological workshops to be opened in the palace grounds. For this purpose he brought together qualified clockmakers from throughout the Empire who had been trained by the missionaries. The technical direction was entrusted to the Jesuit Brother Louis Stadlin, a native of the canton of Zoug in Switzerland.

These workshops produced thousands of clocks and watches with workmanship approaching that of Europe. The mechani-



Unique timepiece and the only specimen known of a 22K gold watch, painted on enamel, made in the Imperial workshop in Peking, for the K'ang-Hsi Emperor (1662-1722).

cal design was copied from British and Dutch movements, but fell short of their quality and hence of their precision. The form and materials of the cases varied, but continued to show Western influence. While such clocks are still to be found, the pocket watches have become very rare. The cases, although not comparable to those of Europe, are nevertheless very attractive, especially the enamels, in which the choice of colors is always delicate and the polish highly refined. Champlevé and cloisonné enamels, smooth-surfaced or in relief, have motifs obviously influenced stylistically by the decorative painting on porcelain, usually floral patterns which often feature peonies. The current rarity of these pieces can be attributed to their fragility, the toll taken by time, and a production which was very limited in the first place, having been broken off when the Imperial workshops were closed, some thirty years after the death of K'ang Hsi in 1722.

Under the Regency and Louis XV, trade and closer cultural relations with China, as well as the cult of Chinese curios, contributed to the promotion of European decorative arts, enabling European artists to become better acquainted with porcelain, lacquers, and inlay work. In the wake of these exchanges, French horologists discovered the Oriental market,

and the Chinese fascination with watchmaking. Unfortunately, only a very few examples of this French work have come down to us. Other works conceived for China are part of the watch-



**Julien Le Roy A Paris, No. 1522, circa 1735.**  
Very fine and rare, small, silver, quarter repeating, "grande et petite sonnerie" coach watch.

making heritage of Germany, Denmark, and England. The latter country had the added advantage of frequent voyages by representatives who presented the gifts offered to the Emperor of the Celestial Empire and to the powerful mandarins. During this period, which preceded the appearance of the first Genevan watches in China, the existence of this important market allowed Geneva's horo-

logical industry to continue to develop, despite frequent economic and social crises at home. Yet, although China was importing a considerable number of watches and clocks as early as the seventeenth century, this trade did not become really important until the reign of Ch'ien Lung (1736 - 1795). During this period, English production, although large, did not compare in quality and beauty with Genevan workmanship, and in France, the "Siècle des Lumières" had ended in a revolution which overwhelmed the country and was among the chief reasons why so few French watches were exported to the Orient.

But for Geneva, the story was different. It was an open city, at the crossroads of various political and religious trends, and a republic, the refuge of Huguenot artists.

With its hard-working polyglot population, animated by the pioneer spirit that had already characterized it in the Middle Ages, it offered all the commercial advantages of a free city. Renowned for its fairs, its printed cottons and goldsmithery, it was equally well-known for the courage and adventurous spirit of its traders, who traveled all the roads of Europe in search of new markets, as far as Asia Minor, North Africa, and Russia.

Although the influence of Geneva in the Middle East goes back to the seventeenth century, it was not until the eigh-

teenth century that it made itself felt in China. Among the master craftsmen whose work traveled as far as the Orient, mention must be made of the Jaquet-Droz father-and-son team, and of their associate Leschot. Their extraordinarily beautiful and ingenious masterpieces enchanted Emperors and men of wealth, the Kings of Spain, France, and England.

The pieces sent to the Orient bore the signatures of the Jaquet-Droz and Leschot, or of James Cox, who was in close contact with them. The Jaquet-Droz and Leschot were artisans with a highly varied production: automata, pocket watches, curio watches. Curios of exceptionally good taste and refined luxury were produced, snuff boxes with singing birds, musical movements and automata, musical watches in the form of flasks with automata, in gold,

enamel, and with pearls.

They ordered watch cases from the best enamellers, engravers, engine-turners, and stone-setters of Geneva. Pierre Jaquet-Droz died in 1790, leaving to posterity the evidence of his talent which places him among the greatest watchmaking mechanics of all time. A number of distinguished artisans came from his workshops, who with the benefit of the master's experience and teaching, became prodigious artists in their own right. Particularly worthy of mention is Jacob Frisard, who won distinction as a maker of fine watches and other pieces. It is probably he who, in collaboration with Jean-Frederic Leschot, invented the sliding piston for modulating the song of artificial birds, which was to lead to the creation of many exceptional pieces.

The house of Jaquet-Droz is credited with being the first to introduce paired watches with symmetrical, mirror-image designs. This innovation has given rise to much discussion among experts, some of whom have come up with explanations we consider doubtful. Some thought that these watches were to be offered on the occasion of marriage and betrothal; others asserted that only a commercial goal was envisaged and that this pairing was intended to increase sales. One suggestion, which may come closer to the facts, concerns the requirements of repair work, for a second watch must surely have been indispensable to those living in the interior of the country at great distances from the coastal cities, for a watch sent for repair might be returned to its owner several years later.



William Antony, London, Nos. 1913 and 1914, circa 1800.

Very fine pair of identical 20K gold, enamel, pearl and diamond-set oval watches, possibly made for the Imperial Court in Peking.





**Edouard Juvet, Fleurier, No. 46345 and 46346, circa 1850.**  
Very fine 18K gold and enamel pair of center-seconds watches with asymmetrically painted scenes.



**Bovet, Fleurier, No. 286, circa 1840.**  
Very fine 18K gold and enamel center-seconds watch with special escapement.

However, we believe that the truth lies elsewhere and that wealthy collectors wished to possess twin watches and to see them hanging on the walls for display in pairs, with the designs reflecting each other as if in a mirror, in accordance with the Chinese love of symmetry. History clearly shows that gifts were offered to superiors in duplicate, and nobody could run counter to this practice. Among famous examples are the two clocks with magicians, constructed by Jaquet-Droz and presented to Ch'ien Lung in 1795 by the ambassador of Holland. The same custom held true for the horses of Mongolia, and for concubines, who were presented two at a time to the sons of Heaven. In the West also certain objects of value are sold in pairs : vases, candlesticks, and pictures, for instance.

Following in the footsteps of

the Jaquet-Droz and Leschot, and Frisard, many other fine artisans constructed pieces for China and enjoyed considerable commercial success. The Rochats – probably the frères Rochat – who often signed their pieces with the mark “F.R” - may have been the sons of David Rochat who are mentioned in the Jaquet-Droz account books as early as 1802. The Rochat workshop specialized in fine mechanical

singing bird pieces, among which we find snuff boxes, vases, a mirror with a small rose out of which pops a tiny bird, and fantastic gold and enamel pistols with a singing bird.

As concerns the China trade, two watchmakers from the beginning of the nineteenth century must be mentioned: Isaac-Daniel Piguet (1775 – 1845) and Philippe-Samuel Meylan (1772 – 1845). As associates from 1811 to 1828, they constructed watches, musical snuff boxes, and other pieces featuring automata and music, which were much sought-after, especially in the Orient. The watches they created for China established a very particular style for that trade. Piguet and Meylan specialized in complicated musical watches with repeaters, singing birds and barking dogs, power reserves of eight days, two hundred

days, and even (very rarely) one year. The watch cases were highly individualized, full of charming detail. They adopted the form of fantasy watches in vogue at the beginning of the nineteenth century and gave free reign to their imagination. They had the advantage of highly-reputed collaborators such as François Dupont, Richter, Dufaux, L'Evesque, Roux, and Lissignol for the enamel painting, and Reymond and Patru for precious metal work. The dials for China were generally white enamel with Roman numerals composed of short, broad strokes. The hands were steel and there was a direct-drive center-seconds hand, rarely an auxiliary seconds dial.

Another family of watchmakers that began to work for the China trade early in the nineteenth century and continued to do so for generations was the Bovet family of Fleurier, called the Bovets of China. Edouard Bovet and his brothers Charles, Alphonse and Gustave, set up a firm in Canton which prospered to such an extent that later Edouard Bovet said "If my brothers had let me have my way, I would have made enough money to fill the Vallon with it". On the whole, the Bovet production was of good quality, rather spectacular and reasonable in price, but it did not compare in luxury or excellent finish with the work of the Rochats, Frisard, and Piguet and Meylan. The Bovet enterprise had the advantage of the designs of good Genevan decorators who consistently maintained their reputation for good taste. At the start, Edouard

Bovet took his inspiration from the models of Piguet and Meylan, later developing his own caliber, simplified in the mechanism, and richly decorated. During his London period his work was signed "Bovet London", and when he moved to Fleurier "Bovet à Fleurier" and "Tevob", which is Bovet spelt backwards. Many other watchmakers were important in the history of Chinese trade. The house of Vaucher was founded by Charles-Henri Vaucher from Fleurier (1760 -1865). The firm became Vaucher Frères until 1880, when it was represented in



**Bovet, No. 304, Fleurier, circa 1830.**  
Very fine 18K gold and enamel, quarter repeating watch with music.

Hong Kong. Generation after generation of gifted watchmakers came from this family. The two sons of Antoine Dimier of Geneva, Charles-Louis (1822 - 1896) and Antoine-Auguste

(1824 - 1891), formed an association in 1848. About 1846, they set up a business in Fleurier, where Auguste Dimier managed the manufacture of "Chinese" watches while Charles Dimier became the sales director, leaving at about the same time for Canton, where he founded the commercial firm of Dimier et Cie., with a special Chinese trademark pronounced Tien Ye. Business came to a complete halt in 1860 because of the hostilities in China, and Charles returned to Switzerland, where in 1862 he and his brother left Fleurier for Geneva.

The firm of Juvet, founded by Edouard Juvet (1820 - 1883) was the fourth of the great houses working for China, and it quickly rose in importance. Edouard Juvet settled in Buttes in 1842, moving to Fleurier in 1844, and organized a sales house in Shanghai about 1856. Like the others, Juvet manufactured a caliber invented by Bovet and also had cases made by the artisans of Geneva. The Juvet firm used several trade names in China, the most important being U Nah.

Along with the houses of Fleurier, the firm of Courvoisier Frères of Chaux-de-Fonds ranks high among those which built up the watch trade with China. It exported to that country not only the hunter and "Lépine" (with flat glass) watches which it manufactured, but also the "Chinese" watch, in the style of Fleurier. Some of the pieces were rich and complicated, with perpetual calendar and chimes. Manufacture continued from 1870 to 1900.

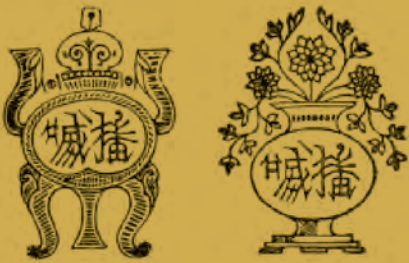
The house of Borel and Courvoisier of Neuchâtel (1859) had long-standing relations with Japan, and in 1880 established links with China through repre-

sentatives in Hong Kong and Shanghai. They produced European watches and had the “Chinese” style made for them in Fleurier.

The name of Vrad & Co. brings this historical summary of the Chinese watch trade to a close. This firm was founded in 1860 under the name of Laidrich & Vrad, later becoming L. Vrad & Co. It began operations in 1862 in Tientsin and shortly thereafter in Shanghai, where it was the agent for Bovet watches until 1894. Another trading station was opened in 1889 in Hangkow and then in Hong Kong. Watches produced by Vrad ranged from the commonplace to the most complicated, and like the Courvoisier firm, Vrad entrusted the decoration of the cases to the Genevan artists Marc Dufaux, Louis Millenet, Louis Pauthex, P.-A. Champod and Louis Rosselet.

When we compare the work of these craftsmen in their “Chinese” watches, we are struck by the high level of artistry and precision. This was indeed one of the most important periods in the history of decorative watchmaking. After this high point, the art of decoration declined slowly and inexorably as the commercial market responded to the popularity of this precious commodity. After a few attempts at resurrection, elaborate decoration disappeared entirely. Was this due to a revolution in taste or in style?

Perhaps – but nevertheless, the fact remains that these watches are eagerly sought-after today, and jealously guarded by their owners, who consider them examples of one of the finest periods of Genevan watchmaking.



First and second Chinese trademarks used by the Bovet family, watchmakers for the Chinese trade.



Another Chinese trademark for the Bovet firm, on an azure background, enclosed within a frame.



Mark of the house of Courvoisier Frères, which made watches for China from 1870 until 1900.



Another old Chinese trademark, on an azure background, enclosed within a frame which identifies a Juvet timepiece.



U-nah, the most important of several trade names used by the Juvet firm for their Chinese watches.



The Dimier brothers made watches for China in the mid-nineteenth century, and this is their mark.