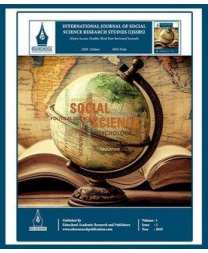
INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF SOCIAL SCIENCE RESEARCH STUDIES (IJSSRS)
(Open Access, Double-Blind Peer Reviewed Journal)
ISSN Online: 3108-1932 ISSN Print: 3139-4566



Entangled Empires: Diplomacy and Cultural Exchange in Early Modern Imperial Relations

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Article information
Received:15th August 2025
Received in revised form:18th September 2025
Accepted: 11th October 2025
Available online:8th November 2025

Volume:1
Issue:1
DOI: https://doi.org/10.63090/IJSSRS/3108.1932.0004

Abstract

This paper examines the multifaceted diplomatic and cultural exchanges between major imperial powers of the early modern period (1500-1800), with particular focus on Ottoman-Habsburg and Safavid-Qing relationships. Moving beyond traditional narratives that emphasize military confrontation, this study reveals how these imperial interactions fostered significant cultural, scientific, and religious transmissions that fundamentally transformed the participating societies. Through analysis of diplomatic correspondence, accounts of embassies, material culture, and artistic productions, this research demonstrates that imperial encounters operated through complex networks of knowledge transfer and cultural negotiation. The findings suggest that these non-military engagements were not merely peripheral to imperial relations but constituted essential mechanisms through which empires articulated their identities, asserted legitimacy, and adapted to changing geopolitical circumstances. This research contributes to evolving historiographical approaches that emphasize transcultural connections and entanglements rather than civilizational isolation or binary opposition.

Keywords: - Cultural diplomacy, Imperial entanglement, Knowledge circulation, Ottoman-Habsburg relations, Safavid-Qing exchange, Transcultural history

Introduction

The grand narrative of imperial history has long privileged warfare, territorial conquest, and competition as the primary modes of interaction between empire states. While military confrontations certainly shaped imperial boundaries and relationships, this analytical frame obscures the equally significant diplomatic negotiations, cultural exchanges, and knowledge transfers that occurred across imperial borders. This paper interrogates how major empires of the early modern world engaged with one another beyond the battlefield through systematized diplomatic relations and cultural interactions that profoundly influenced their respective societies.

The research question at the core of this investigation asks: How did diplomatic relations and cultural exchanges between major imperial powers transform their respective societies beyond military confrontations? Two particularly illustrative case studies anchor this analysis: the Ottoman-Habsburg interaction across the Mediterranean world and Central Europe, and the relations between Safavid Persia and Qing China across Central and East Asia. These imperial dyads, representing different geographical and cultural contexts, provide comparative insight into the varied mechanisms and consequences of inter-imperial engagement.

This study's significance lies in its contribution to the recent historiographical turn toward "connected histories" that challenge Eurocentric periodization and civilizational boundaries. By elucidating the entangled nature of imperial development, this research undermines notions of hermetically sealed cultural spheres and instead reveals the porosity of imperial borders to ideas, artistic styles, technologies, and religious concepts. Furthermore, this approach helps reframe our understanding of early modern globalization as a process driven not only by European expansion but equally by Asian and Middle Eastern imperial systems engaging in complex networks of exchange.

The paper proceeds by first establishing the theoretical frameworks that inform this analysis, particularly concepts of cultural translation, diplomatic history, and knowledge circulation. It then analyzes the Ottoman-Habsburg case, exploring how diplomatic protocols, artistic patronage, and scientific exchange transcended religious and political rivalries. The subsequent section examines Safavid-Qing relations through similar lenses, highlighting unique patterns of interaction across the Asian continent. Finally, the paper synthesizes these findings to advance broader arguments about the centrality of non-military interactions to imperial formation and legitimation.

Theoretical Grounding

This study operates at the intersection of several evolving historiographical approaches that have transformed our understanding of early modern empires. The traditional paradigm of studying empires in isolation, defined primarily through their internal structures and evolution, has given way to approaches emphasizing connectivity, networks, and mutual influence. Three theoretical frameworks particularly inform this analysis: transcultural history, the "new diplomatic history," and knowledge circulation studies.

Transcultural Historical Approaches

Scholarship on transcultural history has advanced significantly since Sanjay Subrahmanyam's seminal work on "connected histories" challenged the compartmentalization of early modern societies into discrete civilizational units. Building on Subrahmanyam's insights, historians like Serge Gruzinski have developed concepts of "entangled histories" that emphasize how societies were mutually constituted through their interactions with others. This perspective counters older historiographical traditions that treated cultures as bounded, self-contained entities with essential characteristics. Instead, transcultural approaches highlight processes of hybridization, adaptation, and synthesis that occurred as imperial elites engaged with foreign concepts and practices.

As Natalie Rothman argues in her work on Ottoman-Venetian diplomatic interactions, empire-building projects were intimately connected to processes of cultural translation and boundary-making. Imperial actors defined themselves partially through encounters with others, making the borderlands and diplomatic interfaces critical sites for identity formation. This paper builds upon this theoretical orientation by examining how Ottoman, Habsburg, Safavid, and Qing imperial identities were articulated partly through their diplomatic and cultural encounters with one another.

The New Diplomatic History

Recent reorientations in diplomatic history have moved beyond state-centric narratives focused solely on treaties and formal negotiations to incorporate cultural dimensions of diplomacy. This "new diplomatic history," championed by scholars like John-Paul Ghobrial and Christian Windler, examines diplomatic practice as a cultural system with its own rituals, material culture, and symbolic communications. Rather than viewing diplomacy merely as a mechanism for settling conflicts or establishing alliances, this approach frames diplomatic encounters as opportunities for cultural performance, status competition, and knowledge exchange.

Particularly relevant to this study is Timothy Hampton's concept of diplomatic exchange as a form of "cultural translation," where diplomatic actors must navigate not only linguistic differences but also disparate political and cultural frameworks. This paper applies this theoretical lens by analyzing how Ottoman and Habsburg diplomats, as well as Safavid and Qing envoys, served as cultural mediators who interpreted foreign practices for domestic audiences and facilitated knowledge transfers between imperial centers.

Knowledge Circulation Studies

The third theoretical pillar informing this research comes from the growing field of knowledge circulation studies, which examines how scientific ideas, technical expertise, and artistic styles traveled across cultural and political boundaries. Moving beyond diffusionist models that privileged European knowledge production, scholars like Kapil Raj and Pamela Smith have demonstrated the multi-directional nature of knowledge flows in the early modern world and the role of non-European actors in generating and transforming knowledge systems.

This approach proves particularly valuable for analyzing how imperial interactions facilitated the movement of astronomical observations, medical techniques, artistic styles, and technological innovations across Eurasian imperial spaces. The paper employs this framework to examine instances where diplomatic channels enabled the circulation of expertise between imperial courts, highlighting how such knowledge transfers contributed to scientific and cultural developments within each empire.

Ottoman-Habsburg Relations: Diplomacy Beyond Confrontation

The relationship between the Ottoman Empire and the Habsburg Monarchy represents one of the most significant and enduring imperial interactions of the early modern period. While military confrontations from the siege of Vienna to the naval battles of the Mediterranean have dominated historical memory, diplomatic negotiations and cultural exchanges between these powers were equally consequential for both societies.

Diplomatic Protocols and Translation Practices

The establishment of permanent diplomatic missions between the Ottoman and Habsburg courts in the late sixteenth century created institutional channels for sustained cultural interaction. Ottoman diplomatic practices, which initially rejected the principle of reciprocity in diplomatic representation, gradually adapted to accommodate European diplomatic norms following the Treaty of Karlowitz (1699). This adaptation manifested in the creation of new administrative positions and the development of specialized expertise in European languages and customs within the Ottoman bureaucracy.

The translation bureau (tercüme odası) became an essential institution that not only rendered diplomatic correspondence intelligible but also served as a conduit for cultural and intellectual exchange. As documented in the work of Virginia Aksan, Ottoman translators frequently belonged to minority communities like the Phanariote Greeks, who leveraged their linguistic skills to gain political influence while facilitating cross-cultural communication. These translators did more than convert texts from one language to another; they interpreted cultural concepts and political ideas, effectively functioning as cultural intermediaries who shaped how each empire understood the other.

Habsburg diplomats in Istanbul similarly operated as cultural mediators whose reports conveyed Ottoman customs, architectural achievements, and scientific knowledge to Central European audiences. Ogier Ghiselin de Busbecq's famous "Turkish Letters," written during his ambassadorship to the Ottoman court in the mid-sixteenth century, exemplifies this phenomenon. Beyond negotiating political matters, Busbecq collected botanical specimens, documented Ottoman military organization, and acquired Greek manuscripts that would significantly influence European scholarly traditions. Through such activities, diplomatic representatives facilitated the circulation of knowledge that transcended the immediate political concerns of their missions.

Artistic Exchange and Material Culture

The visual and material culture of both empires bears testament to the profound impact of their mutual engagement. Despite religious differences and periodic military conflicts, Ottoman and Habsburg elites participated in networks of artistic exchange that transformed aesthetic sensibilities on both sides. The transfer of artistic styles occurred through multiple channels, including diplomatic gift exchanges, merchant networks, and the movement of artisans between imperial centers.

Ottoman carpets became prestigious luxury items in Habsburg courts, appearing in royal portraits as symbols of status and wealth. Conversely, European clockmaking technology found its way to Istanbul, where it was incorporated into Ottoman timekeeping practices and stimulated local production of mechanical devices with distinctively Ottoman aesthetics. The fusion of European and Ottoman design elements gave rise to hybrid artistic styles, exemplified by objects like the ceremonial helmets commissioned by Sultan Süleyman I that combined Ottoman calligraphy with Renaissance decorative motifs.

These artistic exchanges were not mere aesthetic curiosities but carried profound symbolic and political significance. As Gülru Necipoğlu has demonstrated in her study of Süleyman's architectural projects, Ottoman imperial architecture selectively incorporated European elements while transforming them to articulate a distinctly Ottoman imperial identity. Similarly, Habsburg portraits of imperial ambassadors to the Ottoman court used oriental motifs and Ottoman settings to communicate diplomatic achievement and cosmopolitan knowledge to European audiences.

Scientific and Medical Exchange

Perhaps the most significant yet underappreciated dimension of Ottoman-Habsburg interactions involved the exchange of scientific and medical knowledge. The sixteenth and seventeenth centuries witnessed substantial

cross-fertilization in fields ranging from astronomy to pharmacology that belied the presumed civilizational divide between Christian Europe and the Islamic world.

The Ottoman court under Murad III actively sought astronomical knowledge from European sources, resulting in the translation of astronomical tables and the importation of observational instruments. Conversely, European medical practitioners incorporated treatments and pharmacological substances documented by Ottoman physicians, particularly in the treatment of infectious diseases. The circulation of medical texts across these imperial boundaries fostered what has been termed a "medical ecumene" spanning the Mediterranean world.

These exchanges accelerated during periods of relative peace between the empires. Following the Treaty of Passarowitz (1718), for instance, Ottoman rulers dispatched officials to European centers to study printing technology, military engineering, and medical techniques. The resulting knowledge transfers contributed to the scientific and technological developments of the early Ottoman reform period, demonstrating how diplomatic openings facilitated broader intellectual and technical exchanges.

Safavid-Qing Relations: Commerce, Religion, and Artistic Patronage

While Ottoman-Habsburg relations have received considerable scholarly attention, interactions between Safavid Persia and Qing China represent an equally instructive case study of imperial entanglement across Asian contexts. Despite geographical distance and cultural differences, these empires established substantial diplomatic and commercial connections that fostered religious dialogues and artistic exchanges with lasting consequences for both societies.

Commercial Diplomacy and Knowledge Networks

The overland trade routes connecting Persia and China served as crucial channels for diplomatic and cultural interaction. Safavid shahs dispatched multiple embassies to the Chinese court, particularly during the Ming-Qing transition period. These diplomatic missions, documented in both Persian and Chinese sources, facilitated commercial agreements that structured the silk trade while simultaneously enabling the exchange of technical expertise and artistic practices.

Chinese porcelain technology significantly influenced Persian ceramic production, leading to the development of distinctive blue-and-white wares in seventeenth-century Isfahan that combined Chinese technical methods with Persian aesthetic sensibilities. Similarly, Persian metalworking techniques influenced Qing decorative arts, particularly in the production of luxury goods for the imperial court. These artistic transfers occurred through multiple mechanisms, including the movement of artisans, the circulation of pattern books, and the exchange of finished objects as diplomatic gifts.

Commercial networks extending between these empires facilitated not only the exchange of commodities but also the circulation of geographical knowledge and cartographic techniques. Persian geographical works incorporated Chinese place names and spatial concepts, while Chinese maps from the period show increasingly accurate representations of the western regions based partly on information obtained through Persian intermediaries. This cartographic exchange contributed to evolving conceptualizations of space and territory within both imperial traditions.

Religious Dialogue and Accommodation

Religious interaction between Safavid Persia and Qing China reveals complex processes of accommodation and translation across Islamic and Confucian-Buddhist-Daoist frameworks. The presence of Muslim communities in China's western regions created a need for imperial officials to understand and administratively incorporate Islamic practices. Conversely, Persian interactions with Chinese religious systems generated new theological commentaries that sought to reconcile diverse religious traditions.

Of particular significance was the role of Persian-speaking Muslim scholars who served as cultural intermediaries in Qing administration of Muslim territories. These scholars produced syncretic texts that interpreted Confucian concepts through Islamic frameworks and vice versa, creating intellectual bridges between disparate religious traditions. The resulting works, such as Liu Zhi's "Tianfang xingli" (Islamic Philosophy of Nature), represent remarkable attempts to translate between conceptual systems often presumed to be incommensurable.

The Qing court's policies toward Islam evolved partly through these intercultural exchanges, resulting in accommodative practices that incorporated Muslim elites into imperial governance structures. Similarly, Safavid engagement with Chinese philosophical concepts influenced certain strands of Persian mystical thought, particularly in interpretations of the relationship between divine sovereignty and natural order. These religious

dialogues demonstrate how inter-imperial interactions could foster intellectual syntheses that transcended apparent civilizational boundaries.

Artistic Patronage and Visual Culture

The visual cultures of Safavid Persia and Qing China reveal substantial mutual influence mediated through diplomatic exchanges and commercial networks. Persian painting techniques, particularly in landscape representation and figural composition, influenced certain schools of Chinese painting during the early Qing period. Conversely, Chinese motifs and spatial arrangements appear in Persian miniature paintings commissioned by the Safavid court, especially in scenes depicting royal hunts and garden settings.

These artistic exchanges intensified during periods of active diplomatic contact, such as the embassy led by the Persian merchant Muhammad Rabi to the Kangxi Emperor's court in 1720-21. The detailed accounts of this mission describe the exchange of artworks and the demonstration of artistic techniques that enhanced mutual aesthetic appreciation. These diplomatic-artistic encounters generated visual vocabularies that elite audiences in both empires could recognize and interpret, creating a shared visual language that transcended linguistic differences.

Perhaps most notably, the development of Safavid architectural decoration incorporated Chinese-inspired cloud motifs and spatial arrangements that transformed the visual landscape of cities like Isfahan. Similarly, Islamic architectural elements appeared in certain Qing imperial buildings, particularly in regions with significant Muslim populations. These architectural adaptations reveal how aesthetic concepts circulated between empires and were selectively incorporated into monumental expressions of imperial power.

Interpretation: Beyond Binary Oppositions

The case studies of Ottoman-Habsburg and Safavid-Qing interactions challenge traditional historiographical frameworks that emphasize civilizational difference and imperial isolation. Instead, they reveal complex processes of engagement that defy simple categorization as either conflict or cooperation. Three significant patterns emerge from this analysis that enhance our understanding of early modern imperial entanglements.

Strategic Adaptability and Selective Borrowing

First, these case studies demonstrate that imperial powers engaged in strategic processes of selective adaptation rather than wholesale rejection or acceptance of foreign elements. Ottoman rulers incorporated European technological innovations while adapting them to Ottoman contexts and legitimizing them through Islamic frameworks. Similarly, Qing emperors selectively patronized Persian artistic techniques while maintaining distinctive Chinese imperial aesthetics. This selective borrowing reflects not cultural subordination but rather imperial confidence—the ability to incorporate useful or prestigious foreign elements while maintaining distinctive imperial identities.

The seemingly contradictory impulses toward cultural borrowing and boundary maintenance actually operated as complementary aspects of imperial statecraft. By selectively incorporating foreign elements, imperial elites demonstrated their cosmopolitan knowledge and global reach. Simultaneously, by adapting these elements to local contexts, they asserted the distinctiveness and superiority of their own imperial traditions. This dialectic between incorporation and differentiation appears consistently across both case studies despite their different geographical and cultural contexts.

Dynamic Mediating Institutions

Second, these imperial interactions fostered the development of specialized institutions and social groups that mediated between different imperial systems. Translation bureaus, diplomatic corps, merchant communities, and religious scholars with cross-cultural expertise facilitated communication across linguistic and cultural boundaries. These mediating institutions often operated in liminal spaces—physically located at imperial borderlands or occupying ambiguous social positions within imperial hierarchies.

The development of these institutions reflects the systemic nature of inter-imperial contact rather than merely episodic encounters. As empires regularized their interactions through diplomatic protocols and commercial agreements, they necessarily created institutional mechanisms for cross-cultural communication. These institutions, in turn, developed specialized knowledge practices and distinctive cultural orientations that influenced their respective imperial centers. The dragomans (interpreters) of the Ottoman court, for instance, developed unique perspectives informed by both Ottoman and European traditions that influenced Ottoman diplomatic practice and intellectual culture.

Multidirectional Knowledge Flows

Third, these case studies reveal the multidirectional nature of knowledge circulation across imperial boundaries. Rather than unidirectional processes of diffusion from presumed centers to peripheries, knowledge moved in multiple directions and underwent transformation at each stage of transmission. Scientific concepts, artistic techniques, and religious ideas traveled between imperial centers through networks that often included multiple intermediary points and translation processes.

This pattern challenges diffusionist models that privilege certain regions as originators of innovation and others as passive recipients. Instead, it reveals how imperial centers simultaneously functioned as producers and consumers of knowledge within interconnected networks. Ottoman physicians incorporated European anatomical concepts while contributing pharmacological innovations that influenced European medical practice. Similarly, Persian astronomical traditions influenced Chinese calendrical calculations even as Chinese porcelain technology transformed Persian ceramic production.

Implications: Rethinking Imperial Formation

The findings of this study carry significant implications for how we conceptualize imperial formation and legitimation in the early modern world. By highlighting the centrality of diplomatic and cultural exchanges to imperial development, this research suggests three broad theoretical implications:

Imperial Identity Through Interaction

First, imperial identities were partially constituted through interactions with other imperial systems rather than developing in isolation. The Ottoman self-conception as heirs to both Byzantine and Islamic imperial traditions developed partly through engagement with European interlocutors who recognized and responded to these claims. Similarly, Qing imperial ideology incorporated elements of multiple traditions—Confucian, Manchu, Mongol, Tibetan Buddhist, and Muslim—partly through processes of diplomatic engagement with neighboring powers.

This interactive model of imperial identity formation challenges essentialist approaches that seek to identify unchanging cultural cores or authentic traditions unaffected by external contact. Instead, it suggests that imperial self-representation was inherently relational, defined partly through recognition by and differentiation from other imperial systems. The elaborate diplomatic protocols that regulated inter-imperial encounters thus served not only practical communicative functions but also symbolic purposes in performing imperial identity before foreign and domestic audiences.

Circulation as Imperial Strategy

Second, empires strategically facilitated certain types of circulation while restricting others as part of their governance strategies. The movement of people, objects, texts, and ideas across imperial boundaries was neither unrestricted nor entirely prohibited but rather selectively managed according to imperial priorities. Ottoman sultans restricted the movement of certain technologies like printing while actively promoting the circulation of scientific texts they deemed valuable. Similarly, Qing emperors created institutional channels for Islamic knowledge to inform imperial governance of Muslim regions while limiting the spread of certain religious practices they considered politically threatening.

This selective management of circulation represents a crucial and often overlooked dimension of imperial power. By controlling the channels through which knowledge and cultural practices moved, imperial authorities shaped not only what content circulated but also how it was interpreted and employed. The administrative structures created to regulate these flows—customs houses, translation bureaus, diplomatic protocols—constituted important sites of imperial power that merit further scholarly attention.

Cosmopolitanism and Imperial Legitimacy

Third, cosmopolitan knowledge increasingly functioned as a source of imperial legitimacy in the early modern period. As empires became more interconnected through diplomatic and commercial networks, imperial elites demonstrated their fitness to rule partly through their ability to navigate diverse cultural systems and incorporate prestigious foreign elements into their own traditions. The Ottoman sultan's collection of European clockwork devices, the Habsburg emperor's display of Ottoman carpets, the Safavid shah's patronage of Chinese-inspired decorative arts, and the Qing emperor's employment of Persian astronomers all exemplify this cosmopolitan dimension of imperial legitimation.

This cosmopolitan imperative did not replace traditional sources of legitimacy like dynastic succession, military prowess, or religious sanction but operated alongside them as an increasingly important component of

imperial self-representation. The architecture of imperial capitals, the ceremonial practices of courts, and the material culture of elite consumption all reflected this cosmopolitan orientation, creating imperial spaces characterized by cultural hybridity rather than purified tradition.

Conclusion

This examination of diplomatic relations and cultural exchanges between major imperial powers reveals that non-military interactions were not peripheral but central to early modern imperial development. Through systematic analysis of Ottoman-Habsburg and Safavid-Qing relations, this study has demonstrated how diplomatic channels facilitated the circulation of knowledge, artistic practices, and religious concepts that transformed participating societies in profound ways.

The evidence presented challenges traditional historiographical frameworks that emphasize civilizational isolation or binary opposition between East and West, Islam and Christianity, or China and its neighbors. Instead, it reveals a complex landscape of imperial entanglement characterized by selective adaptation, institutional mediation, and multidirectional knowledge flows. These patterns are not merely interesting historical curiosities but fundamental processes that shaped how empires articulated their identities, asserted legitimacy, and adapted to changing circumstances.

This study's findings suggest several directions for future research. First, additional comparative work on other imperial dyads—such as Mughal-Safavid, Russian-Ottoman, or Spanish-Portuguese-Moroccan relations—would further illuminate patterns of imperial interaction across different contexts. Second, greater attention to the role of non-state actors like merchant communities, religious orders, and artistic workshops in facilitating cross-imperial exchanges would complement the institutional focus of this study. Finally, deeper investigation of how imperial subjects beyond elite circles experienced and contributed to these entanglements would provide a more complete picture of their social consequences.

By reframing imperial history through the lens of entanglement rather than isolation, this research contributes to evolving historiographical approaches that emphasize connection, circulation, and mutual constitution rather than civilizational essentialism. At a time when public discourse often invokes oversimplified civilizational narratives, recovering these histories of complex interaction offers not only more accurate historical understanding but also resources for imagining more nuanced approaches to cross-cultural engagement in the present.

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