

The ‘catastrophe of this new Chinese mission’: the Amherst Embassy to China of 1816.

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Amherst’s Embassy and Early Nineteenth-Century Sino-British Relations

Two hundred years ago in the early hours of the morning 29 August 1816 (Jiaqing 21), William Pitt, Lord Amherst, unrested after travelling overnight, was unceremoniously manhandled in an attempt to usher him physically with his two deputies, George Thomas Staunton and Henry Ellis, into the presence of the Jiaqing Emperor at the Summer Palace of Yuanming Yuan. Exhausted, dirty after a very uncomfortable overnight journey and separated from his diplomatic credentials and ambassadorial robes, Amherst and his two deputies resisted, leaving the palace in anger. It was reported to the emperor that Amherst’s inability to attend the audience was occasioned by an indisposition, as was that of his deputies. The emperor, when discovering the diplomatic nature of this evasion, immediately and perhaps impulsively, dismissed the embassy without granting it an imperial audience and rejected its ‘tribute’ of gifts. Amherst’s party then began their long, overland journey south to Canton (Guangzhou) where the group embarked for home.

British accounts, of which there were several, laid this ostensible ‘failure’ of the embassy to secure an imperial audience not on the Jiaqing Emperor, but on the scheming of certain senior court officials who had unwisely assured him that Amherst had practiced and was prepared to perform the ceremony of the full imperial *koutou* (or *ketou* both Mandarin) or ‘kowtow’ (anglicised) with three kneelings accompanied by three knockings of the forehead for each prostration. The British suspected that

Chinese officials had reckoned that by compelling an exhausted Amherst into an imperial audience, he would be obliged to perform a ceremony that, after much deliberation, he had unambiguously refused to undertake. They also suspected that the Viceroy of Canton and his associates had prejudiced the court against them (Davis, *Sketches*, p. 81). After a process of extended negotiation Amherst had offered to his Chinese minders to perform the ceremony that his more famous predecessor, Viscount George Macartney, had agreed to undertake for the Qianlong Emperor at Jehol in September 1793, kneeling on one knee and bowing his head thrice as he would before his sovereign, George III. Indeed in an extension of this compromise the ambassador had offered to perform this kneeling not once but three times with the full complement of nine bows of the head in total. He also (like Macartney) had offered to perform the complete ceremony if either a Chinese court official of equal status would kowtow to a portrait of the Prince Regent, or if the emperor would supply a written undertaking that any Chinese official appointed to the court of St James in future would perform the ceremony in front of a British monarch. The Qianlong Emperor had accepted Macartney's compromise in 1793; his fifth son and successor would not. The expensive items brought by the British as 'presents' for the Jiaqing Emperor, costing some £20,000 were not accepted, though afterwards, the emperor agreed to a very limited and symbolic exchange of a few items in his apparent recognition of the sincerity and obedience of the Prince Regent in sending this tribute (Kitson, 'Dark Gift'). The embassy left Canton for home on 28 January 1817, suffering shipwreck and pirate attack on the return voyage, and visiting the deposed emperor Napoleon on St Helena (who told Amherst he was very foolish not to kowtow), arriving back in Britain on 17 August 1817.

The Amherst Embassy was only the second British embassy to visit China but

technically the fourth to be sent. The first official British mission to attempt to approach China was organised in Calcutta not London by Warren Hastings, Governor-general of Bengal (Teltscher, *High Road to China*). Hastings dispatched George Bogle to Tibet in 1774, but he did not cross into China. In 1788 the first embassy from the British mainland to China was aborted when its ambassador, Lt-Colonel Charles Cathcart died en route (Morse, *Chronicles* 2.151-170). It was thus not until 1793 that Viscount Macartney finally arrived at the imperial court of the Qianlong Emperor for his more celebrated and critically discussed visit.¹ To a great extent scholars of British literature and culture have largely forgotten or ignored the the Amherst embassy twenty-three years later in their accounts of early nineteenth century and its place in the lead up to the First Opium War of 1839-42. For the Chinese, this war marks the beginning of their highly traumatic 'Century of National Humiliation' (*bǎinián guóchǐ*) that concluded in 1949 with the establishment of the Peoples Republic of China (Callahan, *China: The Pessoptimist Nation*).

Comparatively little has been written about Amherst's embassy, either from the British or the Chinese viewpoints, which has tended to be largely viewed, when it is noted at all, as a farcical repetition of its more famous predecessor.² The embassy along with the two earlier British attempts to take possession of the Portuguese enclave of Macao in 1802 and 1808, however, demands the attention of both historians and critics of the cultural relations between China and Britain in the nineteenth century. Wensheng Wang's reappraisal of the reforming reign of the Jiaqing Emperor (1796-1820) presents a more complex and nuanced account of this

¹ Influential discussions include: Hevia, *Cherishing Men*; Peyrefitte, *Clash of Two Civilizations*, and Porter, *Ideographia*, 000-000.

² For the details of the embassy, see Morse, *Chronicles*, 3. 256-306; Gao, 'Amherst embassy'; Min, 'Narrating the Far East'; Peyrefitte, *Collision of Two Civilisations*, pp. 504-111; Hevia, *Cherishing Men*, pp. 210-18.

crucial period in Chinese history. (*White Lotus Rebels*) Whereas H. B. Morse referred to ‘the degenerate and corrupt court’ of 1816 Wang describes a frugal, thoughtful, self-critical and reforming monarch, keenly aware of the two British attempts to take over Macao and nervous about their power (*Chronicles* 3.258). When Macartney visited China in 1793 it was nearing the end of the prosperous Qianlong era. When Amherst arrived, the empire was suffering severe problems, subject to overpopulation, land shortages, frequent rebellions and serious financial issues. It was also at this time, as Zheng Yangwen has demonstrated, that opium consumption in China was transformed from a largely elite cultural practice into popular activity, due to the increasing supply of the drug from British controlled Bengal, used by the Company to recuperate huge amounts of silver bullion paid to the Chinese to fuel the more beneficial but also growing British addiction to tea (*Social Use of Opium*, pp. 00-00; Trocki, *Opium, Empire*, pp. 33-57; Lovell, *Opium War*, pp. 32-33). Wang argues that the Jiaqing Emperor successfully enforced two major British climb downs over Macao and his subsequent, strict treatment of the Amherst embassy was intended to confirm imperial strength in the face of opportunistic British aggression. James L. Hevia similarly comments that ‘the Jiaqing court reviewed the historical record of the embassy, took tensions in Canton into account, and organized the greeting and preparation phase of Guest Ritual accordingly’ (*Cherishing Men*, p. 220). The Jiaqing Emperor emerges not as a decadent, weak or petulant ruler imprisoned within an ossified ritualistic ceremonialism, but one who was capable of reacting pragmatically to the complex, challenging and rapidly changing political landscape that confronted him. The choices facing the increasingly beleaguered emperor, however, were stark.

Contemporary responses to the earlier Macartney embassy were certainly mixed. Macartney and his admirers regarded his embassy as something of a personal

diplomatic triumph. He claimed his mission ‘laid a foundation of amity, good offices, and immediate intercourse with the Imperial Court.’ (cited in Pritchard, ‘The Kowtow’, p. 375) Others were not as convinced. Contemporary views of the Amherst embassy, however, generally viewed it as a failure; John Crawfurd reviewing Henry Ellis’ *Journal of the Proceedings of the late Embassy to China* for the *Edinburgh Review* commented ‘everybody who knew anything of the matter, we believe, was prepared for that catastrophe of this new Chinese mission, which actually ensued.’ (*Edinburgh Review* 29 [1818], p. 433) Eun Kyung Min argued that the various narratives of the embassy took on ‘the added burden of interpreting the history of their failed mission to open up trade with China [...] by attempting to sort out the convolutions of commerce, civility, and ceremony’. (Min, ‘Narrating the Far East’, p. 162) Patrick Tuck charged that the embassy ‘was not merely a failure, it was a fiasco.’ (Staunton, *Notes*, p. viii) Lo-shu Fu, however, while regarding the embassy as an unambiguous diplomatic failure, draws attention to the new knowledge that was gained of the northern Chinese coast and especially of Korea, surveyed by the embassy’s ships while Amherst journeyed overland to and from the Qing court and disseminated in John Macleod (M’Leod) and Basil Hall’s narratives (*Documentary Chronicle*, p. 403). Gao Hao stresses the importance of the embassy’s discoveries in China after the official proceedings were concluded (‘Amherst Embassy’ p. 571). The embassy was granted unprecedented and unexpected freedom of movement during its four-month journey from Beijing to Guangzhou (Canton), taking a different route from that of Macartney’s 1793 return, one that had not previously been taken by a Briton. Macartney’s mission travelled to the Southern end of the Grand Canal, whereas Amherst’s party transferred from Guazhou to the Yangtze River. They sailed 285 miles along the Yangtze to Poyang Lake and from there on smaller inland

waterways to Guangzhou.

Britons were thus allowed to visit parts of the lower Yangtze delta hitherto unexplored by Europeans. As Amherst wrote to Canning, the embassy enjoyed ‘a greater degree of liberty than has been granted to any former embassy’.³ The members of the embassy were also able to communicate more fully with the Chinese people than they had hitherto under the jealously guarded Macartney embassy, rambling in the countryside, visiting cities and towns, purchasing souvenirs and even playing the first recorded game of cricket in China. At times more like tourists than guests, the embassy gathered valuable first-hand knowledge of China. The information that they gained about the country would provide useful intelligence as Hao argues, such ‘important perceptions laid the foundation for future changes in Sino-British relations and led, indirectly, to the outbreak of the first Opium War in 1839.’ (‘Amherst Embassy’, p. 587) The strategic and formal mission of the embassy was not accomplished, yet it was of major importance in changing British views of China in the lead up to the War and, arguably, marked the first major event taken in that process. This context thus problematizes our understanding of success and failure.

The Macartney embassy lead to the publication of some fifteen or so accounts, the Amherst embassy also produced fifteen contemporary narratives published and unpublished by eleven of its members.⁴ The official account, authored by Henry Ellis was published in (1817) and widely reviewed; Clarke Abel’s *Narrative* focusing on

³ Letter from Amherst to George Canning, 8 March 1817. British Library, London: India Office Records (hereafter IOR) G/12/197, f.281.

⁴ Ellis, *Journal*; Staunton, *Notes of Proceedings and Occurrences; Miscellaneous Notices*; Morrison, *Memoir*; Abel, *Narrative of a Journey*; Macleod, *Narrative of a Voyage*; Hall, *Narrative of a Voyage*; Davis, *Sketches of China*; ‘Henry Hayne Diary 1816-1817’. *China Through Western Eyes: Manuscript Records of Traders, Travellers, Missionaries and Diplomats, 1792-1842*. 4 vols (London: Adam Matthew Microfilm Publications, 1996); Martin, ‘Journal of Sir William Fanshawe Martin.’

natural history was published in 1818 and accounts of the exploratory voyages of the embassy were published by naval personnel John McLeod (1817) and Basil Hall (1818), containing the first substantive British discussion of Korean culture, another under-explored area. The embassy's main interpreter, the missionary Robert Morrison, contributed a briefer memoir in 1820. The embassy's deputy, George Thomas Staunton, authored a substantial, but privately circulated account printed for a limited audience of politicians and company personnel only in 1824. Staunton when aged twelve had served as Macartney's page on the first embassy and was the son of Macartney's deputy, George Leonard Staunton. It was not until 1841, some twenty four years after the outbreak of hostilities with China, that John Francis Davis, Company man and another interpreter on the embassy published his major, two volume account of the embassy's progress and failure, *Sketches of China*.

The embassy originated in an attempt to address a series of specific grievances about the Canton system and the trade with China (most of which were resolved by the time of its arrival in China) (Morse, *Chronicles*, 3. 279-284; IOR G12/196 f. 195-97). The East India Company financed the embassy and it was in its interests that it was dispatched. John Barrow, who had served as comptroller on Macartney's embassy, now elevated to the powerful position of second secretary at the Admiralty had canvassed a sequel to Macartney's embassy earlier, and enthusiastically in 1805. In 1815, however, the times seemed especially propitious. Britain had just defeated its major continental rival, the Napoleonic Empire, and its future as a global trading and imperial power seemed assured. That year Barrow proposed to the government 'a Mission to the Court of Pekin, in order to announce the restoration of a general peace in this quarter of the World; and of congratulating the Emperor upon his recent escape

from assassination.⁵

The embassy because it never achieved an audience with the emperor, entered into any substantial negotiations, or concluded any agreements, was generally regarded as a complete failure. Yet at least two of the embassy's participants, Davis and Staunton, would later both view it as leading to a distinct improvement in trading conditions and thus, paradoxically, a success because of it was a formal failure, thus problematizing any simple understanding of 'success' or 'failure'. (Davis, *The Chinese*, 1.181; Staunton, *Memoirs*, pp. 67-68) As a Company employee, Davis fully supported the advice of Staunton that the performance of the kowtow ceremonial was unlikely to achieve anything positive, and would only have negative consequences for the Company at Canton. His *Sketches*, however, indicates that there might have been a much more pragmatic motivation in the British resistance to perform the full ceremonial. He writes that because 'there seemed so little prospect of succeeding in anything, that it became a question whether the point of ceremony might not be the best to break off upon, since it would involve no article of negotiation, but be a good mode of asserting our independence, without making other matters worse than they were before' (1. 55-56). He argues that they 'should gain nothing more *with* compliance than we could gain *without* it' and that he 'instead of gaining any points by such measure, we should only become contemptible in the eyes of the Chinese, and in fact do ourselves more harm than good (1.109)'. The negotiations over the ceremonial proved an unambiguous object lesson for Davis for what he understood to be Qing diplomacy: the Chinese are 'too proud to learn any thing about us, while we foreigners study them in every relation of life, and have availed ourselves to some purpose the opportunities (scanty as these may have comparatively been), which years

⁵ 'Minute of Secret Court of the Directors held on Wednesday the 22nd February 1815'. IOR/G12/196, f.44.

of intercourse afforded us.' He indicates that this embassy, like that of Macartney's was an opportunity to acquire 'that "power" which consists in "Knowledge".' However, what he claims to know and understand is not the subtleties of complex Qing guest ritual, but a stereotypical understanding that 'the most complete faith, the most unblushing perfidy, is one part of the Chinese system in their negotiations with strangers'. (1. 109) Davis was subsequently appointed second superintendent of British trade in China alongside the luckless Lord Napier in December 1833. After Napier's death in 1834, he briefly became chief superintendent before resigning this position in January 1835. In 1844 he was appointed as the second governor and commander-in-chief of the new British colony of Hong Kong. By this time he had established himself as Britain's major sinologist of the mid-century. In *The Chinese: A General Description of China and its Inhabitants* (1836; 1851). Davis concluded that:

It has often been a subject of just remark, that this *unsuccessful* mission was followed by a longer interval of tranquillity and freedom from Chinese annoyances, than had ever been experienced before. From the year 1816 to 1829 not a single stoppage of the British trade took place, except in the affair of the *Topaze* frigate in 1822; and there the Canton government was glad to make the first advances to a resumption of the suspended intercourse (1. 81).

Davis's conclusion was similar to that of Amherst himself who expressed his shock that 'the circumstances attending these transactions were of so extraordinary a nature, so little to be accounted for by the usages of European Courts, or even by the practices adopted on the occasion of the last Embassy to the Emperor of China.' He

complains that ‘the decorum, and the deliberation with which everything relating to the court ceremonies during the time of the late Emperor Tchien Lung appears to have been arranged and conducted’ were dispensed with in favour of ‘hurry and confusion, of irregularity and disorder, of insult, inhumanity and almost personal violence, sufficient to give the court of the Emperor Kea-king the manners, character, and appearance of the roving camp of a Tartar Horde.’ Surveying a detailed description of the ceremonials to be required from him by the Jiaqing court and the wish of the court to send his embassy away after a mere six days, Amherst concludes that it was unlikely that the embassy could have proceeded, and that the breaking off over the issue of the kowtow represented the best outcome in which both sides could claim some degree of face saving. He concludes that the number and frequency of kowtows required and the brusque manner of their demand would have rendered compliance impossible.

But with us, all was hurry and precipitation. A total disregard of everything relating to the comfort of the individuals. An absolute banishment of decorum from public transactions. An unceasing attempt to hurry us into acts without a moment for reflection or deliberation. In short, a pervading wish to remove away from us every thing that constitutes the splendor or event the respectable appearance of an Embassy, and finally an attempt to drag us before the Emperor in such a guise as would befit only his vassals from the meanest and most barbarous island of the China seas.⁶

Detailed historical scholarship into the motivation of the Jiaqing court in its conduct of the embassy is not yet available to anything like the same extent for the

⁶ Letter to George Canning, 8th March 1817. IOR G/12/197, ff 285-299.

Amherst embassy as for the Macartney embassy, so in attempting to explain the reasons for the apparent hardening of the Chinese position regarding the ceremonial treatment of the embassy as perceived by the British accounts, we are required to speculate somewhat.⁷ It does appear that the Jiaqing court took a very less generous and flexible approach with Amherst's embassy subjecting it to a more rigorous ceremonial. Additionally, the court wished the embassy to leave almost immediately after the audience in contravention of the prescribed forty-day residence. Certainly, the Jiaqing Emperor's noted frugality is sufficient to explain his wish to see the back of this extremely costly visit. In the end, Amherst stayed some five months and, according to Davis, this residence must have cost the Chinese court something like £170,000 (*Sketches*, 1.81) roughly the same as that of Macartney. But the reason for the embassy's treatment is probably more easily explained by the Jiaqing Emperor's wish to appear firm and decisive in the wake of British aggression in Macao and its leading participation in the booming illegal trade in opium. In an edict back in 14 November 1808, the emperor determined that the British must leave Macao describing them as 'proud, tyrannical and generally obnoxious! [...] When the barbarians dare to occupy the strategic spots of our frontier, we must not show the least sign of weakness or cowardice!' In an edict of 30 June 1809, the emperor described the British as 'always unreasonable and dishonest' adding that 'we have been too lenient with them. From now on, we must make amends and be more severe' (Fu, *Documentary Chronicle*, pp. 371, 377). The Chinese were highly suspicious of Staunton. The emperor decreed on 8 January 1815 that when he accompanied Macartney's embassy as a boy Staunton showed himself to be 'young and crafty, and

⁷ The most important published source of documents relating to the Jiaqing reign in English remains Lo-She Fu's *A Documentary History of Sino-Western Relations* (University of Arizona Press: Tucson, 1966).

throughout the return journey drew maps of all strategic spots of the mountains and rivers he passed through'. He suspected that 'probably in the long run he will make trouble' and that he may have been involved in the recent incident involving *H.M Doris*'s pursuit of an American schooner in Chinese waters (p. 394). The court believed, wrongly, that Staunton had amassed substantial personal wealth and property at Canton though bribery and corruption. In 1816 the emperor was petitioned for help by the Rajah of Nepal against the British in Bengal, warning that they had designs on Tibet (pp. 401-2, 616). The emperor refused any aid but secretly strengthened Chinese defences on the Tibetan and Nepalese border in response.

From around this time also, the court was becoming increasingly aware of and concerned about burgeoning Chinese use and even its consumption by officers of the imperial guard and court eunuchs (p. 616). In April 1810, the emperor decreed that 'opium is a poison, undermining our good customs and morality' and that, lately, 'the purchasers and eaters of opium have become numerous', issuing orders to suppress the trade (p. 380). In March 1811, the emperor decreed that 'opium from the overseas countries has infiltrated into the interior and has caused so much harm [...] This item, opium spreads deadly poison. Rascals and bandits indulge in it and cannot do without it even for a second' and that it was supplied by 'treacherous merchants' (p. 381). In January 1815 the Chinese government adopted new measures to prohibit the trade, the emperor declaring, 'Opium spreads its poison intensively' and claiming that it 'is usually smuggled in by barbarian ships'. The emperor was also aware that because of the trade silver was draining out of the country and 'a serious deficit in the national revenue' was occurring (pp. 399-400).

It seems clear than that at the time of the embassy, the emperor regarded the British as troublesome, potentially dangerous, and possessed of an insatiable appetite

for trading, especially in opium. His response was rational and pragmatic if, ultimately, counter productive. Of course, neither Chinese nor British were fully aware of the situation that was beyond both their respective conceptual worldviews. This was a period enormous uncertainty and anxiety for both empires, as Wang puts it, ‘British policy toward China, aiming to find out how the vast empire might be pressured, was tentative and experimental and could have gone in different directions.’ (*White Lotus Rebels*, pp. 250, 235-51) Chinese policy was also uncertain, which probably accounts for the emperor’s later public acceptance for the misunderstanding relating to the hurried audience.

Amherst came to the conclusion that, given the expectations of the imperial court, even had the audience gone ahead it is unlikely anything worthwhile would have been achieved.

I cannot think that His Imperial Majesty’s intentions with regard to the present Embassy, would have satisfied the expectations of the British Government, as of the Honorable Company more immediately interested in the success of this mission, or would have appeared in the eyes of Europe either as an honourable or an amicable reception. I cannot flatter myself that confined to very limited a period of time, and subject to the will of a Man of most untoward personal character, it would have been possible for me or for those who acted with me to have obtained any thing that might be considered as an adequate return, either of honor or advantage for the compliment paid to the Emperor by the scale and composition of the present Embassy [...]⁸

⁸ Letter to George Canning, 22 March, 1817. IOR G12/197, f.310.

He regarded the emperor's adoption of a strict policy regarding the ceremonial aspect of the court as stemming from weakness rather than from strength.

I conceive that no Foreign Ambassador is likely to be admitted into the presence of the Emperor Kia-King, unless he agrees to perform, to its full extent, the Tartar Ceremony of the Ko-tou. Perhaps the present Emperor, whose reign has been frequently and very lately disturbed by insurrections of his subjects, may less readily dispense with outward forms of respect than his Father, whose reign was long and victorious, and, who, being firm in the possession of real power and authority, might attach less consequence to any show of external homage.⁹

Faced with British attempts to encroach at Macao, their prosecution of an expanding trade in opium, and the infringement of Chinese territorial waters in their disputes with France and later the US, the Jiaqing court, which never solicited or encouraged the embassy to be sent in the first place, chose to deploy a stricter usage of Qing guest ritual than that of the Qianlong emperor and to countenance the dismissal of the embassy rather than adopt a form of compromise.

The kowtow controversy

The controversy over the embassy's dismissal thus came to feature prominently in accounts of the embassy's apparent failure as symbolizing the Chinese court's despotic and condescending attitude to other nations. James L. Hevia has influentially argued that European and Americans fetishized the kowtow embedding the ceremonial in the context of an European discourse of humiliation and abasement

⁹ Letter to Canning, 21 April, 1817. IOR G12/197, f. 378.

familiar to them but entirely foreign to Chinese understanding of the ritual. (Hevia, 'Ultimate Gesture', p. 213; Wills, *Past and Present*) He details the complexity of the ceremony and its multiple meanings within a Confucian cosmology that did not expound the virtues of abject servitude, far from it. The Ming and Qing emperors personally kowtowed to Confucius ancestral shrine and kowtowed at the command of a court official when he worshipped at the Temple of Heaven (Crossley, *The Manchus*, p. 124) The kowtow was only one facet of the very complex but also routine ceremony of Qing government. Europeans, however, chose to isolate the practice from its cultural context and read into it their own binaries of western freedom and Asiatic despotism, servitude and independence. Ming and later Qing China arranged the visits of European embassies in terms of their established system of tributary relations. Europeans with a different set of notions of international diplomacy, largely established by the Westphalian system at the conclusion of the Thirty Years War, were aware of Chinese practices and viewed the kowtow as a ceremony implying submission to the Chinese emperor rather than the sovereign equality that they were seeking to establish. Both forms of practice, as Hevia argues, were equally a product of the specific political and ceremonial discourses of their respective polities.

The Macartney embassy was aware of the issue of the kowtow and the imperial court also understood, to an extent, British sensibilities. The full kowtow was dispensed with, after a period of prolonged negotiation, for the Macartney audience with the emperor at the Mountain Resort for Escaping Summer Heat (Bishu shanjuang) at Chengde of September 1793. Macartney formally negotiated a compromise by which he knelt on one knee before the emperor as he would before his sovereign George III, and bowed his head, delivering his letter from his king directly

into the emperor's hands. Macartney did not reject the ceremony out of hand; he agreed to perform the full public kowtow if a Chinese official of equivalent rank undertook the ceremony before a portrait of the British king, or if the emperor promised in writing that on a future occasion such an official if presented to the king would also perform the full ceremony. For him, the issue of national reciprocity was much more important than the physical performance itself. As Hevia has argued, in this case rather than the Qing court insisting on an inflexible ceremony, it was willing, albeit reluctantly, to allow an altered version of the ceremony to take place both to accommodate British concerns and successfully (in Qing terms) complete the visit and arrange the embassy's speedy departure. This was because it understood that the visit of a British embassy was unprecedented and needed bespoke handling (Hevia, 'Ultimate debasement', p. 227).

After Macartney's mission, the Dutch East India Company had sent an embassy led by Isaac Titsingh, including Andreas Everardus van Braam Houckgeest, who authored the main account. The Dutch seemed to have no issues about performing the ceremony and their embassy undertook the full kowtow but received, according to the British, less preferential treatment than Macartney. Barrow's *Travels in China* of 1804 defended Macartney from the charge that his refusal to adopt an 'unconditional compliance with all the humiliating ceremonies which the Chinese might have thought proper to extract from him' would have led to a more favourable conclusion to the embassy (p. 7). He argued that the willingness of the Dutch in 1794-95, to 'humiliate themselves at least thirty different times' led to no positive outcomes questioning what 'advantages can reasonably be expected to accrue from a servile and unconditional compliance with the submissions required by this haughty government' after 'such a vile reception and degrading treatment?' Barrow recalled how van

Braam, a corpulent man, was subject to the imperial laughter when his wig fell off in front of the emperor while undertaking the ceremonial (pp. 10, 11, 13). Davis in 1836 would also recall the embarrassment of the Dutch as a confirmation of the correctness of the British conduct:

The embassy occurred in 1795, during the era of small-clothes, and before liberal principles had been generally established in dress, as in other matters; and these hapless Dutchmen were made, on the most trivial occasions of ceremony, to perform their evolutions, while the wicked mandarins stood by and laughed—and who would not?—at what has been diplomatically styled ‘the embarrassment of a Dutch-built stern in tight inexpressibles.’ (*The Chinese*, 75)

Barrow, as Davis, claims that the Chinese treated the English with more respect than the Dutch because of ‘the character and independent spirit’ of the nation as well as its great power over which they cast ‘a jealous eye’. It was Macartney’s ‘manly and open conduct’, which affirmed this demonstrated by his refusal to kowtow unconditionally. Barrow writes of the profound effect of ‘the refusal of an individual to comply with the ceremonies of the country’ on the emperor and his court and how ‘greatly must their pride have been mortified’ (*Travels*, pp. 17-18). In Barrow’s account the Qing court is presented as proud, haughty, and insolent, never for a moment relaxing its rigid ‘long established customs’ except in the single case of the this British embassy. The lesson learnt is clear, ‘a tone of submission, and a tame and passive obedience to the degrading demands of this haughty court, serve only to feed its pride, and add to the absurd notions of its own vast importance’ (pp. 20-21, 24).

In 1805 the Russian ambassador Count Yuri Golovkin led a mission to Beijing

to secure permission for Russian ships to enter Canton, to negotiate for the opening of a Russian consulate in Beijing and to secure Chinese agreement to the despatch of a Russian mission to Tibet. Golovkin, though apparently willing to kowtow in the imperial presence, refused to undertake the ceremony for items symbolic of this presence and his mission ended (Mancall, *Russia and China*, pp. 250-55). Although Amherst similarly refused to undertake such symbolic kowtowing yet the possibility of performing the imperial kowtow was left open until very late in the embassy.

Both British and Chinese regarded the reception of the Macartney embassy as a precedent for the conduct of the new embassy (Fu, *Documentary Chronicle*, pp. 618-619; Hevia, 'Ultimate Gesture', pp. 214-15). An extract from the Canton Secret Consultations of 12 February opines that,

In a Country where precedent & Custom carry with them so much weight, and under the circumstances of the precedent of Lord Macartney's Embassy being so favourable to our views, we consider it to be one of the clearest and most unexceptionable rules that can be laid down for our guidance in the execution of the very delicate & important trust now under consideration, to adhere as strictly as possible to the line of the proceeding which that precedent has suggested.¹⁰

Unfortunately, neither party could now agree on exactly what ceremony Macartney had performed. The embassy insisted Macartney only performed the compromised version of the ceremony, whereas the court maintained that Macartney had

¹⁰ Extract from the Canton Secret Consultations 12 February, 1816. IOR G12/196, ff. 187-88.

undertaken the full kowtow. The situation was complicated by the fact that both the Jiaqing Emperor and Staunton were present during Macartney's audience and neither agreed as to what occurred. It was diplomatically difficult for the British to query the accuracy of events affirmed by the imperial memory. Though there is some evidence that the Jiaqing Emperor considered the possibility of adapting the ceremony to that the British claimed as practiced by Macartney, the preparation for Amherst's embassy was much stricter with the court issuing a very detailed description of the audience itself and what was to be required from the ambassador (Pritchard, 'The kowtow', pp. 173-74; Hevia, 'Ultimate Gesture', p. 214). Amherst's ambiguous instructions directed him to conform 'to all the ceremonies of that court' which did not lessen his dignity or 'commit the honour of your Sovereign' (Staunton, *Notes*, p. xx). Henry Ellis, while admitting the ceremony to signify 'oriental barbarism' believed that it was a point of 'etiquette' that might have been complied with rather than sacrifice the entire objects of the embassy (*Journal*, p. 151). Writing in 1818 in the *Edinburgh Review*, John Crawfurd, argued that the ceremony did not appear 'much more humiliating than other court ceremonies' and the negotiations to avoid it were simply 'absurd'. (29, 436-7) British attitudes to kowtowing post-Macartney were thus by no means homogenous.

In his *Notes of Proceedings and Occurrences* (1824), Staunton squarely blamed the Chinese ceremonial for the failure of the mission, although his own inclusion had badly irritated the Chinese. Considered by many as the leading British 'China expert' of the time, he advised Amherst strongly against any compliance with the ceremony and Amherst to his experience. He remained adamant that any retreat from the precedent of Macartney 'would be a sacrifice of national credit and character; and as such would operate injuriously to the trade and interests of the East-

India Company at Canton' (p. 662). Barrow reviewing the narratives of the Amherst embassies in two substantial articles for the *Quarterly Review* for 1817, followed this line, arguing that it was on the 'refusal or compliance with this degrading and humiliating demand' that 'England must continue to maintain, in the eyes of this haughty government, that high rank and independent spirit for which she had hitherto been known to them, or set the seal of vassalage to her submission, and be registered among the number of their petty tributaries' (pp. 408, 412). To those at home who criticised Amherst's pride in refusing to undertake the ceremony, Barrow claims that 'it was this kind of pride, which, in the early days of England's history raised her reputation in foreign courts, gained for her commerce substantial advantages, and made her alliance an object of solicitude' (pp. 33, 476). Throughout these narratives and their reception, the British emphasized virtues such as dignity, respect, firmness, and manliness and described the ceremony as abject, offensive, humiliating, disgusting, and debasing. They understood this as a clash between an open, brave, and manly British character and a haughty, arrogant, and insolent Chinese 'character'.

Amherst came to believe that any last minute promises made by imperial officers were meaningless and that 'the Emperor never had consented, but also extremely probable that he never would consent to admit me to his presence under any other conditions than the performance of the ceremony of prostration.'¹¹ In this he was probably correct. The underlying British position is probably best summed up by the missionary, Robert Morrison in his *Memoir of the Principal Occurrences during an Embassy from the British Government to the Court of China in the Year 1816* (1820). Here Morrison outlines the precepts underlining the British mission to

¹¹ Letter to George Canning, 22 March 22, 1817. IOR G/12/197, f. 314.

China based on commercial and diplomatic reciprocity, couched in the language of civic rationality:

As individuals are improved by an amicable intercourse with each other; and as parts of the same empire are gradually ameliorated in proportion as they have an easy intercourse amongst themselves; so separate and independent nations are mutually benefitted by a liberal and amicable intercourse. Those governments which with sincere minds endeavour to extend the friendly intercourse of nations, deserve the thanks of mankind. Whilst they pursue the good of their own country, they promote the welfare of the species [...] exchange of commodities, or commercial intercourse, tends to ameliorate the temporal condition of the whole human family [...] national and commercial intercourse will proceed best under an idea of the equality and reciprocity of the two countries. (pp. 1-2)

Morrison argues that while some ceremonies are simply ‘mere forms’ and essentially meaningless, others imply submission and homage. It is in this latter context that he understands the ‘ceremony called the *San-kweikew-kow*; thrice kneeling and nine times beating the head against the ground’ that only those nations that consider themselves tributary to China should perform. Morrison has, of course, internalised and universalised a Eurocentric understanding of personal and diplomatic relations, based on affective, polite, and reciprocal undertakings. These apparent norms had little meaning for Qing understandings of relations between China and other polities, premised as they were on mutual understanding of obligation and hierarchy.

Four years after the Amherst embassy departed from China, the Jiaqing Emperor was dead. The Daoguang Emperor inherited the problems that his predecessor had only just managed to fend off. The issues that would begin to dominate Sino-British relations in his reign would be concerned with the demise of the East India Company's monopoly of the China trade in 1833 and the impact of the opium trade on the Chinese people and the Qing economy, exacerbated by the 'opium rush' occasioned by the curtailment of the monopoly. But it seems that the deployment of the kowtow and the conduct of Qing guest rituals by the Qianlong and Jiaqing courts was a direct and strategic response to current political realities. Whereas both sides could claim Macartney's embassy as successful with some degree of justice, it was very much harder for either Britons or Chinese to maintain the Amherst embassy as successful, except in the rather special sense that it helped both nations to clarify their positions in the lead up to the First Opium War. A clear trajectory from the embassy to armed conflict, however, should be viewed with caution. While the East India Company maintained its monopoly of the China trade and opium production in Bengal there remained some stability. Eventually, the move to free trade, the termination of the Company's monopoly, and the subsequent 'opium rush' were the key factors in creating the conditions that precipitated war. To the extent that neither Britons nor Chinese seem to have either contemplated or desired armed conflict in the wake of the Amherst embassy to China may lead us to regard it as a qualified success in the short term at least.

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