

“THE WOUND INFLICTED BY POOR ELLIS”: THE AMHERST EMBASSY OF 1816,  
JOHN MURRAY, AND CHINA

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Over the last few years there has been an increasing amount of research on the relationship between the history and cultures of Qing China and Georgian Britain in what we know of as the Age of Romanticism. As this endeavour extends in reach, and expands in scope, our previous, and still largely provisional understandings of the subject are inevitably problematised and complicated. This essay, like the other in this volume, intends to progress perhaps only modestly this ongoing project in my case by exploring the impact of the 1816 Amherst Embassy to China, which was only the second such royal embassy to reach the Forbidden city. This essay will tentatively consider not just some of published accounts the embassy generated, but also their publication and reception history, especially with regard to that great romantic period publishing house of John Murray. In doing so, I hope to connect and develop the insights of travel and book historians, notably, Innes Keighren, Charles Withers and Bill Bell’s major study of Murray and exploration, *Travels into Print* (2015). Although the tremendous impact of the first royal embassy to China, that of Viscount Macartney of 1792-93, has now been extensively explored, that of its problematic successor remains, despite some important recent publications, very much an under explored event. While, in many ways, less exciting and glamorous than its predecessor, it is much more

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 propel 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 an uncomfortable overnight journey and separated

from his diplomatic credentials and ambassador's 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, on discovering the diplomatic nature of this evasion, appears angrily, to have dismissed the embassy without granting it a ceremonial audience and rejected its "tribute" of gifts. Amherst's party then began their long, overland journey south to Canton (Guangzhou) on 28 January 1817. Their ship, the *Alceste*, refused permission to sail up the Pearl River to anchorage at Whampoa, forced its way resulting in an exchange of fire that killed almost fifty Chinese (Platt 167-69). The party later suffered shipwreck and attack by Malay pirates on their return voyage, before stopping to visit another now former emperor, the deposed Napoleon on St Helena. With characteristic *realpolitik* Napoleon told Amherst he was very foolish not to conform to local ceremonial practices and presciently warned against the consequences of military action. The embassy arrived back in Britain on 17 August 1817.

British accounts, by and large, laid this ostensible "failure" of the embassy to secure an imperial audience not on the Jiaqing Emperor ("*Kea-king*" in their transliteration), 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 "kowitz" (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 feel himself obliged to perform a ceremony that, after much deliberation, he had eventually decided to refuse. They also suspected that the viceroy of Canton and his associates had prejudiced the court against them (Ellis 422-23; Davis, *Sketches* 81). After a process of extended negotiation Amherst had offered his Chinese minders a compromise in which he would perform the ceremony that the British understood his more famous predecessor, 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 the Macartney 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, yet his fifth son and successor would it seems not. Or, at least this is what the British reported as happening. The expensive items brought as "presents" for the Jiaqing Emperor, costing some £20,000 were not accepted, though afterwards, the requested a limited, symbolic exchange of a few items in his recognition of the sincerity and obedience of the Prince Regent in sending this tribute (Kitson "Dark Gift"). The issue of the performance of the kowtow remains murky and unclear. Recent scholarship suggests that Macartney actually performed privately the ceremony for the emperor and performed some hybridized form in public that was fairly indistinguishable from the actual ceremony (Platt 158-64). In any case, the issue does not seem to have then troubled the Qing as much as the British, the suspicion being that the British had become obsessed with an important though not crucial detail of Qing guest ritual. The only people who knew for sure were those actually present at the time and two of them were still alive and present in China the reigning Jiaqing emperor (thirty-two years old in 1793) and Sir George Thomas Staunton (twelve years old in 1793). It is now the veracity of Staunton, who denied the full kowtow was performed by Macartney, that is most open to question. Staunton, according to Amherst, "merely hinted at the imperfect recollection which he could retain of transactions which took

place so long ago, and at so early a period of his life”.<sup>1</sup> Staunton, however, later confided to Amherst that Macartney had indeed performed “a polite hybrid,” repeating the ceremony of prostrations nine times though probably on one rather than two knees (Platt 161).

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 2.151-170). It was not until 1793 that Macartney finally arrived at the imperial court of the Qianlong Emperor for his more celebrated and critically discussed visit.<sup>2</sup> To a great extent, until very recently, scholars of British literature and culture have largely ignored 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).

Comparatively little has been written about Amherst’s embassy, either from the British or the Chinese viewpoints. It has tended to be largely viewed, when it is noted at all, as a farcical repetition of its more famous predecessor.<sup>3</sup> 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 serious attention of both historians and critics of the cultural relations between China and Britain in the nineteenth century. Wensheng Wang’s major

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<sup>1</sup> Amherst to George Canning, February 12, 1817. PRO 17/3/59. Platt, 160.

<sup>2</sup> Influential discussions include: Hevia, *Cherishing Men*; Peyrefitte, *Clash of Two Civilizations*, and Porter, *Ideographia*, pp. 193-24.

<sup>3</sup> For the details of the embassy, see Morse 3. 256-306; Gao, “Amherst embassy”; Min; Peyrefitte, 504-111; and Hevia, *Cherishing Men*, pp. 210-18.

reappraisal of the reforming reign of the Jiaqing Emperor (1796-1820) presents a more complex and nuanced account of this 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 (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, arguably 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 (41-65; Trocki, *Opium, Empire* 33-57; Lovell, *Opium War* 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* 220). Stephen Platt, in the most detailed history of Sino-British relations in the early nineteenth century yet, argues that neither side expected the embassy to end in failure and though the British would come to blame Jiaqing’s arrogance, “the emperor very much wanted to have a successful meeting, even if it meant compromising on the external trappings of ceremony” and was “disappointed that the British visit failed to result in a friendly audience,” yet, “no matter how each side tried to paper it over, the Amherst mission was a catastrophe” (*Imperial Twilight* 169, 170; 148-74) The Jiaqing Emperor emerges from

historical enquiry 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 uncomfortable and dangerous.

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 Pritchard, ‘Kowtow’ 375). Contemporary views of the Amherst embassy, however, generally viewed it as a failure. Henry Ellis, deputy commissioner, concluded that “the failure of both [embassies] has been complete” (437). John Crawford reviewing Ellis’ *Journal of the Proceedings of the late Embassy to China* in the *Edinburgh Review* agreed that “everybody who knew anything of the matter, we believe, was prepared for that catastrophe of this new Chinese mission, which actually ensue.” (*Edinburgh Review* 29 [1818], 433). Eun Kyung Min argued that the various narratives of the embassy wrestled with “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 162) Patrick Tuck charged that the embassy “was not merely a failure, it was a fiasco” (‘Introduction’ to Staunton, *Notes* 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 (or “M”Leod”) and Basil Hall’s narratives (403). The importance of these narratives which we are only just coming to appreciate is featured in Elizabeth Chang’s important new essay on the subject in this volume. Gao Hao stresses the importance of the embassy’s discoveries in China after the official proceedings were concluded (“Amherst Embassy”

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 Guangzhou 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".<sup>4</sup> 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, even playing the first game of cricket in China. At times more like tourists than guests, the embassy gathered valuable first-hand knowledge of China. John Barrow, in the *Quarterly Review*, commented not entirely unapprovingly that they "frequently ran riot, and rambled to considerable distances from the line of their route" (21 [1819] 74). The information that they gained about the country would provide useful intelligence as Gao 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 influencing British views of China in the lead up to the War and, arguably, marked the first major event taken in that process. Henry Ellis came to the conclusion that, "if ever impression is to be produced at Peking, it must be from an intimate knowledge of our political and military strength, rather than from the gratification produced in the Emperor's mind by the reception of an embassy (438).

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<sup>4</sup> Letter from Amherst to George Canning, 8 March 1817. IOR G/12/197, f.281.

The Macartney embassy led to the publication of some fifteen or so accounts, the Amherst embassy also produced a similar number of contemporary narratives published or unpublished by eleven of its members.<sup>5</sup> The official account, authored by Henry Ellis was published in (1817) and widely reviewed. Amherst's journal which would have been the key account, was lost in the shipwreck of the *Alceste* though his many detailed letters sent back to London survive. Clarke Abel's *Narrative* focusing on natural history was published in 1818. Abel also lost his valuable collection of natural history specimens and other materials in the wreck. Accounts of the extensive and highly important exploratory voyages of the ships while the embassy was ongoing were published by naval personnel John McLeod (1817) and Basil Hall (1818), containing the first substantive British discussion of Korean culture. The embassy's lead interpreter, the British missionary Robert Morrison, contributed a briefer memoir in 1820. Its deputy, George Thomas Staunton, authored a substantial, but privately circulated account printed for a limited audience of politicians and company personnel only later in 1824 (presumably in deference to Ellis). When aged twelve he 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 by far the best written and most significant account, his, two volume account of the embassy's progress and failure, *Sketches of China*. But that was during a very different phase in Sino-British relations.

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 3. 279-284; IOR G12/196 f. 195-97). The ambitious aims of

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<sup>5</sup> Other accounts include: "Henry Hayne Diary 1816-1817" and Martin, "Journal of Sir William Fanshawe Martin."



Macartney's embassy to establish full diplomatic relations, exchange ambassadors, establish open ports and an island warehouse were dispensed with. All that was wanted was some kind of sympathetic arrangement between the Company and Beijing and a general freeing up of the trade. 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 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. As Stephen Platt argues, "[t]he East India Company could start planning for the world after the peace, and independently of anything happening at canton, the directors wanted to make sure that France didn't send a postwar embassy to China before Britain did .... the two British missions would thus be bookends around the long era of war with France" (150). In 1815 Barrow thus proposed to the government "a Mission to the Court of Peking, 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."<sup>6</sup> The Chinese needed to be aware that Great Britain was now by far the dominant military and commercial power in the western hemisphere (and the subcontinent of India) and powerful there as Qing China was in the eastern.

The embassy because it never achieved an audience with the emperor, entered into any substantial negotiations, or concluded any agreements, may have been 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

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<sup>6</sup> "Minute of Secret Court of the Directors held on Wednesday the 22<sup>nd</sup> February 1815". IOR G12/196, f.44.

success because it was a formal failure, thus problematizing any simple understanding of ‘success’ or ‘failure’. (Davis, *The Chinese* 1.181; Staunton, *Memoirs* 67-68) As a Company employee, Davis 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 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 are 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 his *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 complained 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.<sup>7</sup>

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 Amherst embassy as for the Macartney embassy, so in attempting to explain the reasons for what the British viewed as the apparent hardening, if that it was it was, of the Chinese position regarding the ceremonial treatment of the embassy, we are required to speculate somewhat.<sup>8</sup> It does appear that the Jiaqing court initially took a much 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. Yet, the Jiaqing Emperor's noted frugality and the difficult economic times that China was experiencing are entirely sufficient to explain his wish to see the back of this extremely costly visit (Ellis 432). In the end, Amherst stayed some five months and this residence may have cost the Chinese court something like £170,000 (Davis,

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<sup>7</sup> Letter to George Canning, 8<sup>th</sup> March 1817. IOR G/12/197, ff. 285-299.

<sup>8</sup> The most important English language source of Chinese documents relating to the Jiaqing reign remains Fu's *A Documentary History of Sino-Western*. For Chinese sources, see Lovell 425-7; Wang, *White Lotus Rebels* 261-63.

*Sketches* 1.81) roughly the same as that of Macartney. Given the difficulties that the empire was facing, an embassy from troublesome foreigners was probably the last thing the court needed. In any case, in terms of China's past and current history foreigners at Canton would be a minor, if irritating, concern. 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 371, 377). The Chinese were especially 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 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 *HMS Doris* capture of an American schooner, *Hunter*, in Chinese waters (394). Britain and the USA had been at war from 1812-1815 and this conflict spread to Chinese territory. The court believed unfairly that Staunton had amassed substantial personal wealth and property at Canton through bribery and corruption. Though by this time he was in receipt of an annual salary of £20,000 as leader of the factory in Canton and had established his personal fortune (Platt 148-49, 152-53). In 1816 the emperor was petitioned for help by the Rajah of Nepal against the British in Bengal, warning of their designs on Tibet (Fu 401-2, 616). The emperor refused any aid but secretly strengthened Chinese defences on the Tibetan and Nepalese border in response (Ellis

438). From around this time, the court was increasingly aware of and concerned about burgeoning Chinese opium use and even its consumption by officers of the imperial guard and court eunuchs (Fu 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 (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” (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 (399-400).

It seems clear 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. Yet though he wished to appear firm, the emperor remained very pragmatic. Platt has argued that he wanted the embassy to proceed successfully and was much more “willing to accommodate them than they knew.” He had informed the Duke to be flexible about ceremony writing “do not be so severe and exacting about ceremonials that you lose track of the etiquette for managing foreigners.” He added with a degree of coolness and insight seldom acknowledged in British accounts (and historical accounts more generally) that “it was just like this in 1793, and we made the best of the situation then. Generally speaking, it is better to meet with them than to send them away” (quoted Platt 169). Neither Chinese nor British were fully aware of the situation that was beyond both their respective conceptual worldviews and

there was clearly an unfortunate element of unnecessary cultural misunderstanding and suspicion among the parties. 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” (250, 235-51). Chinese policy was also uncertain, which probably accounts for the emperor’s later self-critical public acceptance of responsibility 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 honour or advantage for the compliment paid to the Emperor by the scale and composition of the present Embassy [...]<sup>9</sup>

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.

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<sup>9</sup> Letter to George Canning, 22 March, 1817. IOR G12/197, f .310.

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.<sup>10</sup>

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 this embassy to be sent, chose to deploy a stricter usage of Qing guest ritual than that of the Qianlong Emperor and, reluctantly, to countenance the dismissal of the embassy though that dismissal resulted from Amherst's withdrawal from the audience, not from his refusal to kowtow.

It has frequently been remarked that Qing China does not feature as prominently in our standard accounts of the cultural history of Romanticism as might be expected and several scholars have attempted to redress this balance. However, even so, there are comparatively few references to China in those poets whom we have traditionally thought of as canonically romantic. Yet those few references, as the essays by Coffey and Murray in this collection show, are extremely suggestive and pointed, indicating that the view of China deployed in those accounts became the most influential one during the expansion of the opium trade with China in the prelude to the First Opium War of 1840. For example, in *Biographia Literaria* of 1817, Coleridge wrote of “the immense empire of China improgressive for thirty centuries” (2. 137) and Shelley, in his Preface to “Hellas” of 1822, opined that had it not been for its

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<sup>10</sup> Letter to George Canning, 21 April, 1817. IOR G12/197, f. 378.



origins in Hellenic culture, Europe would have “arrived at such a miserable state of social institutions as China and Japan possess” (ix, 58). Byron in 1822 claimed that in China “they have found out the miserable happiness of a stationary & unwarlike mediocrity” (*Selected Letters* 271). More intriguing and enigmatic is John Keats’ observation in a letter to John Taylor of 5 September 1819 in which he subtly explores the relationship between character and environment, one of the abiding preoccupation in romantic medicine since the experiments of Thomas Beddoes at his Pneumatic Institute in Bristol with Coleridge, Southey and Humphrey Davy. Keats, however, takes a sharp turn to the east after discoursing on the healthy chalky soil and dry airs at Winchester where he was working on “*Lamia*”.

The cultivation of the earth in a great measure—Our health temperament and disposition are taken more (notwithstanding the contradiction of the history of cain and abel) from the air we breathe, than is generally imagined. See the difference between a Peasant and a Butcher. I am convinced a great cause of it is the difference of the air they breathe--The one takes his mingled with the fume of slaughter, the other with the damp exhalation from the glebe--The teeming damp that comes from the plough furrow is of great effect in taming the fierceness of a strong Man than his labour--let him be mowing a furze upon a Mountain and at the day’s end his thoughts will run upon a withe axe if he ever had handled one; let him leave the Plough and he will think quietly of his supper--Agriculture is the tamer of men; the steam from the earth is like drinking their Mother’s milk—It enervates their nature. This appears a great cause of the imbecility of the Chinese. And if this sort of atmosphere is a mitigation to the energy of a strong man; how much more must it injure a weak one—unoccupied--unexercised—For what is the cause of so many men maintaining a good state in Cities, but occupation—An idle man,

a man who is not sensitively alive to self-interest in a city cannot continue long in good Health (*Letters* 2.156)

Here tantalizingly recalling Saturn's somnolent embrace of the earth, "his ancient mother" in *The Fall of Hyperion* and his soporific personification of Autumn in the Ode, Keats' suggestive postulation of some relationship between a people's moral character and the agrarian state of their economy probably also derives in some measure from the fallout from Amherst embassy and its generally more negative and downbeat representation of the peoples and cultures of the heavily agrarian Qing empire and its endless steaming water-filled paddy fields of rice.

As well as his satirical versifications on the Macartney Embassy of 1793, discussed by Jennifer Hargrave in this volume, the now eighty-year old satirist John Wolcot ("Peter Pindar") chose to update his view of Chinese arrogance from the times of the Macartney embassy. Wolcot is now more pessimistic about the idea of cultural exchange that he played with in his earlier satires. This verse marks a serious change in his earlier satire. Whereas previously he could regard, somewhat mischievously, the Qianlong Emperor with his love of poetry as the "Peter Pindar" of China, the present occupant of the throne of China (and the Regent for that matter) are vulgar despots.

"Descendant of the Great Kien Long,  
 Immortal for his Lyric song,  
 The Peter Pindar of the *China* Bards;  
 Why Amherst so disgrace, and Staunton,  
 Like fools dismissing them to Canton  
 How very badly thou hast play'd thy cards!

"*Nine times knock heads !—a sad prostration !—*

Degraded, lo! the British Nation,

Had Amherst yielded to thy proud commands:—

To Kings tho' Britons deign to truckle,

*Once*—and *once* only—down they knuckle,

Whene'er indulged at Levees to *kiss hands*

"Inform me what their crying sin,

That thou shouldst banish them Pekin? (*Critical Review* 5 [1817] 479)

Wolcot points out the disparity between the former poet-emperor Qianlong and the present emperor, neither immortal nor a bard. He continues in this vein satirising the Regent for his fondness for exotic chinoiserie. "Toads, frogs, and snakes, and lizards crawl,/To rival the rich scenes of *Yving-ming!*". The regent will indeed be sorely disappointed at the lack of presents the court will receive from the emperor who foolishly underrates the power of the British:

"Thou never didst vouchsafe, perhaps,

To cast thine eye sublime on Maps;

And therefore, fancying thyself all-mighty,

Has treated us with pompous scorn—

Beneath thy notice—beggars born—

No better than the folks of *Otaheite!*

"Know, should Old England's Genius frown,

Her thunder soon would shake thy crown,

Reduce thee from an eagle to a wren;

Thine high Imperial pride to gall,  
 Force thee to leap the *Chinese* wall,  
 To feed on horse with *Tartar* tribes again (481).

Ironically, the Chinese had an enormous interest in cartography and the British maps were among the few gifts that the emperor was to accept from the British, for good reasons. These several suggestive yet on the whole epiphanic or limited epiphanic references to China are all published shortly after the return of the embassy and at the time that accounts of its frustrating progress were beginning to circulate in the mainstream media of the times, though Keats could not then have access to a copy of Ellis' published account which appeared later in the year.

The house of Murray was Britain's leading publisher of travel and exploration accounts in the Romantic period and beyond. John Murray II (1778-1843), especially, had a strong interest in these subjects. Since 1813, the publishing house had acted as the official publisher to the Admiralty and so undertook the publication of most of the accounts of British expeditions. As well as publishing travel narratives about China, Murray (II and III) also published a series of very important, pioneering translations of Chinese literature by the East India Company writer at Guangzhou (Canton), John Francis Davis. Davis, aged twenty-three, acted as a junior interpreter with Amherst's embassy, publishing his own history of the embassy in later in 1842 as *Sketches of China* though with the London publisher Charles Knight, rather than Murray. Davis's important and engaging translation of the Chinese comedy *Laou-Sang-Urh, or, "An Heir in His Old Age."* *A Chinese Drama* (by Hanchen Wu) which deals with issues relating to marriage, inheritance, filial piety and ancestor worship was published by Murray in 1817. In March of 1817, Murray wrote to Byron about how he had "just published a Drama translated direct from the Chinese, which is curious & rather

interesting for its views of Manners” (*Letters* 207), As Davis began to establish himself as the leading expert on both China and Chinese literature in the wake of the Amherst embassy, Murray also published his *Chinese Novels, translated from the Originals: to which are added Proverbs and Moral Maxims* (1822), *Hien Wun Shoo. Chinese Moral Maxims* (1823), the very fine and poignant Chinese tragedy *Han Koong Tsew or the Sorrows of Han* (1829), and most importantly his major translation of the seventeenth-century Chinese novel, *Hao Ch’iu Chuan. The Fortunate Union* (1829). Davis’ *Chinese Miscellanies* of 1865 which collected his thoughts and opinions on matters Chinese was published by Murray III in 1865. Murray was to have published Davis’ major work on China, *The Chinese* in 1835 but, instead, this was published by Charles Knight, though Murray III published the second edition in 1857. This was easily the most important work of British sinology prior to that of the missionary and sinologist and first professor of Chinese at Oxford (1876), James Legge.

John Murray as we know from the many letters written to him by Byron was very much a hands-on and highly interventionist editor and publisher, and his many letters to the poet are full of gossip detail about his other current publishing activities. He was also a very interested person, holding strong views on many subjects and thus an important, indirect but not obvious opinion former on many subjects, including China. Murray also published the *Quarterly Review* from 1809 onwards where his and other published works on China were extensively reviewed by his friend Sir John Barrow, second secretary of the Admiralty. Barrow had served on the Macartney Embassy as a comptroller and was the originator and champion of the Amherst Embassy of 1816, somewhat generously as *the* British expert on China, a view he enjoyed cultivating.

In his letter of March 1817, Murray wrote that he wishes he could show Byron “extracts from the Peking Gazettes in which the Chinese speak of our Embassy – such contempt—we have got near to them by means of Nepaul [sic] & before I die I hope we shall

have a war with them” (*Letters* 207). Murray’s wish was granted. He died in 1843, a year after the conclusion of the First Opium War with China. These explicitly pugnacious and belligerent comments are most uncharacteristic of British public opinion of the time. Even in the late 1830s, prior to the outbreak of war, what we might call the war party in Britain was limited, mainly centring on the opium merchant community and its proxies (see Chen). When it finally broke out, the war was justified not as a means of protecting the illegal opium trade, but as a response to Commissioner Lin’s robust policies and illegal imprisonment of British merchants in their factories. Murray’s tough stance towards China is occasioned by his reading of extracts translated from the official Chinese newssheet, the *Peking Gazette*, and published in Ellis’s account of the embassy (Ellis 493-510).

That Murray thought this way in 1817 as a result of his reading and publication of Ellis account deserves especial critical notice. In a subsequent letter to Byron of 9 September 1817, Murray tells Byron that he has come to London with “his hands full”. He is preparing to publish two major official accounts of the Embassy. Actually he was to publish three: that of Henry Ellis, *Journal of the Proceedings of the Late Embassy to China*; John M’Leod’s *Narrative of a Voyage, in his Majesty’s late Ship Alceste to the Yellow Sea*, and also Captain Basil Hall’s *Account of a Voyage of Discovery to the West Coast of Corea* (1818). The latter two and their complex publication history are extensively discussed in Elizabeth Chang’s essay in this volume. The news of the embassy’s failure in being summarily dismissed from the capital by the Jiaqing emperor without an official audience was now well known. The *Alceste* had also been involved in a hostile engagement with a Chinese fort along the coast. It is likely that Murray’s animosity to China was as a result of the reporting of these events. In the letter of 9 September, he writes to Byron that he is,

Preparing two accounts of the unfortunate China Expedition of which I know no less than *Eight* have been written by Lord Amherst, Sir Geo Staunton – M<sup>r</sup> Davies [sic] (an able young Man who understands the Language) Capt Hall – M<sup>r</sup> Morrison the Interpreter – M<sup>r</sup> Abel – Naturalist - M<sup>r</sup> M<sup>c</sup>Leod – Surgeon & last but not least M<sup>r</sup> Ellis (L<sup>d</sup> Buckinghamshires Son – who was the second in the Embassy) – the last I am publishing & the other is announced (Murray 245-46).

Ellis's largely unsympathetic *Journal of the Proceedings of the Late Embassy* with its serious lack of cultural empathy thus, because of the prestige of Murray's publishing house and its connections with the admiralty and government rather unfortunately, became the key document for interpreting the embassy and establishing the decline in prestige of the Chinese empire (Keighren, Withers, Bell 554,-55, 238). Intended originally solely "for the eye of private friendship" (Ellis 39), in the absence of the publication of Amherst's journal (lost in the wreck of the *Alceste*), it became the de facto official version of events once published by Murray. Though Amherst's extensive letters of report sent back to Canning could have made the basis of an official account, he seems to have been unenthused by the prospect, perhaps not wishing to be reminded because of the circumstances of the embassy's dismissal. Thus, the embassy lacked the many more vibrant and exciting narratives that appeared after Macartney's embassy. Ellis noted that a British embassy to China was "so rare an event in the history of Europe that a correct narrative of the occurrences attending it possesses a degree of interest, almost independent of the mode in which the narrative may be executed" (iii). Thus as Keighren, Withers and Bell comment, such a "declaration is all the more important given the failure of this official mission" (54).

Ellis had little interest in China. He was, as Murray significantly points out to Byron, the illegitimate son of Robert Hobart, 4<sup>th</sup> Earl of Buckinghamshire and very powerful

president of the Board of Control (1812-1816) which managed and supervised the Company for the government. At twenty-eight years old when the embassy occurred, Ellis thus owed his place on the embassy to patronage. Though having spent over ten years as both a Company and government agent in India and Persia he emerges as a rather jejeune and cynical presence. He regarded the issue of the kowtow as essentially unimportant, while admitting the ceremony was simply to “oriental barbarism” he believed that it was a point of “etiquette” that might have been easily complied with rather than sacrifice the entire objects of the embassy (Ellis 51), a view applauded by free traders such as John Crawford reviewing the book in 1818 for the *Edinburgh Review*, that the ceremony did not appear “much more humiliating than other court ceremonies” and the negotiations to avoid it were simply “absurd” (*Edinburgh Review* 29, [1817] 436-7). He had little of the genuine passion for and understanding of Chinese history and culture of Staunton or Davis, regarding China simply as a “peculiar but uninteresting nation” (Ellis 491). Originally, placed as second commissioner after Amherst he was demoted to third after a miffed George Staunton objected to his third placing in the embassy hierarchy.

Ellis was certainly out of sympathy with Qing China. Experiencing the empire during the notorious year without summer that saw the creation of Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1818) occasioned by the momentous 1815 eruption of Mount Tambora (Markley), he was not at all impressed. He writes that his journal can add little to those accounts already published as “centuries have produced less change in China than a generation in Europe” the subject is already exhausted. China as a subject appears to Ellis as “eminently deficient” (40) and what curiosity he had “was soon satiated and destroyed by the moral, political, and even local uniformity” (440). China “vast in its extent, produce and population, wants energy and variety: the chill of uniformity pervaded and deadens the whole” (40). In summing up this impression of China Ellis remarks that,



Those who have talents for observation, or powers of description, may possibly find wherewithal to occupy the mind and the pen. Millet fields, willow-groves, junks, half-clothed inhabitants with little eyes and long tails, women with prettily-dressed hair but ugly faces, these are *the daily and unchanging objects*, and from these I cannot eke out anything like interesting description [...] Those who landed with an impression that the Chinese were to be classed with the civilised nations of Europe have no doubt seen reason to correct their opinion; those, on the contrary, who in their estimate ranked them with the other nations of Asia, will have seen little to surprise in the conduct either of the Government or of individuals. The leading characteristic feature is the influence of established usage. (197-98)

Ellis finds himself unable to find much positive or significant to say about a land in which the only sublime element is the excessive smell of “horrid effluvia” proceeding from the persons of the Chinese (133-34). The mind of the Chinese as a whole is “treated like the feet of the women, cramped by the bandages of habit and education, till it acquires an unnatural littleness”. China is the land of conformity and sameness,” and the Chinese are a most uninteresting nation” (198). Ellis then presents the land not as the celestial or flowery empire of eighteenth-century chinoiserie fantasy but, instead, as an eastern Dunciad, an empire of dullness and a land of monotony. His final and influential summary of the state of China under the Jiaqing emperor makes this point”

I have now *exhausted* my recollections respecting China and its inhabitants; and have only to ask myself, whether, omitting considerations of an official employment, my anticipations have been borne out by what I have experienced? The question is readily

answered in the affirmative; curiosity was soon satiated and destroyed by the moral, political, and even local uniformity; for whether plains or mountains, the scene in China retains the same aspect for such an extent, that the eye is wearied with the continuance of sublimity as of levelness .[...] I have neither experienced the refinement and comforts of civilized life, not the wild interest of most semi-barbarous countries, but have found my own mind and spirit influenced by the surrounding atmosphere of dullness and constraint (440).

Ellis's account was favourably reviewed by John Barrow in two substantial articles for the *Quarterly Review* for 1817, also published by Murray. Barrow praised Ellis for his demolition of the myth of Chinese civilization, arguing that Ellis had "revealed in its true light ... this government of sages, which Voltaire and his followers conspired to hold up as ... an example for the general admiration of mankind". He argued 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" (Barrow 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" (33, 476). Throughout the 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."

The amplification of Ellis's negative and opinionated view of China, through its presentation by the major publishing house of Murray, publisher of Byron, as the most important official account of the embassy and its subsequent review by Barrow in the *Quarterly* demonstrates how the publishing history of the Amherst embassy accounts came to be an important factor in that extraordinary reversal of China's image in Britain from a prestigious eighteenth-century civilization to the nineteenth-century to the semi-barbarous state that we see vilified so viscerally in the writings of Thomas De Quincey, house writer for *Blackwood's*. Nevertheless, Ellis seems to have been unhappy with having to publish his journal. Despite Barrow's praise, it was badly reviewed in *The Times* which announced that commented that Clarke Abel's forthcoming narrative would be much superior. On October 19, 1817 Ellis wrote somewhat crabbily to Murray that "an individual has seldom committed an act so detrimental to his interests as I have done in this unfortunate publication; and I shall be too happy when the lapse of time will allow of my utterly forgetting the occurrence. I am already indifferent to literary criticism, and had almost forgotten Abel's approaching competition" (Smiles 1.64). Murray, in his deprecated the severity of the criticisms of Ellis "who had done the best hat he could on a subject of exceeding interest". Yet he wrote that he was "now printing Captain Hall's account (he commanded the *Lyra*)" and that this was "one of the most delightful books I ever read, and it is calculated to heal the wound inflicted by poor Ellis" (Smiles 1, 64). Murray is not clear about the exact nature of the "wound" Ellis inflicted on the reading public. He probably had little choice to lead with Ellis's account in the absence of anything from Amherst as the patronage of the earl of Buckinghamshire carried much weight and relegated George Thomas Staunton's account to that of a limited and private audience. Abel's and Hall's accounts were easy to publish as they were authored by those of the naturalist and the explorer unconnected with the politics of the embassy. Murray, no doubt, had simply wanted a better and more engagingly written account to regale his

readership with the high drama of the embassy. It seems, however, that his view of the Qing empire was in many ways conditioned by the content and not the style of Ellis' narrative. The actual "wound" that "poor Ellis" and his narrative really inflicted on the nineteenth-century perception of China, however, would be much deeper and more traumatic in the years leading up to the first Anglo-Chinese or "Opium War" of 1840-42.

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