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Clash of Diplomatic Cultures between Europe and China around 1800: A Rereading of the Macartney Mission

Chenxi Tang
Department of German, The University of California, Berkeley, United States
ctang@berkeley.edu

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Abstract

This essay revisits some familiar diplomatic encounters between European nations and China in the decades around 1800. It proceeds from a theoretical distinction between diplomacy within an international society and diplomacy between international societies. The set of ideas, principles, and institutions of diplomatic interaction within an international society may be summarily termed its diplomatic culture. Diplomacy between international societies lacks a shared diplomatic culture, involving instead negotiations between different diplomatic cultures. The European embassies to China around 1800 epitomize diplomacy between international societies. The essay examines in some detail the attempts on both sides to make sense of the diplomatic exchange, in which they were engaged: translating documents, documenting actions, and interpreting the events by poetic means. All these attempts turned out to entrench differences rather than induce agreements. This predicament was to be resolved only by violence.

Keywords

diplomatic culture – European international society – international society of East Asia – European embassies to China around 1800 – translation in diplomacy – documentation in diplomacy – poetry in diplomacy

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Diplomacy, the conduct of relations between political entities, is a universal practice in human history, at work wherever political entities exist and operate. It may come in many different shapes and forms. Some key elements of diplomacy in today's world such as the idea of sovereign equality and the institution of the permanent resident embassy first emerged in early modern Europe, roughly during the centuries from 1500 to 1800. Especially this period, however, bore witness to a great diversity in diplomatic discourses and behaviors. This essay seeks to capture a moment in the history of diplomacy shortly before the tidal waves of "the transformation of the world" in the nineteenth century submerged this great diversity: diplomatic encounters between European nations and China in the decades around 1800.[1] A proper understanding of this pivotal moment requires a theoretical distinction that sets diplomacy within an international society apart from diplomacy between international societies. The early modern world was inhabited by many regional international societies – groupings of polities tied together by shared interests, values, and institutions. Diplomacy represents a vital bond joining an international society together, operating in tandem with warfare and certain binding norms, be they legal or otherwise. The set of ideas, principles, and institutions of diplomatic interaction within an international society may be summarily termed its diplomatic culture. Diplomacy between international societies lack a shared diplomatic culture, involving instead negotiations between different diplomatic cultures. The diplomatic encounters between European nations and China around 1800 epitomize diplomacy between international societies, with the one side belonging to the European international society, and the other side belonging to the international society of East Asia, each side guided by its own diplomatic culture.

Lacking a shared diplomatic culture, both sides in the European embassies to China around 1800 were consumed with negotiating an agreement on the very conditions for diplomatic exchange – defining the status of diplomatic actors, translating their words, documenting their actions, and interpreting what the words and actions might mean for oneself as well as for the other side. The two sides in the Dutch embassy of 1795 let each other define the status of the envoy as they pleased, as neither side sought or even expected further, more substantial agreements. Accordingly, translation and documentation, let alone poetic representation, could be nothing more than a trivial, if cumbersome, exercise. In the English Macartney embassy of 1793 and the Amherst embassy of 1816, by contrast, there was no agreement on the status of the envoys. Translating,

1 I borrow the term from Osterhammel, J. *Die Verwandlung der Welt. Eine Geschichte des 19. Jahrhunderts* (Munich: Beck, 2010).

documenting, and interpreting only served to entrench differences rather than induce agreements. This predicament was to be resolved, as it turned out, by a spate of violence – imperialist wars – which sidelined diplomacy between international societies, indeed erased the plurality of international societies altogether, and thereby prepared the ground for a new phase in the history of diplomacy.

Diplomacy within an International Society versus Diplomacy between International Societies

To approach the early modern period, it is important to distinguish two kinds of diplomacy: diplomacy within an international society, on the one hand, and diplomacy between international societies, on the other. "International society" is a concept elaborated by Hedley Bull, the leading proponent of the so-called English School of International Relations. According to his now familiar definition, international society is a group of states held together by a set of common interests, rules, and institutions: "A society of states (or international society) exists when a group of states, conscious of certain common interests and common values, form a society in the sense that they conceive themselves to be bound by a common set of rules in their relations with one another, and share in the working of common institutions."[2] Diplomacy, along with warfare and international law, belong to the institutions vital to the existence of international society. For Bull and other representatives of the English School, international society originated as a society of sovereign states in early modern Europe, which then expanded across the rest of the globe and subsequently transformed from a society fashioned in Europe and dominated by Europeans into a global international society of nearly two hundred states.[3] This Eurocentric narrative of the origin and expansion of international society does not stand the scrutiny of world historians. In the centuries between 1500 to 1800, when an international society took shape in Europe, there existed a number of other international societies across Eurasia. Already William McNeill's 1963 classic *The Rise of the West*, a sweeping narrative of world history growing out of the same socio-historical and intellectual soil as the English School of international relations, observes that "the

2 Bull, H. *The Anarchical Society: A Study of Order in World Politics*, 4th ed. (New York: Palgrave, 2012), 13.

3 Bull, H., and A. Watson, eds. *The Expansion of European Society* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984).

millennial balance of the ecumene among the civilizations of the Middle East, India, China and Europe did not decisively collapse until the middle of the nineteenth century."[4] Historically minded scholars of international relations have delineated the distinctive international societies that thrived alongside the international society of Europe, including the Sino-centric international society of East Asia, the Islamic international society encompassing the Ottoman, Safavid, and Mughal empires, and the galactic polities of Southeast Asia.[5] In particular, the Sino-centric international society of East Asia has attracted much scholarly attention.[6] These international societies overlapped, intersected, and interacted with one another to various degrees. For instance, the Ottoman Empire was entangled in the international society of Europe, impinging on it in intermittently decisive ways, while it bonded with other Islamic empires to the East. The polities of Southeast Asia forged a regional international order, while some of them participated in the Sino-centric order of East Asia by cultivating tributary ties to China. By and large, one may speak of "interlocking regional worlds," with the four "peripheries" or "rimlands" of Eurasia, i.e. Europe, the Nearer East, India, and East Asia, forming intertwined yet nonetheless distinctive international societies, each of which boasted its own ideas, principles, norms, and institutions.[7]

Given the plurality of international societies, it makes sense to distinguish between diplomacy within an international society and diplomacy between international societies. Diplomacy within an international society refers to the usually institutionalized practices adopted by the polities making up an international society to regulate their frequent and extensive interactions with one another, while diplomacy between international

4 McNeill, W. *The Rise of the West: A History of Human Community* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 653.

5 See Spruyt, H. *The World Imagined: Collective Beliefs and Political Order in the Sino-centric, Islamic, and Southeast Asian International Societies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020); Suzuki, S., Y. Zhang, and J. Quirk, eds. *International Orders in the Early Modern World: Before the Rise of the West* (London and New York: Routledge, 2014); Zarakol, A. *Before the West: The Rise and Fall of Eastern World Orders* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022).

6 A comprehensive bibliography on this topic can be found in Haggard, S., and D. Kang, eds. *East Asia in the World: Twelve Events that Shaped the Modern International Order* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

7 The term "interlocking regional worlds" is used by Fisher-Onar, N., and E. Kavalski. "From Trans-Atlantic Order to Afro-Eur-Asian Worlds? Reimagining International Relations as Interlocking Regional Worlds." *Global Studies Quarterly* 2 (2023), 1–11. The terms "periphery" and "rimland" were coined by Nicholas Spykman in relation to the writings of Halford Mackinder, namely "The Geographical Pivot of History." *The Geographical Journal*, 23 (4) (1904), 298–321 and *Democratic Ideals and Reality* (London: Constable and Company, 1919).

societies designates usually ad hoc practices adopted by polities belonging to different international societies to conduct their occasional interactions. The diplomatic practices of Europeans in the early modern world illustrate this distinction. On the one hand, from the emergence of the resident ambassador in Renaissance Italy to the maturing of the major institutional elements of modern diplomacy by the end of the eighteenth century – such as "payment and recruitment, precedence and procedure, the evolution of diplomatic theory, the first appearance of foreign ministries and the emergence of the peacetime conference"[8] – the development of diplomacy in Europe was all of a piece with the making of a European international society. Along with the development of international law and the military revolution in the centuries from 1500 to 1800,[9] the development of diplomacy helped establish the norms, principles, and institutions undergirding the European international society, just as it was at the same time fueled by these evolving norms, principles, and institutions. In short, diplomacy and international society were constitutive of one another in Europe. On the other hand, commerce, war, and Christian missions brought European nations into contact with peoples and states outside of Europe, necessitating diplomatic exchange with polities that had cultivated their own diplomatic practices under vastly different historical conditions. Up to the early eighteenth century, there were attempts in Europe to treat polities and inter-polity relations elsewhere in the same way as their European counterparts. In drawing an analogy to Samuel Pufendorf's account of the European international society in the process of gestation – *Einleitung zu der Historie der vornehmsten Reiche und Staaten, so itziger Zeit sich in Europa befinden* (1683)[10] – an author found it necessary to "do the same in respect to the histories of Asia, Africa, and America, so far as the circumstances of things and revolutions of time would possibly allow it."[11] This implied placing the diplomatic exchange with non-European polities on a par with diplomatic

8 See Hamilton, K., and R. Langhorne. *The Practice of Diplomacy: Its Evolution, Theory, and Administration*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2011), 61–90.

9 The publication of the 22-volume *Classics of International Law* by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace from 1911 to 1950 cemented the scholarly consensus on the centuries from 1500 to 1800 as the classical age of international law. On the development of warfare in this period, see Parker, G. *The Military Revolution: Military Innovation and the Rise of the West, 1500 – 1800*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

10 The English translation followed a decade later: *An Introduction to the History of the Principal Kingdoms and States of Europe of Samuel Puffendorf, made English from the Original* (London: Gilliflower, 1695).

11 *An Introduction to the History of the Kingdoms and States of Asia, Africa, and America, Both Ancient and Modern, According to the Method of Samuel Puffendorf* (London: Newborough, 1705), Preface.

relations within the international society of Europe, and thereby affirming the universality of the natural law-based law of nations as elaborated by Pufendorf. Certain diplomatic norms of the European international society were indeed occasionally extended to, and also accepted by, non-European polities. For instance, a treaty concluded between the King of Persia and the States General of the United Provinces of the Netherlands in 1631 accorded reciprocal benefits and privileges to both the Dutch merchants in Persia and the Persian merchants in the Netherlands.[12] Conversely, on some occasions a European nation or its ruler appropriated, on purpose, certain norms of diplomatic behavior native to a non-European polity. In his spectacular reception of the embassy sent by the King of Siam in 1686, Louis XIV of France went to great lengths to copy the outward forms of Siamese royal ceremonial in a bid to stage himself as the living embodiment of the state.[13] One of the most decorated noblemen at the French court bid farewell to the Siamese envoys by declaring: "*qui n'étais pas bon Siamois, n'était pas bon Français.*"[14] In contrast to such successful cases of mutual accommodation between a European nation and a polity belonging to another international society, certain diplomatic encounters ended in failure, even disaster. In 1806, a Russian embassy under Count Golovkin traveling overland to Beijing with a long list of requests was rejected and sent back home at Kulun (present-day Ulan Bator), because the ambassador, in the words of a Chinese official, "is ignorant of our ceremonials."[15] A decade later, a British embassy under Lord Amherst was repelled without an audience by the Emperor of China because of the ambassador's refusal to perform a requisite ceremonial. The officials in charge of the reception of this embassy were disgraced.[16] All in all, the diplomatic exchange between European nations and the polities outside of the European international society abided by anything but an unequivocal principle, traced anything but a clear path. Rather it occurred on ever shifting grounds, sometimes succeeding in applying European norms, sometimes consenting to the rules of another international society, sometimes plodding from one compromise to another, sometimes

12 See Alexandrowicz, C.H. "A Persian-Dutch Treaty in the Seventeenth Century" In *The Law of Nations in Global History*, eds. D. Armitage and J. Pitts (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 153–57, here 156.

13 See Love, R. "Rituals of Majesty: France, Siam, and Court Spectacle in Royal Image-Building in Versailles in 1685 and 1686." *Canadian Journal of History* 31 (1996), 171–98.

14 Quoted from Van der Cruysse, D. *Louis XIV et le Siam* (Paris: Fayard, 1991), 403.

15 Fu, L.-S., ed. *A Documentary Chronicle of Sino-Western Relations* (*1644–1820*) (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1966), 367.

16 See ibid., 404–7.

improvising an entirely new modus operandi, all the while acutely aware of the provisional nature of whatever arrangement that was actually made.

Forging bonds among polities by institutional means, diplomacy within an international society was nourished by the ideas and belief systems that this international society shared. It manifested itself in organizations, customary or statutory rules, and behaviors characteristic of this international society. That is to say, each international society had its own diplomatic culture. By contrast, diplomacy between polities belonging to different international societies was beset by differing, conflicting, even contradictory ideas and belief systems; and it had to contend with widely diverging organizations, rules, and behaviors. If diplomatic exchange between far-flung political communities belonging to different international societies was possible at all, that was primarily because of "a prior recognition of at least a crude parallel morphology," that is, a recognition by diplomatic actors, rightly or wrongly, of "similar political systems" and "systematic rules and conventions" in all polities.[17] In addition, polities at the intersection of international societies (e.g. the Ottoman Empire at the intersection between the European and the Islamic international societies) or polities simultaneously participating in different international societies (e.g., Siam both as a tributary state in the Sino-centric international society of East Asia and as a member of the regional international society of Southeast Asia) garnered a wealth of experiences that could serve as precedents or useful guides. Without common ideas and belief-systems as a mental map, and without shared institutions and norms as a framework for action, diplomacy between international societies unfolded through ad hoc arrangements, generating motley sets of practices. One particularly visible example of such practices was the exchange of artistic objects and material goods in diplomatic encounters, which conveyed economic and aesthetic values mutually intelligible among many, if not all, polities.[18] In time, these sets of practices provided, in the words of two legal historians, "a loose scaffolding for cross-polity interactions involving a wide range of parties, some European, many not."[19]

17 Subrahmanyam, S. *Courtly Encounters: Translating Courtliness and Violence in Early Modern Eurasia* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), xiv.

18 See Biedermann, Z., A. Gerritsen, and G. Riello, eds. *Global Gifts: The Material Culture of Diplomacy in Early Modern Eurasia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

19 Benton, L., and A. Clulow, "Legal Encounters and the Origins of Global Law" In *The Cambridge World History, vol. 6: The Construction of a Global World, 1400–1800, Part 2: Patterns of Change*, eds. J. Bentley, S. Subrahmanyam, and M. Wiesner-Hanks (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 80–100, here 82.

Since each international society had its own diplomatic culture, diplomacy between international societies boiled down to negotiations between diplomatic cultures, taking the form of a diplomacy of the second order, as it were. In consequence, the very nature of diplomacy came into focus, probed and calibrated at every turn. The embassies of maritime European nations to the Qing imperial court during the decades around 1800, coming at a historical juncture when both the European and the Sino-centric international societies became fully fledged, epitomized the negotiations between diplomatic cultures, throwing light on both the foundation and the limitation of diplomacy as such.

European and East Asian International Societies

With a simultaneity not exact yet nonetheless astonishing, two distinctive international societies emerged on the western and eastern flanks of the Eurasian continent during the centuries from 1500 to 1800. Despite all the fortuitousness, vicissitudes, and irregularities of history, the general contours, vectors, and structures of the two international societies were clear enough. On the western flank, the numerous small and medium-sized polities, baptized by the blood and fire of unceasing warfare, and defying the intermittent attempts of certain larger states at imperial hegemony, coalesced into a grouping of polities underpinned by the principles of territorial sovereignty and equality. It was a grouping constantly reshuffled by wars, kept in a dynamic balance of power by diplomacy, and bound together by a law that, by the mid-eighteenth century, bore the name of *le droit public de l'Europe* (latinized two centuries later into *ius publicum europaeum* by Carl Schmitt and projected onto European history from the Discovery of the New World to the First World War).[20] This grouping of polities served as the template for the concept of international society developed by twentieth-century scholars of international relations. On the eastern flank, in the wake of the collapse of the Mongol Empire in 1368, a two-pronged international society centering on the colossal continental polity of China emerged, structured by China's relations to the mostly nomadic peoples of inner Asia on the one side, and to the archipelago of small and medium-sized polities around the East China Sea and the South China Sea on the other side. In the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644), China's relations to the peoples of inner Asia were characterized by a pattern of intermittent conflict

20 Bonnot de Mably, G. *Le Droit Public de l'Europe, Fondés Sur les Traités*, 4th ed. (Geneva: Compagnie des Libraires, 1768); Schmitt, C. *Der Nomos der Erde im Völkerrecht des Jus Publicum Europaeum* (Berlin: Duncker and Humblot, 1950).

and accommodation, emblematized by the gigantic border barriers known as the Great Wall. The Qing Dynasty (1644–1911), the rulers of which – the Manchus – hailed from the western edge of the Inner Asian steppes, brought the other peoples of Inner Asia under its imperial rule, although they were granted a different status than the heartland of the empire and governed by the Ministry for the Administration of Borderlands. In both the Ming and Qing periods, the polities around the East China Sea and the South China Sea, most of which used the Chinese script and belonged to the so-called Sinographic sphere, entertained tributary relations to China, with the exception of Japan which, for all its cultural ties to China, mostly rejected the status of tributary. The relations to these polities were managed by the imperial Ministry of Rites. As a whole, the East Asian region formed a hybrid, asymmetrical, but remarkably stable system of polities that fit the bill of international society in every respect.[21] But it was an international society undergirded by norms, principles, and institutions entirely different from those holding Europe together. In contrast to the European international society, in which polities, each claiming sovereign equality, fiercely competed with one another for prestige, influence, and survival, the international society in East Asia was characterized by hegemony and hierarchy, with China enthroned at its center, and the polities on the peripheries each differing from the other but all paying respect to China in exchange for recognition, autonomy in their domestic affairs, and commercial benefits. Diplomacy was conducted through tributary missions by the peripheral polities to the Chinese court, at which gifts were exchanged, trade conducted, and the obeisance of the tributaries recognized by the granting of titles by emperors. Instead of international law – "*le droit public de l'Europe*" – rites, rituals and other customary norms of a commonly respected civilization emanating from China, most notably investiture (*cefeng*) and tributary gifting (*chaogong*), performed the function of binding the disparate polities together. The motivations for adopting such diplomatic institutions and ritualized norms varied from polity to polity: whereas China used them as instruments for demonstrating its symbolic superiority, other polities may have accepted them out of various domestic consideration or

21 See Zhang, Y., and B. Buzan. "The Tributary System as International Society in Theory and Practice." *Chinese Journal of International Politics* 5 (2012), 3–36; Zhang, F. *Chinese Hegemony: Grand Strategy and International Institutions in East Asian History* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015); Lee, J.-Y. *China's Hegemony: Four Hundred Years of East Asian Domination* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017); Schokowitz, D., and N. Chia, eds. *Managing Frontiers in Qing China: Lifanyan and Libu Revisited* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2017).

as opportunities for lucrative trade.[22] But whatever the motivations of the individual polities for participating in this international society, the diplomatic institutions and ritualized norms ensured that wars were few and far between. The few wars that did break out were usually waged on the peripheries.

Diplomatic contacts between European nations and the international society of East Asia began in the sixteenth century and waxed and waned in the following centuries, accompanying the formation of the European international society from incipience to maturity. First came the Portuguese, then the Dutch, then the English and all other nations engaged in overseas trade and Christian mission. As far as China – the hegemonic center of the East Asian international society – was concerned, the 1656 embassy sent by the Dutch East India Company to Beijing, headed by Johan Nieuhof, inaugurated formal diplomacy between maritime Europe and the Qing court. The Qing official records documented about ten European embassies by 1800, not including papal legations, and more than a half dozen Russian embassies. Particularly the decades around 1800 witnessed a spate of diplomatic overtures from the Europeans, which aimed primarily to initiate ambassadorial visits and establish resident envoys – the appropriate form of inter-state diplomacy in the European international society.[23] As noted, four embassies materialized: the British embassy of 1793 headed by George Macartney (1737–1806); the Dutch embassy of 1795 headed by Isaac Titsingh (1745–1812); the Russian embassy of 1806 headed by Yurii Alanxandrovich Golovkin (1762–1846), which was turned back at the border; and the British embassy of 1816 headed by William Pitt Amherst (1773–1857), which was dismissed before reaching the capital.

These embassies, the last formal diplomatic contacts between European countries and China before gunboats spoke, have mesmerized historians.[24]

22 See for example Wills, J.E. "Functional, Not Fossilized: Qing Tribute Relations with Đại Việt (Vietnam) and Siam (Thailand), 1700–1820." *T'oung Pao* 98 (2012), 439–78.

23 For an overview of diplomacy with Western European countries, see Cranmer-Byng, J.L., and J.E. Wills. "Trade and Diplomacy with Maritime Europe, 1644–c. 1800." In *China and Maritime Europe, 1500–1800*, ed. J.E. Wills (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 183–254. For an overview of diplomacy with Russia, see Ye, B. [叶柏川]. *Eguo shituan laihua yanjiu, 1618–1807* [俄国使团来华研究] (Beijing: Shehui Kexue Wenxian Chubanshe, 2010).

24 Recent monographs on the Macartney mission include Peyrefitte, A. *The Immobile Empire* (New York: Knopf, 1992); and Hevia, J. *Cherishing Men From Afar: Qing Guest Ritual and the Macartney Mission of 1793* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995). On the Dutch mission: Andrade, T. *The Last Embassy: The Dutch Mission of 1795 and the Forgotten History of Western Encounters with China* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021). On the Amherst mission: Stevenson, C. *Britain's Second Embassy to China: Lord Amherst's "Special Mission" to the Jiaqing Emperor in 1816* (Canberra: Australian National University Press, 2021). There is no monograph on the Golovkin mission. The most detailed account of it so far can be found in Ye, B. *Eguo shituan laihua yanjiu, 1618–1807*.

Those subscribing to the grand narrative of the modern West see a clash between advanced and traditional societies, with Britain and China representing, respectively, the first country to be gripped by the industrial revolution and the most brilliant of all civilizations rooted in custom.[25] A more prevalent and more capacious narrative, advocated by most recent historians, frames these diplomatic encounters as yet further evidences of a clash of cultures.[26] In the very capaciousness of the "clash of cultures" approach, however, lies also its inadequacy, for it elides the specificity of diplomatic encounters. Diplomacy means the conduct of relations between polities, but the diffuse concept of culture is at once too broad and too narrow to capture the nature of polity and inter-polity relations. A much more precise conceptual parameter would be "diplomatic culture," a term one may use to designate the set of ideas, norms, and institutions underlying the diplomatic conduct of inter-polity relations. Polities engaged in diplomatic intercourse either share the same set of ideas, norms, and institutions – the same diplomatic culture – in which case they may be considered to belong to the same international society. Or they do not, in which case they must be considered to belong to different international societies. In reality, there is perhaps no such clear-cut either-or distinction, as polities may share some elements of a diplomatic culture but not others, for instance if the intercourse between polities leads to hybridization of diplomatic cultures. But as a distinction between ideal types, it may yet prove to be productive for understanding historical events. In light of this distinction, the European embassies to China around 1800 can be construed as encounters between two diplomatic cultures informing, and informed by, the European and East Asian international societies respectively.[27] The following case study

25 See, for instance, Peyrefitte, A. *The Immobile Empire*.

26 For a review and questioning of this "clash of cultures" approach, see Andrade, T. *The Last Embassy*, "Prologue: A Clash of Cultures?"

27 James Hevia proposes to recast the diplomatic encounter between Britain and China as "one between two expansive imperialisms, the Manchu and British multiethnic formations" (*Cherishing Men from Afar*, xii). This approach is not plausible for at least two reasons. First, as noted above, while the relationship between the Qing court to its central Asian territories (e.g. Mongol tribes, Tibet, Xinjiang), managed by the Ministry for the Administration of Borderlands (*lifanyuan*), can be understood in terms of imperialism, its relationship to the tributary states around the East China Sea and the South China Sea (e.g. Korea, Ryukyu Islands, Vietnam, Siam), managed by the Ministry of the Rites (*libu*), was arguably a matter of hegemonic influence rather than straightforward imperialism; second, Britain's approach to China at the time suggested a desire to apply the ideas, norms, and institutions underlying European international society rather than those promoting its nascent colonial empire.

focuses on the Macartney mission, while drawing on the Dutch mission and the Amherst-mission to provide comparison and context.[28]

Negotiating between Diplomatic Cultures

Diplomacy revolves around negotiations. If a diplomatic exchange takes place within an international society that shares a common diplomatic culture, negotiation is meant to tackle specific issues pertaining to the relationship between the parties – the "business" of diplomacy, as it were. Yet in a diplomatic exchange between polities belonging to different international societies, differences between the diplomatic cultures germane to the respective international society must be resolved before negotiation can move on to whatever business there might be. The first subjects of negotiation, then, are questions of who the diplomatic actors are, what they are doing, and how they should proceed. The European embassies to China in the years around 1800 were all mired in such preparatory negotiations without ever progressing to the "business," as Macartney, for one, constantly lamented. Precisely for this reason, they provided the most telling illustration of the diplomacy between international societies.

In a journal entry dated August 16, 1793, Macartney noted how he and his suite were closely watched on their journey to the imperial capital, adding: "I therefore shut my eyes upon the flags of our yachts, which were inscribed 'The English Ambassador bringing tribute to the Emperor of China', and have no complaint of it, reserving myself to notice it if a proper opportunity occurs."[29] This curiously nonchalant remark reveals an open secret: there was a fundamental disagreement between the English and the Chinese about Macartney's status and actions. For the Chinese, the British embassy was a tributary mission, one of the many that it received every year mostly from neighboring countries. Macartney was the tribute-bearer. That he came from a faraway land lent it added importance, but by no means changed its nature as a tributary mission. Macartney did not agree with this characterization of his mission. Indeed, the disagreement was so profound that he felt compelled to adopt an ostrich policy. He saw himself as the envoy sent by a mighty sovereign

28 This essay is not able to take the Golovkin mission into account. It remains to be seen to what extent any future study of this mission might enrich or revise the arguments developed here.

29 Macartney, G. *An Embassy to China, Being the journal kept by Lord Macartney during his embassy to the Emperor Ch'ien-lung 1793–1794*. Edited by J.L. Cranmer-Byng (London: Longmans, Green, and Co, 1962), 88.

to another sovereign to establish a permanent embassy and to defend and maximize his country's interest. Shutting his eyes, however, would not help him accomplish this mission. To succeed, he had to reach an agreement with the Chinese about what the mission was. The same imperative weighed on the Chinese side, for the Chinese, too, were keen on the success of the mission, even though success meant for them something else, namely redounding to the glory of the Celestial Empire. The Macartney mission turned out to be a mission of negotiating a consensus on the very nature of diplomatic mission. The Dutch mission of 1795 and the Amherst mission of 1816 were no different in this regard.

Translating Documents

Diplomacy is a textually mediated practice. Etymologically derived from "diploma" – official written document – diplomacy involves inspecting, exchanging, and producing official documents. Sharing a common language, then, is crucial to the operation of diplomacy. An international society with a shared diplomatic culture usually has also a common language – lingua franca – by means of which to conduct diplomatic interactions. In early modern Europe, it was first Latin and then French. In East Asia, it was literary Chinese. In fact, the East Asian international society was by and large coterminous with the so-called *kanji bunkaken* (漢字文化圏) or the Sinographic cultural sphere – the cultural sphere based on the shared script and textual culture of literary Chinese, which encompassed China, Korea, Japan, the Ryukyu Islands, and Vietnam.[30] Belonging to different international societies and not recognizing a common language as they did, maritime European nations and China needed translation in their diplomatic encounters.

For the Macartney mission, the British managed to identify two Chinese Christians in Naples – Jacopus Li and Paolo Cho – and hired them as interpreters. They were also entrusted with the important task of translating the letter of credence from King George III to the Qianlong emperor. Li and Cho did not read English, so the letter had to be translated first into Latin for them. As was often the case with Christian converts, Li and Cho apparently had received no formal education in China, as their translation of the letter was rendered in the vernacular, far removed from the elaborate literary Chinese used by the court.[31] Perhaps appalled by the demotic diction, the Chinese court had the

30 See Nishijima, S. [西嶋定生]. *Chūgoku kodai kokka to Higashi Ajia sekai* [中国古代国家と東アジア世界] (Tokyo: Tokyo University Press, 1983).

31 This translation is held in the National Archives, Kew – Foreign Office under the reference number FO 1048/1.

letter retranslated, most likely with the help of the European missionaries residing at the court. This was the version presented to the Qianlong emperor and held in the court archives.[32]

Striking, first of all, are the form and format of the translated text. The title – "The Letter of King George III to the Emperor of China" – was translated as the "tributary memorial (表文 *biaowen*) respectfully submitted (敬奏 *jingzou*) by King George of England." This designation effectively placed the embassy in the Sino-centric tribute system of East Asia. The formatting of the text visualizes the superiority of China and its emperor. Before China borrowed European norms of formatting texts in the twentieth century, Chinese texts were written in vertical lines from top to bottom and from right to left. One norm of formatting was *taitou* (抬头), or "raising the head": whenever a special person or entity was named, the running text had to be broken off and restart with a new line, with the special person or entity raised above the head margin. The Chinese translation accorded "China" (中国 *zhongguo*) and "Great Emperor" (大皇帝 *dahuangdi*) this formal distinction, consistently placing these two words at the beginning of a new line and above the head margin (see Figure 1). Neither the King of Great Britain, nor even the God whose grace the king invoked as the ground of legitimation of his reign, was acknowledged with the same treatment.

As noteworthy as the form and format of the translated text was the rendering of the titles of the diplomatic actors. King George, like all the European sovereigns of the time, gave himself pompous titles: "His Most Sacred Majesty George the Third, by the Grace of God King of Britain, France, and Ireland, Sovereign of the Seas, Defender of the Faith and so forth." In the Chinese translation, the elaborate title shrank to "the king of English great red hairs (大红毛 *dahongmao*) and France along with Ireland." The curious term "great red hairs" was the quizzical, if not downright derogatory, epithet for the English and the Dutch. The royal "We" disappeared. Lord Macartney, the "Embassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary to Your Court" metamorphosed into "tributary envoy" (贡使 *gongshi*), with his convoluted honorary titles unceremoniously expunged. Similarly, Sir George Staunton,

32 The English original is published in Morse, H.B. *The Chronicles of the East India Company Trading to China, 1635–1834*, vol. 2 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1926,) 244–47. The Chinese translation is held in the Qing court archives and published in *The First Historical Archives of China* [中国第一历史档案馆], ed. *Yingshi Majia'erni fanghua dang'an shiliao huibian* [英使马戛尔尼访华档案史料汇编] (*Archival Materials on the Macartney Embassy*) (Beijing: Guoji Wenhua Chuban Gongsi, 1996), 162–64. In the following, this title is quoted as *Archival Materials on the Macartney Embassy*. Unless otherwise noted, all translations from Chinese are mine.

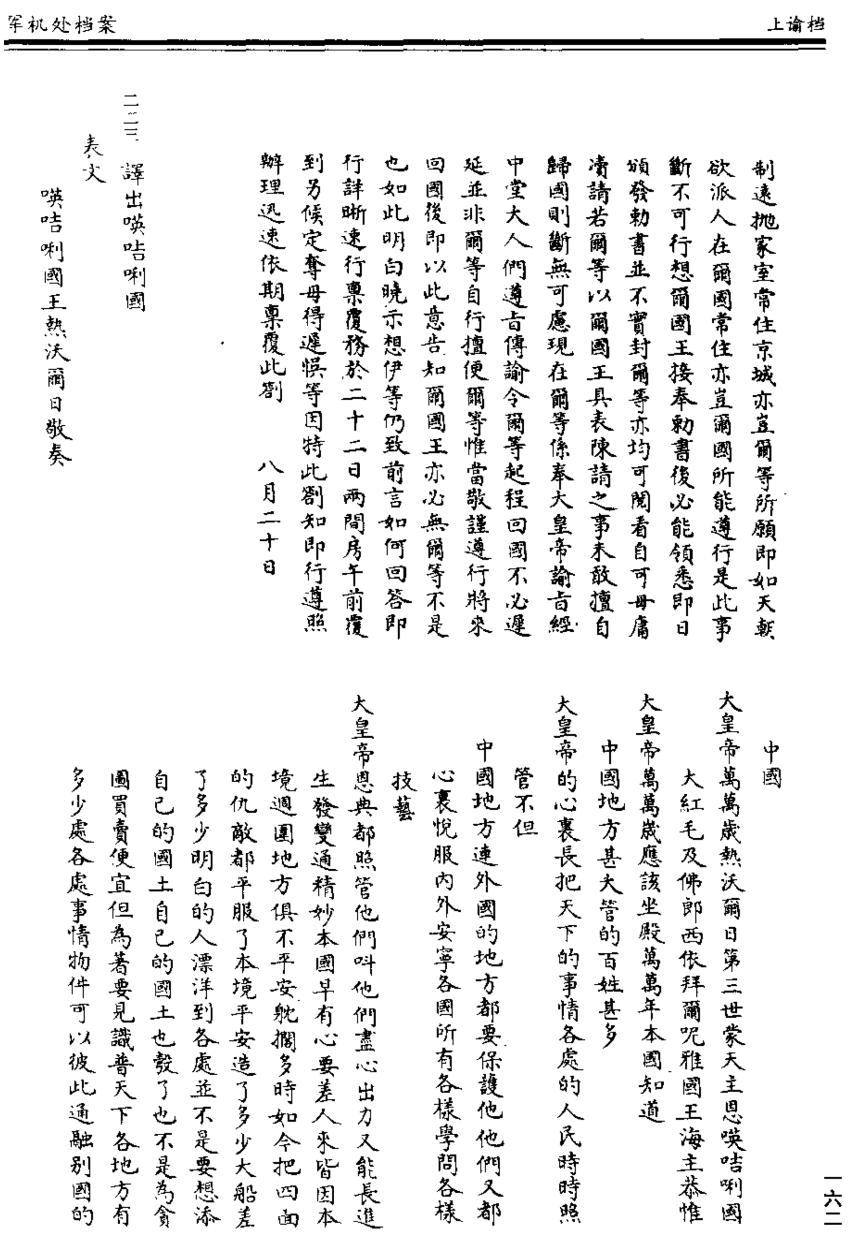


FIGURE 1 The Chinese translation of "The Letter of King George III to the Emperor of China," held in the Qing court archives. Reproduced from *The First Historical Archives of China* [中国第一历史档案馆], ed. *Yingshi Majia'erni fanghua dang'an shiliao huibian* [英使马戛尔尼访华档案史料汇编] (*Archival Materials on the Macartney Embassy*) (Beijing: Guoji Wenhua Chuban Gongsi, 1996), 162.

the "Secretary of Embassy" and "Minister Plenipotentiary" transformed into "deputy tributary envoy" (副贡使 *fugongshi*), with his numerous titles likewise stripped.

The renaming of the diplomatic actors and the stripping of their honorary titles went hand in hand with the rebalancing, indeed the reversal, of the intended relations between the two countries. In his letter, King George leaves no doubt as to the global reach of his power as well as the legitimacy of Britain's global expansion. "The most natural disposition of a great and benevolent Sovereign, such is your Imperial Majesty," he writes, is not only to secure peace and prosperity to his own country, but also to extend "the same beneficence … to the whole human race." Guided by this principle, "from the beginning of Our Reign when we found Our People in War We granted to Our enemies after obtaining Victories over them in the four quarters of the World the blessings of Peace on the most equitable conditions." "Since that period," he continues, "We have taken various opportunities of fitting out Ships and sending in them some of the most wise and learned of Our People, for the discovery of distant and unknown regions." In the Chinese translation, King George's unequivocal claim to global power becomes a panegyric to the universal appeal of the Chinese emperor: "my country knows that China's territory is vast and its population enormous. The Great Emperor cares about all that is going on under heaven and cares for people everywhere, protecting not only China but also foreign places." As a result, people in all countries heartily admire the emperor, owing to him peace, prosperity, and the flowering of learning and the arts. The translation then continues: "our country has always wanted to send an envoy, but the lack of peace on the frontiers of our country has caused much delay. Now we have pacified the enemies in the four quarters, peace has returned to our country, so we have built ships and sent many intelligent people to sail to distant regions."

While presenting the British as a benevolent and curious people projecting power worldwide, King George apparently relegated China to one of many regional polities in the world, which Great Britain would like to acquaint itself with: "We have the happiness of being at peace with all the World, no time can be so propitious for extending the bonds of friendship and benevolence, and for proposing to communicate and receive those benefits which must result from an unreserved and amicable intercourse, between such great and civilized nations as China and Great Britain." The Chinese rendering of this passage reads: "Now our country is at peace with all quarters, so we take this opportunity to pay tribute to the Great Emperor of China in the hope of reaping some rewards." In accordance with the format of "raising the head," both "China" and "the Great Emperor" are placed above the head margin,

introducing two new lines. The translation transforms the self-confident Britain prowling the globe into a tributary state to China.

In the annals of diplomacy, there are perhaps few translations that misconstrue the original document as fundamentally as the Chinese translation of King George III's letter to the Qianlong emperor.[33] This misconstrual highlights what happens when two diplomatic cultures encounter one another: everything about inter-polity interaction, ranging from the cast of actors to their speech and action, has to be reimagined. A letter of credence becomes a tributary memorial, an ambassador becomes a tributary envoy, self-praise becomes praise of the other, the rhetoric of amicable intercourse becomes the rhetoric of tribute. This translational practice was repeated in the Dutch mission a year later. The ambassador Isaac Titsingh had his letter of credence translated by Chinese merchants at the seat of the Dutch East India Company in Batavia (present-day Jakarta). Ignorant of both the conventions of official communication and the stylistic strictures of literary Chinese, they produced a text based on the phonetic conventions and the vocabulary of a dialect spoken in their native Fujian province. Upon seeing the letter, the local officials in Canton were appalled, and instantly began to arrange for a retranslation.[34] With the help of European missionaries, coordinated by local officials and approved by the court, the letter of credence carried by Titsingh was translated from Dutch into French and then into literary Chinese. The resulting text conformed to the established norms for transliterating foreign names, for formatting, and for diction. It turned into an exemplary tributary memorial that explicitly and emphatically presented the envoy Titsingh as a tribute-bearer.[35]

The institutionally overdetermined work of imagination and interpretation, which produced the Chinese translations of European documents, also informed the translation of Chinese documents into European languages. In

33 It should come as no surprise that this translation has attracted considerable scholarly interest. For a most recent study, see Wang, H. "Translation Between Two Imperial Discourses: Metamorphosis of King George III's Letters to Qianlong Emperor." *Translation Studies* 13 (3) (2020), 318–32. Wang takes into account the differences between the Chinese court's translation and the one by Macartney's own interpreter.

34 See Van Braam, A.E. *An Authentic Account of the Embassy of the Dutch East India Company, To the Court of Emperor of China, In the Years of 1794 and 1795* (London: R. Phillips, 1798), 9–10.

35 See Cai, X. [蔡香玉]. "Qianlong monian Helan shituan biaowen chongyi shimo" [乾隆末年荷兰使团表文重译始末]. *Studies in Qing History* [清史研究] 110 (2) (2018), 99–113.

response to the British requests, the Qianlong emperor issued an edict to King George III. It begins thus:

> We, by the Grace of Heaven, Emperor, instruct the King of England to take note of our charge. Although your country, O King, lies in the far oceans, yet inclining your heart towards civilization you have specially sent an envoy respectfully to present a state message, and sailing the seas he has come to our court to kowtow and to present congratulations for the Imperial birthday, and also to present local products, thereby showing your sincerity.[36]

A tone so condescending was likely hard to stomach for the British. Or so the translators – European missionaries residing at the court – believed. They toned it down. A missionary by the name of Louis de Poirot later wrote to Macartney: "*nous selon notre coutumes modifiammes de part et d'autre les expressions, car nous ne pouvions absolument retrancher tout l'article, de peur, que doutant eux de la fidelité de notre Traduction, ils n'appellassent à notre insçut un troisieme Missionaire pour ainsi s'en assurer*."[37] In the English version that Macartney received, the opening passage reads: "Your Sovereign admiring from afar the Splendor of this Empire, and thereby manifesting the Sagacity of his mind, was induced by that Motive to order an Ambassador to traverse the Seas, and as a mark of his Respect, to bring me Letters patent from him, together with Presents."[38] An imperial response to a tributary state in the Sino-centric diplomatic culture of East Asia is translated into a correspondence between sovereigns in the diplomatic culture of Europe.

Instead of bridging two diplomatic cultures, the translation of documents in the diplomatic exchange between Europe and China around 1800 helped reinforce their entrenched differences.

Documenting Negotiations, Producing Alternative Facts

Whatever agreements a diplomatic mission aims to reach, the parties must first agree on what the mission is about. In preparing for the Dutch mission to

36 The Chinese original of Qianlong's letter to King George III is reprinted in *Archival Materials on the Macartney Embassy*, 165–66. The English translation quoted here is made by J.L. Cranmer-Byng in Macartney, G. *An Embassy to China*, Appendix C: "An Edict from the Emperor Chi'en-Lung to King George the Third of England," 336–41, here 337.

37 Pritchard, E.H. "Letters from Missionaries at Peking relating to the Macartney Embassy (1793–1803)." *T'oung Pao*, XXXI (1935), 1–57, here 41.

38 "Answer of the Emperor of China to King of England," reprinted in Morse, H.B. *The Chronicles of the East India Company Trading to China, 1635–1834*, vol.2, 247–52, here 247.

Beijing, Chinese officials were keen to make sure that the two sides were on the same page about the purpose and the procedure of the mission. According to van Braam, the deputy ambassador of the mission,

> [the responsible Chinese official] made inquiry in a very particular manner in the motive of Embassy; and being told in answer that it had no other object than to congratulate the Emperor on his entry into the sixtieth year of his reign, he persisted again in asking if his Excellency [the ambassador Titsingh] were not charged with any other mission. Being again assured that he was not, he repeated, that in case any thing were to be proposed to his Imperial Majesty, of any nature whatever, it must be mentioned beforehand, because it was necessary that the court should have previous information. He was told a third time, that nothing whatever was meant but to offer congratulations and presents to the Emperor. He then required the Ambassador and me to declare upon our honor that we spoke the truth; a request with which we readily complied.[39]

This is a telling scene of diplomatic encounter: for polities not bound by the guardrails of a common diplomatic culture – shared ideas, principles, institutions – the nature of diplomatic encounter itself is a matter of negotiation. Van Braam, who left behind this account, served as the director of the Dutch East Company's office in Canton. A canny businessman, he initiated a mission to the sixtieth anniversary of Qianlong Emperor's reign. It was meant to be a purely celebratory mission without the expectation of securing substantial agreements. His calculation was that the gesture itself would bring benefits to the Dutch business in China. Since the Chinese court was all too eager to receive acclamations, the two sides agreed to let each other define the nature of the mission as they pleased, as long as no substantial matter was involved. As to the Macartney and the Amherst embassies, however, negotiations about the nature of the mission – its motive, objective, and implementation – were much more torturous, consequently leading to much less satisfying outcomes. They left behind a long paper trail – or rather two paper trails, as the Chinese and the British documents often diverged, sometimes significantly.

In the absence of shared ideas, principles, and institutions by which to conduct their encounter, diplomatic actors could do little more than to record what was going on, to establish the facts of the encounter. A proactive intervention became imperative only when one side perceived its own ideas,

39 Van Braam, A.E. *An Authentic Account of the Embassy of the Dutch East India Company*, 8–9.

principles, and institutions to be seriously at risk. This was the case with the ceremonial towards the emperor. Apprehensive that the English envoy would not perform the requisite genuflections and prostrations – the so-called kowtow – Chinese officials engaged in intense face-to-face negotiations with the British. Yet precisely the most decisive episode of such negotiations, which, to all appearances, led to a compromise, was faithfully documented neither by the Chinese nor by the British. Instead of documenting it, both sides attempted assiduously to cover it up. The precise terms of the compromise remain a riddle. The Chinese sources unanimously claimed that the British envoy performed the Chinese ceremonial as required, whereas the British sources unanimously claimed that they did not perform the Chinese ceremonial, but the British one. These two alternative facts contributed significantly to the disastrous failure of the Amherst embassy twenty-three years later and thereby to the collapse of British-Chinese diplomacy altogether.

According to the Chinese sources, the Grand Council arranged for the British envoy's audience with the Qianlong emperor to take place at the imperial summer retreat in Rehe on September 10, 1793. The ceremony designed for this occasion was to include the requisite kowtow. The plan was approved by the emperor on September 8, but the British side did not agree to it. In an edict dated to September 9, the emperor made no secret of his displeasure: "The English envoy and his suite have now come to Rehe. They have yet to acquaint themselves with the rites and customs. We are surely not pleased with it."[40] After castigating his officials for having lavished too many favors and privileges on the English and having thereby abetted their pride, the emperor ordered the protocol for the British embassy to be downgraded. There followed, on the same day, a flurry of court instructions to local officials to cut down on the favors for the British embassy on their return journey. The planned audience was cancelled. On the following day, on which the audience was originally scheduled to take place, the Grand Councilor Heshen ordered court officials to "cut down immediately the ceremony of their reception in order to demonstrate our ways," announcing the intention of the emperor to send Macartney and his suite back to the capital soon, to settle the exchange of gifts and other necessary affairs, and to hasten their departure from the

40 *Archival Materials on the Macartney Embassy*, 13.

country.[41] One day later, however, there was a dramatic volte-face. A court letter of September 11 states:

> Now that the Grand Councilor and others have passed on to the Envoy and others the Imperial command warning them, they fully realize and regret. Today the Chief and Assistant Envoys went to wait on the Grand Councilor and the ceremonial was very reverential. Because they have sailed the seas and came from afar, when they first reached the Celestial Empire they were not conversant with the ceremonial system, and we had to restrain [栽柳] them a little. Now that they are sincerely loyal and entirely follow the system of the Celestial Empire we naturally ought to continue to extend our favour to them in order to fulfil their loyalty in coming afar to have an audience.[42]

Apparently, a negotiation took place on September 11, which broke the stalemate and reached a solution acceptable to both sides. Yet the details of the negotiation were not recorded. The court letter strongly suggests that the British envoy accepted the demand of the Chinese side, even though it does not lay out the exact terms of the agreement reached. The audience finally took place on September 14. The official Chinese record of this obviously important event is exceptionally terse, stating that "the Chief English Envoy, Macartney, and the Assistant Envoy, Staunton, had an audience, and were feasted," along with Mongol princes and the Burmese tribute envoy.[43] It contains no unambiguous information about what ceremonial the British performed. The British envoys had another audience on September 17, the emperor's eighty-third birthday. Court records pertaining to the British embassy on this occasion are similarly terse, listing Macartney and his deputy Staunton alongside envoys from border tribes and tributary states, according them no special status. These records mention congratulatory etiquettes being performed without specifying what they were.[44] However, the meticulous plan for the birthday celebration, made by the Grand Council and approved by the emperor, explicitly stipulated that the Grand Councilor Heshen was to prompt the British envoys to perform the Chinese ceremonial of genuflections and prostrations. A number of

41 Ibid., 149.

42 Ibid., 51. The English translation is quoted from Cranmer-Byng, J.L. "Lord Macartney's Embassy to Peking in 1793 – From Official Chinese Documents." *Journal of Oriental Studies* 4 (1957–1958), 117–87, here 160.

43 *Archival Materials on the Macartney Embassy*, 51–52.

44 Ibid., 552.

contemporary and later accounts of this event in the imperial court archives either strongly suggest or explicitly state that the British envoys in fact did so.[45]

What do the English sources report on this series of events? In Macartney's journal, the entry on September 9 records his refusal to perform the ceremonial demanded by the Chinese: "I dwelt upon the propriety of something to distinguish between the homage of tributary Princes and the ceremony used on the part of a great and independent sovereign."[46] This explains the displeasure of the emperor as expressed in the edict of that day. The entry on September 10 – the day on which the Chinese court was busy with sending out instructions about downgrading the reception of the British embassy – records the continued altercation between the two sides, an altercation that Macartney characterized as a "curious negotiation, which has given me a tolerable insight into the character of this Court."[47] The entry on September 11 records the decisive session of negotiation referenced by the court letter of that day, but describes a turn of events diametrically opposed to the one reported by the Qing court letter cited above:

> The Minister made some compliments in return, and said that, on account of the very great distance from which the Embassy had been sent, and of the value of the presents, some of the Chinese customs (which had hitherto been invariably observed) would now be relaxed, and that I might perform the ceremony after the manner of my own country, and deliver the King's letter into the Emperor's own hand. So now these preliminary difficulties are over, and Saturday next, being a great festival at Court, is fixed for the day of my introduction.[48]

In the entries on September 14 and September 17 – the two occasions on which the audience with the emperor took place – Macartney went out of his way to state that he performed the British, not the Chinese ceremonial: "as [the emperor] passed we paid him our compliments by kneeling on one knee, whilst all the Chinese made their usual prostrations"; "all the dwellers upon

45 For an exhaustive review of these documents, see Qin, G. [秦国经]. "C ong qinggong dang'an kan yingshi majia'erni fanghua lishi shishi" [从清宫档案，看英使马戛尔尼访华历史事实]. In ibid., 23–88 (the editorial section), here 47–50.

46 Macartney, G. *An Embassy to China*, 119.

47 Ibid.

48 Ibid., 120.

China earth there present, except ourselves, bowed down their heads, and prostrated themselves on the ground ...."[49]

The account by the deputy envoy George Leonard Staunton differed from Macartney's. According to Staunton, while the two sides were agonizing over the ceremonial conflict, "it had been announced to the Embassador, that his Imperial Majesty would be satisfied with the same form of respectful obeisance from the English, which they were in the habit of paying to their own Sovereign."[50] As a result, at the conference on September 11, "no longer disturbed by a pending contest," the two sides could, "with frankness and affability," exchange views on world affairs and their bilateral relations.[51] As to the audience on September 14, Staunton did not explicitly describe, for all his wordiness, what ceremonial the British envoys performed, although he did mention that Macartney, "bending on one knee," presented the letter of credence to the emperor.[52] As to the emperor's birthday on September 17, he noted that "all the persons present prostrated themselves nine times, except the Embassador and his suite, who made a profound obeisance," omitting to specify what "a profound obeisance" looked like.[53]

The Chinese and the English sources present two alternative facts, prompting historians to speculate, often by drawing on circumstantial evidence, on what the truth might have been. What happened was most likely a hybrid form of paying respect combining both English and Chinese elements – a kind of face-saving compromise that enabled both sides to claim to have got their way.[54] The only truly indisputable, hence irritating, fact is that the two sides of this diplomatic encounter produced two alternative facts. Usually, facts are produced through stringent procedures within complex institutional frameworks: trial at a court of law, experiments at a laboratory, research by a professional historian. The two alternative facts about the British embassy to China in 1793 grew out of two diplomatic cultures with widely differing ideas, norms, and institutions. On the one side, there were the ideas of celestial empire and tribute, rites of emperor worship, age-old institutions of tributary mission and court administration; on the other side, there were the ideas of sovereign

49 Ibid., 122, 131.

50 Staunton, G. *An Authentic Account of an Embassy from the King of Great Britain to the Emperor of China*, vol. 2 (Philadelphia: Robert Campbell, 1799), 70.

51 Ibid., 71.

52 Ibid., 77.

53 Ibid., 88.

54 See Dai, T. [戴廷杰] (Pierre-Henri Durand). "jiantingzeming – magaerni shihua zaitan" [兼听则明 – 马戛尔尼使华再探]. In *Archival Materials on the Macartney Embassy*, 89–150 (the editorial section), here 113–29.

equality and free trade, purportedly enlightened norms of interpersonal interaction, institutions of increasingly professionalized diplomatic service, and the nation-state spoiling for colonial expansion. The one side made use of edicts, court letters, memorials as procedures of establishing facts, all meant for the eyes of state officials; the other side made use of personal journals and published books, meant for both the government, trading companies (the Macartney mission was sponsored by the East India Company), and the reading public.[55] The difference between the institutional frameworks, within which the two sides operated, as well as the difference between the procedures and mediums that they deployed, led to different facts about one and the same sequence of events. In producing their alternative facts, however, the two sides shared one thing in common: both obfuscated, if not downright obliterated, the most crucial of events – the negotiation on September 11, 1793. The Chinese side offered no details of the negotiation, just mentioning its miraculous effect of having converted the refractory British. The two British participants offered two diverging versions of the negotiation: the chief envoy Macartney claimed that the Chinese side started off with a concession giving the British the option to do as they pleased, and that both sides then moved on to a frank and pleasant conversation, whereas the deputy envoy Staunton claimed that the Chinese side had announced a concession beforehand, so that the negotiation, " no longer disturbed by pending contest," unfolded as nothing else than a frank and pleasant conversation. Alternative facts thrive on muddying the event that they claim to uncover. Whatever motivations the two sides might have had in muddying the event of negotiation, its effect is clear to see: negotiation did not bring the Chinese and the British closer, but drove them further apart.

Alas, the alternative facts about the Macartney mission were destined to be the undoing of British-Chinese diplomacy. When Britain sent another embassy to China two decades later, this time headed by Lord Amherst, the ceremonial again loomed as a flashpoint of contention. Armed with the fact that the British produced about their embassy of 1793, Lord Amherst, as the secretary of the embassy noted, "declared his intention of following, in every respect, the precedent set by Lord Macartney."[56] In trying to persuade the British, Chinese officials pertinaciously cited the only fact that they knew of: Macartney performed the Chinese ceremonial of kowtow. And they called on an eyewitness: George Thomas Staunton, the deputy envoy of the Amherst mission. A twelve-year-old boy back in 1793, Staunton was present at the audiences with the Qianlong emperor in his capacity as Macartney's

55 This point is emphasized by Hevia, J. *Cherishing Men From Afar*.

56 Ellis, H. *Journal of the Proceedings of the Late Embassy to China* (London: Murray, 1817), 92.

page and the deputy envoy's son. He not only witnessed the ceremonial, but also performed it together with the adults. He not only performed it, but also described it in his journal: "The ambassador then came down, and my papa and I went up and made the proper ceremony."[57] If anyone knew the fact for sure, it was George Thomas Staunton. Yet he refused to testify. In his journal of the Amherst embassy, the entry dated to August 13, 1816 records a tense confrontation:

> … and the legates both appealed to me as having been present, and able to give evidence of the facts which they had asserted.… I avoided the discussion of the subject, by replying that his excellency's information of what had taken place, on the occasion of the former embassy, was derived from the highest authority, the authentic records, which had been presented to our Sovereign by Lord Macartney on his return: on these records also our present instructions were grounded, and not at all from my opinion or evidence, respecting a fact, which had occurred twenty-three years ago, when I was a child of twelve years of age.[58]

This was not the first time that Staunton came under pressure in bearing witness to what the British did at the audiences with the Qianlong emperor. In his journal entry on September 14, 1793, the twelve-year-old Staunton noted: "As he [the emperor] passed we went upon one knee and bowed our heads down to the ground." In the manuscript, the three words "to the ground" – a strong index of kowtow – are neatly crossed out. A boy felt the pressure to manipulate a fact. Whether the pressure came from within himself or was exercised from outside, historians can only speculate.[59] The adult Staunton knew better. He referred to the fact produced by "the highest authority," the official fact, discounting any "opinion or evidence." But there were two official facts, because there were two highest authorities. Caught between two alternative facts and weighed down by the personal responsibility of bearing witness: this predicament of Staunton's generated irritation, resentment and rage, which fueled hardline approaches in all negotiations. Staunton pertinaciously dissuaded the chief envoy from making compromises, despite the British government's injunction to be flexible. The embassy was doomed to failure.

57 Macartney, G. *An Embassy to China*, 351 (Appendix D).

58 Staunton, G.T. *Notes of Proceedings and Occurrences, During the British Embassy to Pekin, in 1816* (Havant: Henry Skelton, 1824), 47.

59 For a detailed discussion of Staunton's unpublished journal, see Peyrefitte, A. *The Immobile Empire*, Chapter 37, "At the Emperor's Feet (September 14, 1793)."

Poetic Flight

Without shared ideas, principles, and institutions to define the nature of a diplomatic encounter, poetry rose to the occasion. The Macartney mission and the Dutch mission of 1795 triggered a burst of poetic production on the Chinese side involving the emperor himself as well as the literati,[60] while Macartney, a career diplomat and colonial administrator, allowed himself, for a rare moment or two, to be carried away by the flight of the poetic imagination.

The half dozen poems that the Qianlong emperor composed on the occasion of the Macartney mission embed the unfolding diplomatic encounter within a number of interlocking symbolic orders.[61] To begin with, the imperial author portrays the embassy as one facet of his good governance. Domestically, it is juxtaposed with a good harvest just reported from Henan province. In terms of foreign relations, the embassy figures as one more instance of the appeal of the Celestial Empire: just as formerly Portugal presented tribute, now England is paying homage. Second, with the help of conventions and stereotypes of nature poetry, Qianlong located the embassy in the eternal course of nature. In a poem composed September 8, 1792, the day when Macartney and his suite arrived in the imperial summer retreat, missions from the south (Burma) and from the west (England) coincide with autumnal clouds and nocturnal rain, forming a seemingly fortuitous yet cosmically necessary constellation. Third, the emperor-poet takes the opportunity to evoke a mythic vision of China as a universal empire. A poem written on the occasion of the audience on September 14, 1793 features a hyperbole of the English envoys as "having travelled further than Shuhai 竖亥 and Hengzhang 橫章." Shuhai and Taizhang 太章 (the emperor changed the latter name into Hengzhang to play on the antonyms Shu, literally "vertical," versus Heng, literally "horizontal") were legendary geographers-astronomers mentioned in the ancient classic *Huainanzi* (second century BCE): "King Yu禹commissioned Taizhang to travel from the East Pole to the West Pole, a distance totaling 233575 feet; he commissioned Shuhai to travel from the North Pole to the South Pole, a distance totaling 233575 feet."[62] Yu was a legendary sage king who controlled floods and surveyed the whole of China. This passage in *Huainanzi* elaborates the mythic geography of China as depicted by "The Tribute of Yu" in *The Book of Documents*. Qianlong's hyperbole

60 In the following I discuss only Qianlong's poetry. A good example of literati poetry is Wang Wengao's [王文诰] (1764–?) two suites of poems on the Dutch embassy of 1795 included in his *Yunshantang shiji* [韵山堂诗集].

61 These poems are reprinted in *Archival Materials on the Macartney Embassy*, 554–56. I treat them here as one corpus of texts.

62 *Huainanzi* [淮南子], ed. G. Chen [陈广忠]. (Book 4). (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 2012), 200.

at once anchors his realm in the mythic past and expands it to encompass the whole world. Last but not least, Qianlong's poetic discourse makes out of the English mission an illustration of the moral order that his reign embodies: coming from so distant shores, the mission testifies to the immeasurable reach of his ancestor's merits and virtues, as well as providing an opportunity for himself to demonstrate his generosity and magnanimity. In sum, the poetizing emperor deftly used the English mission as a tool for legitimizing the political order of China, and this in multiple registers – practical, natural-cosmic, mythic, and moral.

Macartney did not compose poetry as Qianlong did, but his poetic imagination was no less lively – he let it soar as a reader. Watching the proceedings on September 14, 1793, the day on which he had his first audience with the emperor, Macartney remarked: "Thus, then, have I seen 'King Solomon in all his glory'. I use his expression, as the scene recalled perfectly to my memory a puppet show of that name which I recollect to have seen in my childhood, and which made so strong an impression on my mind that I then thought it a true representation of the highest pitch of human greatness and felicity."[63] On the emperor's birthday celebration on September 17, Macartney observed: "At length the great band both vocal and instrumental struck up with all their powers of harmony, and instantly the whole Court fell flat upon their faces before this invisible Nebuchadnezzar. 'He in his cloudy tabernacle shrined sojourned the while.'"[64] Summoning poetic literature from biblical stories to Milton to make sense of what was happening in front of his eyes, Macartney activated impromptu what might be properly called an Orientalist imagination. The protagonists in it are half-historical, half-legendary oriental monarchs – Solomon, Nebuchadnezzar, and the like – from long-vanished civilizations in the remote past, indeed in the beginning of time. Idolized by the masses, and keeping the masses down – "flat upon their faces" – these oriental monarchs symbolize religious fervor, superstition, unconditional devotion. The few poetic vignettes suffice to put China in its place: spatially in the remote east, temporally in the remote past, immobilized with an aged, idolized ruler and a faceless, benighted mass. Macartney's poetic imagination casts China as an exotic spectacle that would impress only small children.

Poetry, utilized by Qianlong to legitimate and perpetuate the political order of China, and by Macartney to imagine China as a mummified oriental Other, entrenched both sides' opposing worldviews.

63 Macartney, G. *An Embassy to China*, 124.

64 Ibid., 131. Here Macartney quotes from Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Book VII.

The End of Diplomacy between International Societies

Taken together, the European missions to China around the turn of the nineteenth century can be best understood not merely as diplomacy between two countries, but as diplomacy between two international societies. They were not conducted under the aegis of a shared diplomatic culture – the hallmark of an international society – but had to grapple with differing diplomatic cultures of East Asia and Europe. In Macartney's incisive words, "nothing could be more fallacious than to judge of China by any European standard."[65] Lacking a shared diplomatic culture, both sides struggled to make sense of the diplomatic encounter itself, defining the status of diplomatic actors, parsing the words spoken, documenting the actions undertaken, and even resorting to the poetic imagination to comprehend what was going on. Yet not all the missions were the same. Initiated by the enterprising director of the Dutch East India Company's office in Canton for the purpose of improving business ties with China, the Dutch mission of 1795 was billed as a congratulatory mission to Qianlong's sixtieth anniversary on the throne, with no expectation of securing specific agreements. It was hardly a mission of a sovereign state, which was the proper subject of diplomatic action in the European international society. In fact, when the mission arrived in Beijing in January 1795, just in time for the Chinese New Year, the Dutch Republic was undergoing a revolution, and a new state – the Batavian Republic – was established with the armed support of the French revolutionary forces. The two sides easily agreed on the status of the envoy: he was a bearer of congratulations. That this status served different purposes for the two sides – the Dutch expected a boon to its trade in Asia while the Chinese saw acclamation by a tribute-bearer – mattered little. Accordingly, translation and documentation – the vital operations in a diplomatic encounter between international societies – proved to be trivial, if not easy, activities. The Dutch mission, then, was not so much a success as a mission of no consequence.[66]

The other missions were different. Sent by a sovereign state of Europe, and with the chief aim of establishing a resident embassy in the Chinese capital, the Macartney mission of 1793 and the Amherst mission of 1816 (as well as the Russian Golovkin mission of 1806, which is not discussed in this essay) embodied the norms and institutions of the diplomatic culture of Europe and sought to transplant these norms and institutions to China. There was no

65 Ibid., 219.

66 That the Dutch mission was a success is the main argument of T. Andrade's *The Last Embassy*.

shared understanding of the status of the envoys. Translation, documentation, and even the poetic imagination assumed great importance. Yet parsing the words through translation only reinforced the barriers, documenting the actions generated alternative facts, and the poetic imagination fortified the differing visions of the self and the other. Can the stalemate be broken? Is diplomacy between countries belonging to different international societies possible at all? Sailing on the Grand Canal on his return journey, a disappointed Macartney was lost in reveries:

> Can they be ignorant that a couple of English frigates would be an overmatch for the whole naval force of their empire, that in half a summer they could totally destroy all the navigation of their coasts and reduce the inhabitants of the maritime provinces, who subsist chiefly on fish, to absolute famine?[67]

The diplomatic stalemate could only be broken by violence. After the Amherst embassy ended also in failure – a much more disastrous failure to boot – Macartney's martial reverie came to be considered a viable option. "At a later date it was clearly seen," as a historian told us, "that only three alternatives remained: a resort to force to compel the Chinese to regulate the trade on reasonable terms, absolute submission to such rules as they might prescribe, or abandonment of the trade."[68] A resort to force was soon considered to be the only option. In 1839, British warships turned Macartney's reverie into a reality.[69]

Among its many historical consequences, the Anglo-Chinese War that broke out in 1839 – later known as the Opium War – tolled the knell for the Sino-centric international society of East Asia. The cascade of violence triggered by the Opium War and lasting for the rest of the nineteenth century wrecked this international society and drowned its diplomatic culture, paving the way for expanding the European international society over East Asia and transplanting its diplomatic culture in the new climes. The European missions to China around 1800 marked a rupture between international societies and a failed exchange between diplomatic cultures.

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67 Macartney, G. *An Embassy to China*, 170.

68 Morse, H.B. *The International Relations of the Chinese Empire*, vol. 1 (London: Longmans, 1910), 57–58.

69 On the sequence of events leading from the Macartney and Amherst missions to the Opium War, see Gao, H. *Creating the Opium War: British Imperial Attitudes to China, 1792–1840* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020).