

Lumen

Selected Proceedings from the Canadian Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies
Travaux choisis de la Société canadienne d'étude du dix-huitième siècle

LUMEN

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Volume 32, 2013

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1015486ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1015486ar>

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Éditeur(s)

Canadian Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies / Société canadienne d'étude
du dix-huitième siècle

ISSN

1209-3696 (imprimé)

1927-8284 (numérique)

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Citer cet article

Williams, L. (2013). British Government under the Qianlong Emperor's Gaze:
Satire, Imperialism, and the Macartney Embassy to China, 1792–1804. *Lumen*,
32, 85–107. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1015486ar>

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British Government under the Qianlong Emperor's Gaze: Satire, Imperialism, and the Macartney Embassy to China, 1792–1804

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The failure of the Macartney Embassy (1792–94), the first face-to-face diplomatic meeting between Britain and China, has often been understood as a crucial turning point in relations between the two nations. China was recognised by the British as a pre-eminent Asian power, and the embassy was intended to formalise and expand a trading relationship that, since the establishment of British trade at Canton around 1700, had become increasingly lucrative. Planned by the East India Company and the Pitt Government, and led by one of Britain's most experienced diplomats, George Macartney (1737–1806), the embassy was intended as a lavish and dignified spectacle, designed to “impress the minds of the Chinese with a favourable impression of the Embassy, this Country and its commerce.”¹ Equipped at the huge cost of £78,000,² it carried a number of gifts intended to demonstrate British scientific

This research was supported by a Commonwealth postdoctoral fellowship from the Government of Canada. I would like to thank the professors, students, and library staff at McGill University's Burney Centre and McLennan Library. I am also grateful to the anonymous readers of an earlier version of this article for their comments.

1. E.H. Pritchard, “The Instructions of the East India Company to Lord Macartney on His Embassy to China,” *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 70 (1938): 201–30, 211.

2. See Aubrey Singer, *The Lion and the Dragon: The Story of the First British Embassy to the Court of the Emperor Qianlong in Peking 1792–94* (London: Barrie & Jenkins, 1992), 6.

and artistic achievement, including a mechanical planetarium, a carriage for the Emperor's use, and a hot air balloon and pilot. However, although Macartney was received courteously in Beijing in August and September 1793, he failed (as did a Dutch embassy the following year) to win any specific guarantees from Chinese officials, and during the return journey overland to Canton he received a letter from the Qianlong emperor promising friendship between the two nations, but rejecting all British trade requests.

Scholars have often argued that British anger at this "failure" is swiftly channelled into a renewed level of "rhetorical violence" in British writing on the country, paving the way for the actual violence of the Opium Wars in the nineteenth century.³ David Porter has argued that the embassy causes the demise of an "optimistic fantasy concerning the possibilities of Chinese commerce" held by British politicians, artists, and writers, replaced by a new understanding of Chinese government as "in every respect inimical to the unquestioned values of a modern mercantile society."⁴ James Hevia has shown how, for nineteenth-century commentators on Chinese politics, the Macartney Embassy serves as a crucial "point of origin," invoked to demonstrate the necessity of "a much more aggressive stance by the British government towards the Qing empire."⁵ Within a decade, the publication of a volume of *Travels in China* (1804), by the embassy's comptroller John Barrow, inaugurated a new and far more hostile mode of political commentary on the country, by blaming the embassy's failure solely on the unreasonable behaviour of the Chinese government, and arguing that Macartney's major accomplishment had been to preserve national dignity by refusing to perform the kowtow ceremony: "by no trick, nor artifice, nor stretch of power, could [the Chinese] prevail on an English Ambassador to forego the dignity and respect due to the situation he held at their court."⁶ In nineteenth-century British interpretations of

3. James Hevia, *Cherishing Men from Afar: Qing Guest Ritual and the Macartney Embassy of 1793* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995), 73. For a study of the embassy as a turning point in Sino-British relations, see also Lydia Liu, *The Clash of Empires: The Invention of China in Modern World Making* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004).

4. David Porter, *Ideographia: The Chinese Cipher in Early Modern Europe* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 205, 207.

5. Hevia, *Cherishing Men from Afar*, 229.

6. John Barrow, *Travels in China* (1804), 18.

the embassy, the kowtow is given particular prominence, not only as the “cause” of the embassy’s failure, but also as a defining symbol of the “collision” between two incompatible world-views: a British belief in reciprocal relations between equal nations, and a Chinese tributary system supposedly unsuited to the modern trading world.⁷

However, studies of the Macartney Embassy have not previously ventured beyond travel narratives by embassy participants and East India Company documents to assess its broader reception by British public opinion during the 1790s. During this period, China assumed a prominence in public debate perhaps unrivalled by any other point in the eighteenth century. Thanks to skilful government promotion, which focused in particular upon the lavish gifts to be presented to the Chinese emperor, Macartney’s mission received far more attention than an earlier, unsuccessful attempt to send an embassy under Colonel Cathcart in 1787–8 (ended by Cathcart’s death en route to China). Frances Burney’s diary for June 1792 describes a trip to Long Acre to see the “superb” carriages to be presented by Macartney to the emperor of China, a description of which, she writes, “I leave to the Newspapers.”⁸ The embassy was discussed in the press, mentioned in private diaries and letters, and described in travel accounts by high- and low-ranking members of the embassy.⁹ It led to a vogue among London publishers for works surveying what was known about the history and geography of China.¹⁰ And, finally, it inspired a number of satires, including drinking songs, cartoons, poems imagining Macartney’s reception in Beijing, and epistles to the British nation written in the voice of the Qianlong emperor.¹¹

7. See Hevia’s discussion of nineteenth-century historiography of the Macartney Embassy in *Cherishing Men from Afar*, 232–37. For a later exemplification of the “collision” thesis, see Alain Peyrefitte, *The Collision of Two Civilisations: The British Expedition to China in 1792–94* (London: Harvill, 1993).

8. Frances Burney, *The Journals and Letters of Fanny Burney*, 12 vols, ed. Joyce Hemlow (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972), 1:207 (27 June 1792).

9. Four first-hand embassy accounts are published in English in the decade following the embassy: Aeneas Anderson, *A Narrative of the British Embassy to China* (London, 1795); George Staunton, *An Authentic Account of an Embassy from the King of Great Britain to the Emperor of China*, 2 vols (London, 1797); Samuel Holmes, *The Journal of Mr. Samuel Holmes* (London, 1798); John Barrow, *Travels in China* (1804).

10. See Jean-Baptiste Grosier, *A General Description of China*, 2 vols. (London, 1795); William Winterbotham, *An Historical, Geographical, and Philosophical View of the Chinese Empire* (London, 1795).

11. See the appendix below.

Although these satires have largely been ignored by scholars of the embassy, they play a crucial role in shaping contemporary public reactions to the embassy in the decade following its return. Their creative energy—the quality that Qian Zhongshu, in one of the only discussions of this group of texts, praises as “boisterous” and “food for fun”—allows them to shape narratives of the embassy out of the confusion that initially accompanied Macartney’s failure.¹² At a time when accurate information about the embassy was still scarce, they weave together rumours from Canton and information about China from other sources to create speculative fantasies about what had happened in “Pekin” (in fact, the principal encounter took place not in Beijing but in Qianlong’s summer palace in Chengde, known to the British as “Jehol”).

In addition, this essay explores how this lively popular counter-current challenges the prior economic and political assumptions about the embassy made by British planners, and, following Macartney’s failure, resists the movement towards a more imperialist vision of China. Hevia argues, in his study of the British ideological background to the embassy, that Macartney’s assumptions about China appeared rational and self-evident to members of the (male and genteel) “public sphere” in England.¹³ In fact, however, contemporary public debate was politically polarised and influenced by the anti-elite and anti-government sentiments of the early 1790s. The embassy had taken place against a backdrop of fractious debates about liberty and security precipitated by the French Revolution, the publication of Thomas Paine’s *Rights of Man* in 1791, the spread of radical meetings and riots in 1792, government restrictions on speech and assembly, and Britain’s entry into the war against France in February 1793. As a result, even before the embassy had departed from England, it had inspired a series of satires which mock it as a costly folly, as an attempt to distract public attention from the struggles for liberty at home, or even as an imperialist plot to invade China. News of Macartney’s failure, which reaches England in the summer of 1794, inspires a series of alternative inter-

12. Qian Zhongshu, “China in the English Literature of the Eighteenth Century,” in Adrian Hsia, ed., *The Vision of China in the English Literature of the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (Hong Kong: Chinese University of Hong Kong, 1998), 117–213, 192–94.

13. Hevia, *Cherishing Men from Afar*, 63.

pretations which challenge the one-sided and one-directional narratives about the embassy presented by British elites. These texts turn the critical focus away from the supposed “deceit” or “intransigence” of the Chinese emperor in Beijing, and onto Macartney and his officials, scrutinising the ways in which the true causes of the embassy’s failure might lie in the assumptions, conduct, and national character of British elites.

In these satires, the idea of a countervailing “Chinese” perspective on the embassy is often given literal expression in the gaze of the Qianlong emperor himself, directed sceptically at his British visitors. This conceit draws on a number of established eighteenth-century satirical traditions. It develops in part from the Brobdingnagian tradition of peaceful giants expressing their disgust at the pettiness of European conflicts: an idea found not only in Jonathan Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels* (1726) but also in later satirical fantasies such as Voltaire’s *Micromégas* (1752). Its origins also lie in the numerous eighteenth-century epistolary satires written by fictional travellers to Europe, such as Montesquieu’s *Lettres Persanes* (1721) and Françoise de Graffigny’s *Lettres d’une Péruvienne* (1747), which, as Srinivas Aravamudan argues, use a “double-sided critical interrogation of subject and object” to turn a sceptical eye onto the customs of East and West.¹⁴ Although Elizabeth Chang argues that, from the late eighteenth century, the “Chinese eye” becomes associated in racial and aesthetic discourses with “constrained and artificial ways of seeing,”¹⁵ there is also an opposing satirical use of the Chinese, prominent in the mid-eighteenth century, as particularly *clear-sighted* viewers: an idea inspired by Jesuit panegyrics on the enlightened nature of Chinese society, and developed in cosmopolitan satires imagining English society under the scrutiny of “Chinese philosophers,” including Horace Walpole’s *Letter from Xo Ho* (1757) and Oliver Goldsmith’s *The Citizen of the World* (1760–61). Drawing on these earlier Chinese satires, Macartney embassy writers imagine the “Chinese gaze” as a position of complete visual and epistemological penetration, revealing truths about British society to which the British themselves are blind.

14. Srinivas Aravamudan, *Enlightenment Orientalism: Resisting the Rise of the Novel* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2012), 101–2.

15. Elizabeth Hope Chang, *Britain’s Chinese Eye: Literature, Empire, and Aesthetics in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010), 1.

The origins of British cultural imperialism towards China can thus be located in a contest, in the 1790s, between “Enlightenment” Orientalism and a nascent imperialism. During this period, there is broad cultural resistance to the new ways of viewing China being introduced by Britain’s political elite, and to the new British imperial identity that legitimates this stance. Rather than challenging these claims from “within” British society, satirists seek an external, “Chinese” vantage point from which Macartney’s mission can be scrutinised. Just as Goldsmith’s “Chinese philosopher” Lien Chi had been disgusted with the natives of London, who knowing only imported chinoiserie goods and erroneous information from the Jesuits, presume “to instruct me in the ceremonies of China!”¹⁶ so satirists in the 1790s imagine Chinese disgust at Macartney’s efforts to dictate ceremony to the emperor. Qianlong’s gaze reveals Macartney’s numerous misrepresentations and delusions about his own country: its Lilliputian size and might in comparison with China; the corruption and instability of its political system; its economic focus on frivolous consumer goods and *chinoiserie* trinkets; its embroilment in Continental war, Indian imperialism, and the slave trade. This pivotal encounter in Beijing becomes portrayed as a moment in which the mismatch between Macartney’s assumptions and the “reality” of Chinese politics is cruelly exposed; and satirists ultimately relate this folly on the far side of the world to domestic politics, by suggesting that the qualities that have led British elites to misjudge China make them unfit to manage the political crisis at home.

Satirical Views of Far Eastern Trade

The planners of the Macartney Embassy had allowed themselves to form high expectations of its potential commercial benefits to Great Britain. By the end of the eighteenth century, the economic value of Chinese trade to the East India Company had risen to over £2 million per year, and there were hopes that this figure could be substantially increased by extending trade beyond Canton to the northern ports, and

16. Oliver Goldsmith, *The Citizen of the World*, in *Collected Works of Oliver Goldsmith*, ed. Arthur Friedman, 5 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966), 2: 142 (letter 33).

opening a broader market for British commodities.¹⁷ Although little was known of the workings of Chinese government, it was assumed from the reports of Russian diplomatic missions “that The Emperor himself is accessible, that the reception of Foreigners at Peking is courteous, and that the Policy of encouraging foreign Trade is not ill understood there.”¹⁸ The enthusiastic rhetoric that pervaded debates about the embassy’s prospects is captured in Frances Burney’s account of a conversation in June 1792 with the Whig lawyer Richard Burke (whose father, Edmund Burke, was an intimate of Macartney): Burke “spoke of the extent of the undertaking in high, & perhaps fanciful terms, but with allusions & anecdotes intermixed so full of general information, & brilliant ideas, that I soon felt the whole of my first enthusiasm return.”¹⁹

But there are also dissenting voices in the early 1790s questioning the value of the embassy. Even pro-government writers warned that it was a “speculative enterprize” with many uncertainties,²⁰ and some East India Company officials were unenthusiastic, fearing harm to the existing trade at Canton.²¹ In addition, although Robert Markley has argued that, in the Restoration and early eighteenth century, literate Europeans of all social classes were prone to fantasise about the economic potential of China, by the 1790s there are signs of class tension about the perceived irrelevance of Far Eastern trade—which focused on luxury goods such as tea, silk, and porcelain—to the majority of the British population.²²

These criticisms are evident in one of the first Macartney Embassy satires, “Lord Macartney’s Embassy to China,” a song by the Birmingham balladeer and innkeeper John Freeth (1731–1808). Internal evidence suggests that the song was composed around 1792, before Macartney’s departure for China. Like most of Freeth’s work, it would originally have been performed for the patrons of the Leicester Arms tavern, and it was later published as the first item in Freeth’s *Annual*

17. Pritchard, ed., “Instructions of the East India Company,” 214.

18. Hosea Morse, ed., *The Chronicles of the East India Company, trading to China*, 5 vols. (Taipei: Ch’eng-wen, 1966–69), 2:161.

19. *Journals and Letters of Fanny Burney*, ed. Hemlow, 1:195 (18 June 1792).

20. *Register of the Times*, 1:183 (July 21–31, 1794).

21. See Hevia, *Cherishing Men from Afar*, 57–58.

22. Robert Markley, *The Far East and the English Imagination, 1600–1730* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 3.

Political Songster for 1794. Freeth mocks the embassy as a flight of Eastern fancy and a distraction from the crises facing British politics: “Whilst busy minds are o’er and o’er / The Rights of Man declaring, / The Eastern regions to explore, / Macartney is preparing.”²³ If Freeth suggests that the embassy can be thought of as a deliberate ploy by the British government to direct attention away from the questions of political legitimacy raised by Paine’s *Rights of Man* with fantasies of infinite wealth, he also explores it as a more general delusion afflicting British society, associating China throughout the song with images of bewitchment, speculation, and delusion. He reserves particular scorn for the idea that the embassy might be of relevance to local manufacturing, describing the “tranquil joys” that will spread through the Midlands when Macartney returns with Chinese orders for brass and steel: “The Town of Birmingham will reach / The Banks of fair Sabrina [the Severn]! / And larger then than Pekin be, / The Capital of China” (2).

Scepticism towards the stated economic rationale for the embassy can also be found in *A Pair of Lyric Epistles to Lord Macartney and his Ship* (1792), a satirical pamphlet published on the eve of Macartney’s departure from England by “Peter Pindar,” the pen-name of the Cornish poet John Wolcot (1738–1819). Pindar attacks Far Eastern trade as a “delightful whim” managed by, and for the benefit of, an economic elite, who see it as an opportunity to acquire *chinoiserie* knick-knacks.²⁴ Macartney’s embassy, with its painted ships, “gaudy gentlemen,” and “coaches just like gingerbread, so fine, / Amid the Asiatic world to shine,” is the product of a social elite that seems itself economically useless. Pindar imagines how it will appropriately disembark in a China resembling the one-dimensional Xanadu found on a Chinese screen or porcelain jar, with its pagodas, “mountains sky-enwrapp’d,” and “monkeys of Tou-fou” (15). But the poem also predicts that these fanciful illusions about the Chinese monarchy will be dispelled when Macartney confesses to the emperor that the rhetoric of reciprocal “trade” is a sham: “presents are the things we chiefly wish – / These give not half the toil we find in trade’. / On which th’ astonish’d

23. John Freeth, “Lord Macartney’s Embassy to China,” *The Annual Political Songster, with a preface on the times* (Birmingham, 1794), [1]–3.

24. Peter Pindar, *A Pair of Lyric Epistles to Lord Macartney and his Ship* (London, 1792), 14.

Empror cries, 'Odsfish! / Presents! – Present the rogues the Bastinade'" (17). The British, misled by the images on their imported *chinoiserie* goods, have formed an idea of China as an uneconomic realm of luxury collectibles: an error savagely corrected by the cane Qianlong applies to Macartney's bare buttocks.

An even more radical critique of the embassy is presented in an "Ode on Lord Macartney's Embassy to China" by the Unitarian minister William Shepherd (1768–1847). Echoing the Jacobin publisher Daniel Eaton, who had suggested that the embassy was a plot to "usurp the dominion of China," Shepherd portrays Macartney's ships as an invading army, opening not new markets but a new theatre of imperialism.²⁵ The poem, which was not published until 1797, but appears to have been composed in 1792–3, while Macartney was on his way to China, is written in the voice of a feminised "Cathay," redolent of the exotic narrators of Robert Burns's *The Slave's Lament* (1792) or Ann Yearsley's *Sorrows of Yamba* (1795). Standing on the Chinese coast, Cathay shakes with anger as she watches Macartney's ships approaching, which she recognises as "harbingers of woe," responsible for oppression in India and slavery in Africa.²⁶ Once again, however, China is the object of British miscalculation. Cathay is not the passive and sentimental narrator of contemporary anti-slavery poems, but the embodiment of a powerful empire who urges her people to reject Macartney's proposals: "when, with hollow hearts and honeyed tongues, / These slaves of gold advance their blood-stained hand, / Shrink from the touch—Remember India's wrongs—Remember Afric's woes—and save your destined land" (788).

George and Qianlong: A Meeting of Equals?

Planners of the Macartney Embassy had also flattered themselves that it would be a meeting, on equal terms, of the two foremost global monarchs: George III (r. 1760–1820), whose royal house had occupied the throne of England since 1714, and the Qianlong emperor, grandson of the renowned Kangxi emperor (r. 1661–1722), who had personally

25. Daniel Isaac Eaton, ed., *Politics for the People*, 2.12:184 (1794).

26. William Shepherd, "Ode on Lord Macartney's Embassy to China," in *The New Oxford Book of Eighteenth Century Verse*, ed. Roger Lonsdale (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), 787–88.

held power in China since 1735. The audacity of this claim to equality with the Chinese would have been obvious to contemporaries in Britain. The antiquity, vast population, and territorial extent of China were familiar from travellers' accounts and information provided by missionaries, and "Kien Long" enjoyed a formidable personal reputation in Europe as an aesthete and an enlightened ruler, resting in part on Jesuit descriptions of his gardens at Beijing,²⁷ and on translations of specimens of his poetry made in the 1770s, which were favourably received by authors including Voltaire.²⁸ The British government accordingly searches, with some anxiety, for appropriate rhetorical strategies to equate the two monarchs. Adopting a hyperbolic style imagined to be typical of Chinese imperial diction, George's royal epistle to Qianlong is addressed "To the Supreme Emperor of China Kien-Long worthy to live tens of thousands and tens of thousands thousand years," and lists "Sovereign of the Seas" among George's titles, invoking Britain's maritime power to balance China's greater territorial size.²⁹ In his introduction to the Chinese emperor, Macartney adopts the simpler strategy of presenting George as the uncontested monarch of a separate but equal hemisphere: the embassy, he declares, is a "compliment ... by the first Sovereign of the Western world to the Sovereign of the East."³⁰

The most famous of the Macartney Embassy satires, James Gillray's cartoon "The Reception of the Diplomatie & his Suite, at the Court of Pekin," specifically questions the idea of a reciprocal meeting between two enlightened empires.³¹ The corpulent Qianlong emperor fails to answer to European expectations of an enlightened despot, one hand clasped around an opium pipe and the other extended as if asking for a bribe. Before him, the British appear physically diminished

27. Jean-Denis Attiret, *A Particular Account of the Emperor of China's Gardens Near Pekin* (London, 1752).

28. See Qianlong's *Eloge de la ville de Moukden*, trans. Jean-Joseph-Marie Amiot (Paris, 1770), and his poem in praise of tea-drinking, an English translation of which is included in the second edition of William Chambers's *Dissertation on Oriental Gardening* (London, 1773), 118–21.

29. Quoted in Hevia, *Cherishing Men from Afar*, 60.

30. George Macartney, *An Embassy to China: Lord Macartney's Journal, 1793–1794*, ed. J. L. Cranmer-Byng (London: Routledge, 1962), 76.

31. James Gillray, "The Reception of the Diplomatie & his Suite, at the Court of Pekin" (London, September 1792).



James Gillray, “The Reception of the Diplomatique & his Suite, at the Court of Peking,” 14 September 1792.³²

by their lavish Oriental surroundings. Although Macartney cuts a relatively dignified figure on one knee, the East India Company officials behind him, apparently ignorant that this is to be a meeting of equals, cower with their backsides in the air. In the background, a hot air balloon bearing George III's crest is on the verge of being punctured by a gilded Chinese roof dragon. For Gillray, the embassy exposes a more general delusion, on the part of the British government, about its relative cultural status in the world. Macartney's gifts—supposedly samples of cutting-edge British technology—are exposed as low-quality trinkets: children's toys, a rat-trap (neatly symbolising the British plight), a miniature version of the carriage admired by Frances

32. Public domain image, reproduced at http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/7/78/The_reception_of_the_diplomatique_and_his_suite_at_the_Court_of_Pekin_by_James_Gillray.jpg.

Burney, and a copy of John Boydell's edition of Shakespeare's works (an analogy with the embassy is suggested here, as Boydell's work had earlier been satirised by Gillray as a speculative venture prompted by greed).³³ As in Freeth's "Ode," the satire on diplomatic misjudgement is finally extended to broader eighteenth-century tropes of delusion, with a windmill and a hobby-horse included among Macartney's gifts, referencing the farcical madness of Cervantes and Sterne.

A more personal and vituperative attack on the government's attempts to equate George with Qianlong is found in Pindar's *Odes to Kien Long* (1792), yet another pamphlet published on the eve of the embassy, which in its central conceit of a letter addressed to Qianlong follows Voltaire's "Epître au roi de la Chine" (1770). Pindar had won fame as a satirist of George III with his mock-heroic poem *The Lousiad* (1785), which lampooned the king for ordering the heads of his cooks to be shaved after a louse was found on his plate. Where the louse allows the satirist to hold a magnifying glass up to George's flaws, the Macartney Embassy offers an opportunity for an alternative comedy of scale, in which George is made to appear Lilliputian in comparison to an exaggerated "Chinese" ideal.

In mockery of the embassy's rhetoric of reciprocal encounter, Pindar proposes to open a "*literary commerce*" between the two nations (in which his pamphlet will be a free sample of goods) based, not on the circulation of material goods, but on the exchange of comparative models of government.³⁴ His pamphlet consists of a series of odes on the virtues of kingship, in which *The Monthly Review* detected "much satire on Royalty in a *nearer part of the world*."³⁵ Qianlong is praised for his learning ("the souls of many Kings are vulgar entries, / With not a rushlight 'midst the dismal winding") and his martial strength ("Thou art a second Atlas, great Kien Long; / Supporting half th' unwieldy globe, so strong; But, Lord! What pigmy souls to empire rise!").³⁶ Pindar reminds his readers of the relevance of *this* "commerce" to the nation, given the recent damage to the institution of monarchy caused by the French Revolution: "such horrid scenes, / Such little rev'rence

33. See Gillray, "Shakespeare-Sacrificed; or The Offering to Avarice" (1789).

34. Peter Pindar, *Odes to Kien Long, the present emperor of China* (London, 1792),

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35. *Monthly Review* 9:276 (Sept – Dec 1792).

36. Pindar, *Odes to Kien Long*, 24, 8.

both for Kings and Queens!” (12). The enlightened ideal represented by Qianlong allows Pindar to triangulate his criticism: the British monarchy is defended against the instability of the French Revolution, but only from a perspective that locates George in the lowest rungs of a global hierarchy of rulers.

Debating the Causes of Macartney's Failure

By the spring of 1794, satires speculating about what would happen in China had begun to be complemented by eyewitness reports of Macartney's embassy, transmitted back from Canton and published in the London press. The earliest of these reports bear the hallmarks of government propaganda: a brief but glowing report in *The Oracle* in May 1794, for example, claims that the ambassador had been received “with the highest marks of distinction and respect,” and that his mission had ended with “the fairest appearances of the most favourable issue, and the establishment of solid and extensive advantages to Great Britain.”³⁷ During the summer of that year, however, a series of more negative and more accurate reports appeared, some from merchants at Canton, some apparently from embassy sources.³⁸ These differ in important details, particularly in their descriptions of events in the imperial palace: in a letter of 5 August, for example, Charles Burney puzzles over conflicting reports of whether Macartney had performed the kowtow before the emperor.³⁹ All agree, however, that Macartney's requests had been ignominiously rejected. By the following year, the lawyer and essayist Francis Plowden could sum up the emerging public consensus: despite efforts by the government “to fascinate the people

37. *The Oracle and Public Advertiser*, 28 May 1794.

38. The most widely-circulated and most accurate of these reports is that published in *The Star* on 28 July 1794, advertised as “received from one of our Correspondents in India by the last ships.” Apparently based upon information from a senior embassy source, it provides a detailed relation of events at Jehol, including dates and names of Chinese officials. Another report, published in the *Morning Chronicle* on 4 August, is attributed to an anonymous EIC official. Quoting from a translated excerpt from the “Pekin Gazette,” this claims that Macartney failed to perform the kowtow. A third version of events is provided in a letter from a merchant at Canton, dated 14 October 1793, originally published in the *Calcutta Gazette* and reprinted in *The New Annual Register*, September 1794, 55–57.

39. Charles Burney, letter to Mrs Crewe, 5 August 1794, copy held by Burney Centre, McGill University.

into a persuasion, that the enormous expences of Lord Macartney's embassy to China had procured the greatest commercial and other advantages to this country ... the total and disgraceful failure in the objects of that embassy is a matter of melancholy notoriety."⁴⁰ One anonymous East India Company merchant went further, attacking the embassy as a huge disruption to the trade in Canton: "I never saw such a stagnation to trade in China during the many years that I have been engaged in the service."⁴¹

The official responses of Britain's political elite to this failure can be located on a spectrum ranging from denial to imperialist aggression. The second-ranking official Sir George Staunton uses his two-volume *Authentic Account* of the embassy (which did not appear until late 1797) to claim that, although the Chinese court is admittedly "guided by maxims peculiar to itself" and suspicious of outsiders,⁴² a "firm foundation" (1.28) has been laid for future success: as proof of this, he points to numerous successful interactions with Chinese officials, as well as symbolic victories such as the supposed adoption of British cloth at the Chinese court. Other members of the embassy, by contrast, perceive a more intractable "barrier" to British demands, which they attribute to corruption or irrationality at the Chinese court. Samuel Holmes, a foot-soldier in the embassy guard, writes in his private journal of his bafflement at Macartney's expulsion from Beijing: a catastrophe that he can attribute only to "the unaccountable jealousy, and strange conduct of the Chinese."⁴³ One anonymous report received from Canton in 1794 blames the impasse on the corruption of Chinese mandarins, who "were not addressed in the *feeling* manner they expected," and on malicious rumours spread about the British by "the Native Princes of India."⁴⁴ However, the most candid expressions of cultural bafflement and reflexive anger at Chinese "obstructionism" can be found in the final sections of Macartney's journal, which figure Qianlong's government as a decaying tree, and as an "old, crazy, First

40. Francis Plowden, *A Short History of the British Empire During the Year 1794* (London, 1795).

41. *The Morning Chronicle*, 4 August 1794.

42. Staunton, *Authentic Account*, 1: 23.

43. Holmes, *Journal of Mr. Samuel Holmes*, 149–50.

44. "Particular Narrative of the Late Embassy to China," *The Gentleman's Magazine*, 64.2 (August 1794): 708–11.

rate man-of-war" which "may drift some time as a wreck, and will then be dashed to pieces on the shore."⁴⁵ These imperialist metaphors suggest, for perhaps the first time in British discourse on China, the necessity of British intervention to "stabilise" the nation. In the decade following the embassy, however, such fantasies of rhetorical violence towards China largely remain confined to the privacy of journal entries, rather than entering public debate.

By contrast, popular debate in England overwhelmingly responds to Macartney's failure by turning a sceptical "Chinese gaze" onto British conduct and ideological assumptions. Horace Walpole writes to the Countess of Ossory in August 1794 that he was not at all surprised by news of Macartney's "miscarriage," "nor can help admiring the prudence of the Chinese: they would be distracted to connect with Europeans, and cannot be ignorant of our usurpations in India."⁴⁶ Peter Pindar uses an "Ode to the Lion Ship of War, on her Return with the Embassy from China" (1795) to celebrate the accuracy of his earlier predictions of British failure, mocking attempts to blame Chinese "pride" for the impasse: "'tis universally allow'd / That Eastern Monarchs are prodigious proud; / Unlike the *humble* Monarchs of the West— / Such kind and pliable and gentle creatures!"⁴⁷

In addition, given the ideological function played by the kowtow as a symbol of Chinese cultural incompatibility with the West in nineteenth-century discourse, it comes as a surprise to find that Britons in the 1790s were more likely to view Macartney's haggling over the ceremony as an act of pride which had needlessly damaged diplomatic prospects. One report in the press quotes a mandarin at the Chinese court named "Chin-ta-gin," who "on finding what hindered the business from going on, very shrewdly remarked, that he thought it strange that an ambassador, who had come such a great distance professedly to compliment the Emperor, should commence his business by contending about formalities."⁴⁸ This line of argument resonated with the

45. Macartney, *Journal*, 212–13 (2–7 January, 1794).

46. Horace Walpole, letter to Lady Ossory (3 August 1794), in W.S. Lewis et al., ed., *The Yale Edition of Horace Walpole's Correspondence* (New Haven Yale University Press, 1965), 34: 202.

47. Pindar, "Ode to the Lion Ship of War, On her Return with the Embassy from China," in *Pindariana; or Peter's Portfolio* (London, 1794–95), 225–28, 225.

48. *The Gentleman's Magazine*, 64.2:709 (August 1794). Napoleon was said to have adopted a similar argument in denouncing British conduct in the Macartney

British public: the *European Magazine* denounced Macartney's "singularity" in refusing to kowtow as "nonsensical scrupulousness."⁴⁹ Barrow later acknowledged "a very mistaken notion that prevailed on the return of the embassy, which was, that an unconditional compliance of Lord Macartney with all the humiliating ceremonies which the Chinese might have thought proper to exact from him, would have been productive of results more favourable to the views of the embassy."⁵⁰

The public desire to question the narratives about China provided by politicians and diplomats helps to shape the presentation of first-hand "knowledge" about the embassy in the years following Macartney's return. Capitalising on the absence of official reports of the embassy, the London publisher John Debrett produces an unofficial *Narrative of the British Embassy* in April 1795. Significantly, this text, which would be the only available travel account of the embassy until the appearance of Staunton's *Authentic Account* in late 1797, is not attributed to a senior embassy member, but to Macartney's valet de chambre, Aeneas Anderson. The account proved popular, running into multiple editions and abridgements,⁵¹ although the reaction from embassy officials was predictably hostile: Barrow dismissed it as "a work vamped up by a London bookseller as a speculation that could not fail; so greatly excited was public curiosity at the return of the embassy."⁵² The account adopts a dissonant and often hostile "backstairs" perspective on events in China, and although it largely adheres to the conventions of the travel genre, a number of passages seem polished for satirical effect by Anderson or his ghost-writer.⁵³ Perhaps demonstrating the old adage that no man is a hero to his own valet, Anderson lays principal blame for the embassy's failure on Macartney's mismanagement. He indiscreetly mentions Macartney's frequent episodes of gout, and

and Amherst embassies: "It certainly is an extraordinary presumption for you to attempt to regulate the etiquette of the palace of Peking by that of St. James'." See Barry Edward O'Meara, *Napoleon in Exile* (London, 1822), 113.

49. *The European Magazine*, 33:258 (April 1798).

50. Barrow, *Travels in China*, 7.

51. See Laurence Williams, "Plagiarism and the Macartney Embassy to China (1792–94): The Manuscript of Stephen Else," *Notes and Queries* 59.3 (2012) for a discussion of the reception of Anderson's account and its uses by rival publishers.

52. Barrow, *Travels in China*, 579.

53. This ghost-writer may have been William Combe: see ESTC, T139455.

describes how, as a result of the ambassador's decision to buy uniforms for his servants cheaply and second-hand in London, the embassy was made to parade in front of the emperor in ill-fitting and clashing costumes bearing the livery of Monsieur de la Luzerne, the late French ambassador.⁵⁴ He concludes, in a sentence that was widely quoted in the press,⁵⁵ that the British "entered Pekin like paupers; we remained in it like prisoners; and we quitted it like vagrants" (181).

In his description of the British reception at Beijing, Anderson develops an idea, familiar from earlier satires on the embassy, of the Chinese as rational and impartial observers who are horrified by the morals of British elites. Although Anderson is careful to refrain from specific criticisms of the government or East India Company, his satire alludes in a general way to a number of political concerns of the period, including the war in Europe, the government repression of the Reform movement (such as the suspension of habeas corpus in May 1794), and the continuing debates over slavery. When Macartney presents a set of ornamental cannons to the emperor, Anderson reports (in an echo of the King of Brobdingnag's horror at Gulliver's account of his home country) that "his Majesty admired the skill and ingenuity of these engines of destruction, but deprecated the spirit of a people who employed them; nor could he reconcile their improvements in the system of destruction to the benign spirit which they represented as the soul and operating principle of their religion" (180).⁵⁶ Similarly, a Chinese merchant at Canton reacts to the sight of Staunton's African slave, bought at Batavia, with disgust "that the British nation should suffer a trade so disgraceful to that humanity which they were so ready to express," and (rather improbably) expresses his admiration for the campaigns of "good mandarin Willforce [sic]" (272–73).

Anderson claims, however, that the event which most damages the British standing in China—and which leads to their swift expulsion from Beijing—is Macartney's decision to flog a private named James

54. Anderson, *Narrative of the British Embassy*, 122.

55. See *The Annual Register* (1794), 264; *The Analytical Review* 21:374 (January – June 1795); *The Monthly Review* 19:378 (1796).

56. The satire on the unintended consequences of the British gifts was developed in a more comedic direction by a 1797 jest published in the London press, attributing the failure to Qianlong's rage at being presented with a patent water closet. See "The Embassy to China," reprinted in *The Spirit of the Public Journals for 1797* (London, 1798), 106–8.

Cootie in public for smuggling a bottle of rum. Macartney has assumed that, as an “Oriental” nation, the Chinese will be impressed by this example of discipline; in fact, in a neat inversion of stereotypes about Eastern “despotism,” the Chinese are horrified at what they see as an “act of tyranny”: “One of the principal mandarins, who knew a little of the English language, expressed his own sentiments, and those of his brethren, by saying, ‘Englishman too much cruel, too much bad’” (163–4). Summing up the reasons for Macartney’s failure, Anderson rejects the idea that blame is to be placed principally upon “the jealousy of the Chinese government”: instead, he argues, the main factor was “disgust or prejudice proceeding from misconduct, and mismanagement in the embassy itself” (180). Balancing *economic* and *moral* considerations in a way Macartney, with his narrow focus on “trade,” cannot comprehend, the Chinese have judged the British unworthy to be trading partners.

Promoting William Pitt to Chinese “Choulah”: Mathias’s Tory Riposte

A conservative riposte to these satires, by Thomas James Mathias (1754–1835), a treasurer in the queen’s household, attempts to adapt the conventions of “Chinese” satire to defend the embassy. In an implicit response to Pindar’s *Odes to Kien Long*, Mathias uses the device of a reply written from Qianlong to George to defend the reciprocal ideals on which the embassy was founded, while turning a sceptical gaze upon Whigs and reformers at home. The resulting *Imperial Epistle from Kien Long, Emperor of China, to George the Third* (1795), which Mathias humorously claims to have “Translated into English Verse from the original Chinese Poetry” after perusing the first ninety-five volumes of the Kangxi Dictionary,⁵⁷ is addressed in gratitude to “the Power, whose well-fraught vessels bore / Thy lov’d Macartney to my friendly shore” (11). Although unable to pretend that Macartney’s *trade* requests were granted, Mathias portrays the embassy as a *cultural* success which has opened up new forms of connection between the two nation’s governments. Qianlong hails George as an “Imperial Brother,”

57. Thomas James Mathias, *The Imperial Epistle from Kien Long, Emperor of China, to George the Third* (London, 1795), ii.

praises Tory economic policy towards China (particularly the 1784 Commutation Act), and (implicitly brushing aside Anderson's carping about the poor effect produced by Macartney's procession) offers the British government a "Triumphal Entry into the Court of Peking" (15), headed by Pitt in the robes of a Chinese mandarin:

O, that my longing eye Pitt's form might greet,
Triumphant borne through Peking's crowded street,
In boots of silk and satten's trailing length,
Choulah supreme! (13–14)

The final sections of the epistle offer "Qianlong's" perspective, as head of a four thousand year-old empire, on the instability caused by the French Revolution. Making apocalyptic predictions of Europe's fate if "dire Equality" (38) prevails, the emperor urges Britain to respond with a Burkean recommitment to the values of its constitution: "What, but experience, makes a kingdom just? / Fix'd on her ancient base let England rest" (39). If George's Britain lies in the front lines of this struggle, Qianlong's China becomes imagined as a complementary realm of distance and tranquillity, from where the emperor can provide historical perspective and poetic commemoration.

But Mathias's defence of the embassy is complicated by the difficulty of bringing the British and Chinese governments together, without also suggesting a satirical imbalance between the two sides. The opening lines, in which Qianlong hails George as a fellow "Friend of the Muse" (9)—based, Mathias explains in a footnote, on the latter's regard for Handel and patronage of the Royal Academy—seems to reinforce, rather than refute, Pindar's satires on George's learning. In addition, the idea of Pitt's apotheosis, from British prime minister into all-powerful Chinese "choulah," inevitably suggests Whig criticisms of Pitt's ambition and misuse of power. This line of satire is developed further in a footnote to the passage by Mathias: "Mr. Pitt's ambition will never rest in the Premier's office in such a little island as Great Britain, after such an offer from the Emperor of becoming, Chief of the Chief" (14).⁵⁸ One contemporary reviewer of the poem expressed displeasure that the anti-government spirit of satirical excess suggested

58. It is possible that, through information from returning embassy members, Mathias had learned about the current "choulah," Heshen (1746–99), and in particular of his reputation for corruption (for which he was later deposed from power).

by China had been allowed to undermine Mathias's conservative political aims: "satire is a weapon with so many edges, that it is well if he who wields it does not cut his fingers."⁵⁹

From Satire to Imperialism, 1795–1804

The years following Macartney's embassy can be understood, not so much as a *turning point* in relations with China, than as a *period of flux*, in which narratives explaining the causes of Macartney's "failure" and its long-term implications for relations between the two countries had yet to win general acceptance. Although the volume of satires on the embassy diminishes after 1795, as the event gradually fades from public attention, the tendency among commentators to turn a reflexive "Chinese gaze" onto British assumptions and actions persists in discussions of the embassy over the following decade. One commentator in 1803 presents Macartney's failure as a historical crux still balanced between two opposing points of view: "the failure of [the embassy] has been ascribed by some authors to the narrow and jealous spirit of Chinese policy, while others have affected to discover in it a superior degree of wisdom and prudence in the government of China."⁶⁰ Even Abraham Rees's *Cyclopaedia* (1802–20) temporarily discards the stance of academic impartiality, to claim, in the entry on "China" in its 1807 volume, that the Chinese "have wisely prevented the European nations, who have overthrown all the other eastern governments, from obtaining a footing in China."⁶¹

It is not until a decade after Macartney's return that Barrow's *Travels in China* (1804) inaugurates a new phase in imperialist discourse on China by placing an explicitly aggressive and hostile interpretation of the embassy before the public. As William Jardine Proudfoot acknowledged in a book-length critique of Barrow's *Travels* published in 1861, immediately after the Second Opium War, its views played a crucial role in shaping nineteenth-century historiography of the embassy, and

59. *The British Critic* 6:230 (July–Dec 1795).

60. Rev. Thomas Smith, *The Wonders of Nature and Art*, 6 (1803): 96.

61. Abraham Rees, ed., *The Cyclopaedia: or, Universal Dictionary of Arts, Sciences, and Literature*, vol. 7 (London, 1807: 1819 title-page), entry for "China," n.p. This attitude to the embassy is particularly noteworthy given that the compiler of this entry credits Barrow's *Travels*, which had recently appeared, as a major source of information.

“still continue to exercise their pernicious influence with commentators on the middle kingdom.”⁶² Barrow’s foreword, which warns that his opinions on China will be found “very different from the almost universally received opinion,” prepares the readers for a narrative that aggressively rejects the comments made by previous critics of the embassy, including Aeneas Anderson as well as the later French writers David Charpentier de Cossigny and Louis de Grammont.⁶³ Barrow presents China as a barren land devoid of the cultural fascination it had held for eighteenth-century missionaries, portrays court ritual as obfuscation intended to conceal military weakness, and dismisses any hope for future diplomacy: “what advantages can reasonably be expected to accrue from a servile and unconditional compliance with the submissions required by this haughty government?” (11).

Seen in the context of the popular debates on the embassy that had raged in the 1790s, it is clear that Barrow’s vision of China is developed in aggressive reaction to the success of earlier satirical criticisms. The *Travels* operates through a series of rhetorical and satirical inversions, in which criticisms originally directed at British elites for their failure to live up to the “Chinese ideal” are displaced onto the Chinese themselves. David Porter has argued that Barrow’s descriptions of Chinese imperial palaces at Beijing are created by borrowing a “stylistic critique” originally directed at eighteenth-century chinoiserie buildings in the gardens of British elites: that they were gaudy facades covering shoddily-built structures.⁶⁴ Similarly, Barrow’s observations on Qianlong’s government invert the criticisms previously levelled at George III by satirists in the 1790s. Where Gillray had mocked the British monarchy for its presumption in equating itself to the Chinese, Barrow presents readers with a tottering government which clings to “absurd notions of its own vast importance” (24). Where Pindar had argued that the British monarchy was unable to conceive of international trade except as luxury “presents” rendered to the imperial centre, Barrow makes this a fundamental aspect of the “Chinese” economic world-view. Where Anderson had attacked Macartney for his undignified conduct, Barrow depicts a “manly and open” ambassador who

62. William Jardine Proudfoot, *Barrow’s Travels in China. An Investigation into the Origin and Authenticity ...* (London, 1861), 17.

63. Barrow, *Travels in China*, n.p.

64. Porter, *Ideographia*, 235.

resists Chinese attempts to humiliate him (17). And where public opinion had suggested that Macartney had allowed the cultural connection to become derailed by his pride over trivial questions of ritual, Barrow creates the mirror image of a Chinese government perversely determined to use the “vain and arrogant” kowtow ceremony to obstruct proceedings (13). The satires of the 1790s can thus be seen, through their influence on Barrow, to exercise indirect but lasting influence on the development of nineteenth-century historiography of the embassy. They also raise broader questions about the extent to which the “imperial gaze” of nineteenth-century Orientalism can be seen as an inversion of the earlier “satirical gaze” turned against the West by powerful Eastern empires in eighteenth-century fictions.

This debate can be seen to determine the place China would occupy in the nineteenth-century geopolitical imagination. If British officials had begun the decade with fantasies of a union between two equal global empires—the Sovereign of the Seas meeting the emperor of the Middle Kingdom—they had by its end moved closer to Macartney’s metaphors of China as a rotting tree or anchorless ship, ready for British intervention and direction. By contrast, the satires discussed above present a more realistic idea of China as a space beyond the reach of British power, in which a government that appeared unaccountable at home might be held to account by enlightened outsiders. These satires abound in images of powerful Britons cut down to size by an autonomous and sceptical gaze: their samples of British arts and science are shown to be useless trinkets; they are made to parade with asses and pigs; and they are dismissed from Beijing with the parting admonition: “Now, children, ye may all go home agen.”⁶⁵ For the majority of Britons in the 1790s, five decades before the first Opium War, China could be understood as a limit point for British global ambitions: a place where Macartney and his officials arrive thinking themselves the sovereigns of the Western world, but are told to pack up their toys and go home.

65. Pindar, “Pair of Lyric Epistles,” 19.

Appendix: Satires Inspired by the Macartney Embassy

- Anderson, Aeneas. *A Narrative of the British Embassy to China* (London, 1795).
- Anon. *Ode, to the Right Honourable W—P—*, in *An Asylum for Fugitive Pieces*, 4 vols. (London, 1793), vol. 4, 11–16.
- . “Translation of the Copy of Verses, for his Majesty, delivered to Lord Macartney, by the Emperor,” *The Morning Chronicle* (2 August 1794).
- . “The Embassy to China,” reprinted in *The Spirit of the Public Journals for 1797* (London, 1798), 106–8.
- . *The Chinese Dinner, A Fact, Which Occurred During Lord Macartney's Embassy to China*. By Old Nick (London, 1805) (cartoon).
- Church, Edward. “Dedication to the Emperor of China,” in *The Inquisitive Traveller: A Poetic Essay* (London, 1802), [163]–182.
- Freeth, John. “Lord Macartney's Embassy to China,” in *The Annual Political Songster, with a preface on the times* (Birmingham, 1794), [1]–3.
- Gillray, James. “The Reception of the Diplomatique & his Suite, at the Court of Pekin” (London, 1792) (cartoon).
- Mathias, Thomas James. *The Imperial Epistle from Kien Long, Emperor of China, to George the Third* (London, 1795).
- Pindar, Peter. *A Pair of Lyric Epistles to Lord Macartney and his Ship* (London, 1792).
- . *Odes to Kien Long, the present emperor of China* (London, 1792).
- . “A Panegyric on Tea, by Kien Long,” in *Pindariana; or Peter's Portfolio* (London, 1794–5), 24–27.
- . “Ode to Coffee. In the Manner of Kien Long,” in *Pindariana; or Peter's Portfolio* (London, 1794–5), 27–28.
- . “Ode to the Lion Ship of War, On her Return with the Embassy from China,” in *Pindariana; or Peter's Portfolio* (London, 1794–5), 225–28.
- . “Frogmore Fête,” in *Hair Powder; A Plaintive Epistle to Mr. Pitt ... to which is added (with considerable augmentation) Frogmore Fête, an ode for music* (London, 1795), 29–42.
- “S.D.” “Ode to Peter Pindar, On the Subject of Lord Macartney's Embassy,” in *The Kentish Register* (August 1794), 312.
- Shepherd, William. “Ode on Lord Macartney's Embassy to China” (1797), in *The New Oxford Book of Eighteenth Century Verse*, ed. Roger Lonsdale (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), 787–88.