REVIEW: Caroline M. Stevenson (2021), *Britain’s Second Embassy to China: Lord Amherst’s ‘Special Mission’ to the Jiaqing Emperor in 1816* (Canberra: ANU Press).

***Professor Niki J.P. Alsford (University of Central Lancashire)***

On 1 July, 2021, Beijing celebrated the centennial of the founding the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). The party claims its origins in the May Fourth Movement in 1919, a Chinese anti-imperialist movement that grew out of the student protests in Beijing on 4 May 1919, during which radical thought, born in the West, such as anarchism and Marxism, gained traction among the Chinese intellectual elite. At the centre of this was ‘a set of ideas that has shaped China’s momentous twentieth century’ (Mitter, 2004:12). The events leading up to the protest were a culmination of factors centred on the perceived belief that the weakness of their nation. China’s entry into the First World War in 1914, two years after the disintegration of the Qing dynasty and an end of Chinese imperial rule, witnessed 140,000 Chinese labourers entering the Western Front as part of the Chinese Labour Corps. At the Paris Peace Conference in 1919, Chinese delegates called upon ‘The Powers’ to end all privileges and to return territory that Japan had taken from Germany during the War. As the delegates deliberated and moved on to the signing of the Treaty of Versailles, the Chinese voice was silenced, and instead of returning Shandong to China, these were handed to Japan.

After the founding of the Peoples’ Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, and the expulsion of the Chinese Nationalists from the mainland, the ‘Century of Humiliation’ became a moniker used in China to describe the years of intervention and subjugation of China by the West and Japan between 1839 and 1949. It was the defeat of the Qing Empire by the British in what is referred as the First Opium War (1839-1842) that for many was seen as the catalyst for its eventual downfall.

From the mid-seventeenth century, the insatiable demand amongst Europeans for Chinese goods drove European trade with China. Such trade favoured the Chinese, and most European trading nations sustained large trade deficits as demand continued to grow. In 1793 George Macartney led Britain’s first envoy to China. The delegation met with the Qianlong Emperor, who rejected all British requests. The Emperor reiterating that ‘our Celestial Empire possesses all things in prolific abundance and lacks no product within its borders.’ Britain simply had nothing to offer and was in no position at that moment to enforce its demands. The mission and its failure to achieve its objectives is well known, and countless books and articles on the history of Anglo-Chinese relations recount this meeting.

The Macartney mission was not the last to try and break the Qing Empire. In 1816, William Pitt Amherst, the future Governor-General of India (1823-1828) was sent as ambassador with the objective of establishing commercial relations. On his arrival in what is today Baihe, Amherst was given to understand that he could only be admitted into the court of the Jiaqing Emperor on the condition that he perform a kowtow. Amherst refused to consent. As a consequence, he was refused entry into the city. Since Amherst failed to secure an audience with the Emperor, the embassy has largely gone unnoticed, or is just simply mentioned as part of a wider historical analysis. Caroline Stevenson’s *Britain’s Second Embassy to China* is a wonderful examination of this greater-than-Macartney-failure.

Central to Stevenson’s analysis is a question on why the British believed that the Amherst Embassy would succeed in its objectives at the Qing court when the better-prepared Macartney Embassy failed. For Stevenson, this rested on a belief that the Macartney Embassy had succeeded in establishing a new basis for diplomatic conduct between China and Britain. Set over 12 chapters, Stevenson’s book follows Amherst chronologically from initial discussions in London with John Barrow to Amherst’s overland journey to Canton. The final two chapters explore the reaction at home and offer a reflection on the embassy. For the most part this had little impact on British public attitudes towards China. For Stevenson, however, published accounts of the mission solidified earlier views that China was ‘stagnant and dull’ and that ‘people suffered from a lack of freedom and progress’ and that the Chinese officials were both ‘pretentious and arrogant’ (p.289).

Stevenson’s book makes a significant contribution to scholarship of Anglo-Chinese relations in the nineteenth century. In addition, it offers a useful point of reference to our current understanding of UK/China relations. The book is useful in understanding the history behind the gunboat diplomacy widely employed during the Century of Humiliation and how the subsequent ‘set of ideas’ born out of the May Fourth Movement have shaped the legitimacy of the CCP. The only concern that I had, though I will point out that Stevenson does address this limitation, is the lack of Chinese-language material, the use of which would have provided a more nuanced discussion concerning Amherst’s embassy and would have significantly added to the chapter on the reactions towards the embassy. This said, Stevenson was clear that her point of discussion was within the English-language material. As such, Stevenson’s book will be useful for both students and researchers exploring Chinese history from an Anglophone perspective from the early nineteenth century.

Rana Mitter (2004) *A Bitter Revolution: China’s Struggle with the Modern World* (Oxford: OUP).