Xin Liu

Re-Evaluating the Earliest Anglo-Chinese Encounters: An Analysis of Under-Studied Documents from 1553 to 1795

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Abstract: The Macartney Embassy has long been known as the first official Anglo-Chinese encounter, whose failure has been extensively studied. This article makes use of five little known historical documents to re-evaluate these earliest encounters, including the first English attempt at trading with China in 1553; the first letter addressed to the King of China in 1583; the 1787 letter intended to be carried by the first ambassador to China; the 1793 Qing Court Memorial with Qianlong Emperor's comments; and the 1795 reply from King George III to the Qianlong Emperor's letter brought back by Macartney. These under-researched documents not only contextualise the Anglo-Chinese encounters in moving back the timeline to the mid-sixteenth century, but also reveal the underpinning incompatible world views as the much more fundamental reasons behind the failure of the Macartney Embassy, which are still highly relevant and illuminating for understanding today's relationship between China and the West.

Keywords: Anglo-Chinese encounters, under-researched documents, Macartney Embassy, China's relations with the West

1. Introduction

A common Chinese saying likens history to a "long course of river." If the historic empires of Britain and China are vessels navigating this river, this article seeks to explore the people and incidents that played pivotal roles in steering them toward their earliest encounters. These individuals and incidents, often

overlooked or overshadowed by major historical events, hold significant yet underappreciated influence. For example, when the history of Anglo-Chinese relations is discussed in the UK today, it normally begins with the Macartney Embassy in 1793, which has long been known as the first official Anglo-Chinese encounter whose failure has become a setback in Britain's expansive past on its way to conquer the world. Meanwhile in China, the first phrase that comes to people's minds is probably the "Century of Humiliation" started by the First Opium War in 1840[1], which is treated as the event marking the very beginning of modern Chinese history. In this sense, we may argue that Great Britain[2] has an influential and complex role in modern Chinese history.

However, far fewer people may realize that China is equally intertwined with Britain's identity as a global trading power and as a "tea-drinking nation." Its attempt at trading with the remote Empire of Cathay started as early as 1553 during the reign of King Edward VI, and the first letter of credence addressed to the King of China was from Queen Elizabeth I in 1583 to engage in "mutual trade." When these early attempts during the sixteenth century were made, the English lagged behind the Portuguese, Spanish and Dutch, so they endeavored to explore a new sea route shortcut via the Northeast and Northwest passages. Then during the reign of King George III, the first official mission was sent to China in 1787. Unfortunately, the first ambassador Colonel Charles Cathcart died en route, hence the Macartney Embassy dispatched five years later became more commonly known as the first embassy. Despite the extensive studies carried out to explore the multiple reasons behind its failure, three historical documents were almost forgotten in both the Chinese-speaking and the English-speaking worlds: the first and most important is the 1787 letter from King George III to the Chinese emperor along with the 17-page long, very detailed instructions to the first ambassador. They were only published in 1859 in an English translation

1 The Chinese narrative normally puts 1840 as the start of the Opium War, when the British naval force arrived off Canton; while in the UK, it normally puts the start time at 1839, when a skirmish occurred between British and Chinese vessels after Chinese troops were ordered to board British ships to destroy the opium.

2 Great Britain was formed in 1707 when the Kingdom of England united with Scotland; therefore, "English" was used in this paper for specific reference to the British before 1707.

of an unpublished manuscript of *A Journal of the First French Embassy to China, 1698-1700*, written by an engineer sailing with the first French embassy to China. The translator Saxe Bannister supplemented the original account with a lengthy introduction and included the two documents as appendices, believing that there was an "urgent need of better intelligence respecting China" and "of improved principles of intercourse with the Chinese," even wanting to prove that "the general opinion respecting the dislike of Foreigners by the Chinese, erroneous," as the Chinese government was "well disposed in the last two centuries to encourage friendly intercourse with foreign governments" (Bannister 1859, 1). Notably, the book was published in 1859, during the Second Opium War (1856-1860), representing a different stance to the British government, which may have contributed to the little-known status of the book. When it was republished online in 2013 by the Cambridge University Press as its library collection, its aim to "promote a more peaceful and balanced attitude towards China" was described as "a useful example of scholarly propaganda." We are not here to judge its value as propaganda, but the actual historical documents included in the book is highly valuable in piecing together the context of the Macartney Embassy.

The other two documents include the 1793 Qing Court Memorial with Qianlong Emperor's comments regarding the gifts presented by the Macartney Embassy, and the 1795 reply from King George III to the letter from the Qianlong Emperor brought back by the embassy. These under-researched documents not only contextualise the Anglo-Chinese encounters in moving back the timeline to the mid-sixteenth century, but also reveal the much more fundamental reasons underpinning the early adventures and the failure of the diplomatic mission, which are still highly relevant and illuminating for understanding today's relationship between China and the West.

2. From 1553 to 1583, the Explorations of the Northeast and Northwest Passages

The Age of Discovery completely changed the world. It gave people from island nations a new vision that regarded the ocean as a transcontinental

contact zone rather than a barrier to communication. As well said by Boorstin (1983, 154), before the fifteenth century, "the ocean led nowhere, in the next centuries people would see it led everywhere." Seafaring nations such as Portugal and Spain emerged as the greatest naval and commercial powers in the world, developing a most profitable network of seaborne commerce. Although China's Admiral Zheng He set sail for seven voyages (1405-1433) decades earlier than Columbus, trade and discovery were not the main driving forces. The voyages did not bring back many samples for trade or ground-breaking new knowledge to influence and inform China's world view as an agrarian civilisation. The Ming Dynasty of China believed that centralised ruling tended to lose its grip and face challenges when stretched to the nomadic and maritime regions; thus it turned inward-focused, withdrew behind the Great Wall along the northern border, and enhanced maritime defence along the southeast coast. This formed a contrast to the outward-focused Britain.

Since the Portuguese had monopolised the sea route round the Cape of Good Hope following the expedition of Magellan into the East Indies across the Pacific Ocean, the English turned their eyes to the possibility of discovering a new route to the fabled land of Cathay[3], either along the northern shores of Europe and Asia known as the Northeast Passage, or around the northern parts of the American continent known as the Northwest Passage. Foster's (1933) chronological account of *England's Quest of Eastern Trade* started with the first chapter titled "Willoughby and Chancellor Seek Cathay" in 1553, as at that time, the manufacture of woollen cloth in England was outstripping the demands of the home market. Sebastian Cabot, a Venetian explorer who led expeditions to find a Northwest Passage through North America in 1508-1509, acted as the chief advisor for the English venture and along with Richard Chancellor and Sir Hugh Willoughby, aimed to seek a new trade route to Cathay via the Northeast Passage. Three ships were outfitted and crewed, which departed from

3 Ancient China was known as Cathay in Marco Polo's book; it was later confirmed by Matteo Ricci in 1601 that Cathay *was* China in one of his letters sent back to Europe.

London's Deptford Docks on 10 May 1553 (Foster 1933, 9).

A letter from King Edward VI was carried during this expedition "toward the mighty Empire of Cathay." It is most interesting to read to whom the letter was addressed: "To all Kings, Princes, Rulers, Judges, and Governours of the earth, and all other having any excellent dignitie on the same, in all places under the universall heaven" (Hakluyt 1599, 231-32). It then claimed that "every man desireth to joine friendship with other, to love, and be loved, also to give and receive mutuall benefites," as

> For the God of heaven and earth greatly providing for mankinde, would not that all things should be found in one region, to the ende that one should have neede of another, that by this meanes friendship might be established among all men, and every one seeke to gratifie all (Hakluyt 1599, 232).

Following the statement about the universal desires shared by "every man" and the need to receive "mutuall benefites" and establish "universall amitie," the letter gave special praise to merchants, who wandering about the world, search both the land and the sea, to carry such good and profitable things, as are found in their countries, to remote regions and kingdoms, and again to bring from the same, such things as they find there commodious for their own countries (Hakluyt 1599, 232).

They are therefore "valiant and worthy," and should be permitted "free passage by your regions and dominons." In the spirit of reciprocity, "shew your selves so towards them, as you would that we and our subjects should shewe ourselves towards your servants, if at any time they shall passe by our regions" (Hakluyt 1599, 232).

Chancellor's ship managed to return to London in the autumn of 1554, bearing a letter from Tsar Ivan to the English king, welcoming trade between the two nations, although by that time King Edward had died and Queen Mary had taken the throne to rule England. However, all crew members on Willoughby's two ships unfortunately died from cold and hunger when they attempted to winter over on the coast of Lapland. Although Willoughby's exploration of the Northeast Passage was met with a dreadful fate, the 1553 letter and the actual expedition should be recognised as the earliest indication of interest towards trading with China and exploring new sea routes to break

the then Portuguese monopoly. This challenges the common perception of the Elizabethan era as the starting point of England's trading ambitions with China.

What the 1583 letter from Queen Elizabeth I represented was a renewed effort to explore the Northwest Passage. It echoed the 1553 letter in the benefits from "mutual trade," and the belief that "we are borne and made to have need one of another, and that we are bound to aide one another" (Liu 2023, 285). The difference is that this is the first letter from the English monarch directly addressed to the "King of China," which indicated more confidence in reaching this remote fairyland of wealth in the East. The expedition led by John Newbery managed to reach India, but he died on his return to England, so he could not report his experiences and make arrangements for a fresh venture. However, this happened 13 years later under the command of Benjamin Wood in 1596 with a letter from the Queen to "the most high and sovereign Prince the most puissant Governour of the great kingdome of China," but it also came to an unfortunate end. The third expedition set sail in 1602 under the command of George Weymouth, with a letter of credence addressed "To the great, mighty, and Invincible Emperour of Cathaia," but still with no luck. The three attempts made during the Elizabethan age was detailed in Liu's book (2023, 14-21, 285-96), representing a story of perseverance as a late comer to out-compete its European neighbours in trading with China.

Although none of these letters successfully arrived in China, a detailed reading of them actually reveals answers to the consequential failure of the Macartney Embassy, who eventually arrived in China over two centuries later, as the letter of credence he hand-delivered to the Chinese emperor contained highly similar content and consistency from the 1553 letter. For example, we can see the three "wrong or incompatible assumptions" made in 1793 as analysed by Liu (2023, 144) were already deeply-rooted in the 1553 letter:

1) We are equal as "mankind" living in "all places under the universall heaven." This reference to "under the universal heaven" may sound a perfect equivalent to "*Tianxia*" (天下) in Chinese, but the same vocabulary had a

completely different connotation ideologically. The English saw "the world" of "both the land and the sea," but the imperial China claimed to be a "Celestial Empire," whose sway was as boundless as the heaven, reflected by its symbol of the dragon as a mythical animal that has superpowers. Since ancient times, the emperor was believed to be the "Son of Heaven" (天子), mandated to rule all subjects "Under Heaven" (天下). His empire was known as the Middle Kingdom (中国), the "the Divine Land" (神州) governed by the "Celestial Court" (天朝). These indigenous Chinese phrases represented the cornerstone of traditional Chinese political culture that under these notions, "China forms a world of its own, rather than a part of the world" (Mao 2014, 8). Therefore, how could the Chinse emperor be regarded as equal to "all Kings, Princes, Rulers, Judges, and Governours of the earth" as expressed in the 1553 letter, or a "brother monarch" in King George III's letter in 1792?

2) Trade is a mutually beneficial thing that "every man desire." This was a deeply embedded belief in the English mind as an island nation requesting "free passage." While trade was an "essential need" for the English, China as a huge continental empire with the Grand Canal connecting northern and southern China in sustaining a self-sufficient agrarian economy, had an "unusual ability to garner significant wealth from internal commerce. China offered a different model for growth that depended almost entirely on domestic consumption and production" (Millar 2011, 214). In other words, what the English believed as an undisputable tenet that we need to trade with each other as "not all things should be found in one region" did not apply to China, whose different regions within its own vast territory could achieve that exchange satisfactorily. Therefore, exchanging goods with other countries was considered a benefaction bestowed upon "men from afar," and it would be treated with caution if it might disturb China's own "essential needs" for security and stability.

3) Another incompatible view is regarding the role of merchants, which again run counter to the Confucian's scornful view of commerce and the motive of profit, as scholarship and restraining one's desire was valued far higher than wealth. Profit-seeking was despised as it was seen as immoral, so merchants were placed as a profession of low social status in China. On the other extreme,

Adam Smith called the British "a nation of shopkeepers" in his seminal book *Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* published in 1776 (ch. 7, pt. 3). He asserted that Britain's rising success was a result of their collective desire to accumulate wealth. Combined with its geography as an island nation, trade was its bloodline, which shaped the enterprising and adventurous qualities of its merchants as commended in the Queen's 1583 letter: it was a heroic journey of thousands of miles into an unknown territory through an unexplored route "of so much difficulties" and "into so many perils." The British enthusiasm for long distance commerce and the faith in the value of reciprocal discovery reaped from exchanges contrasted with the Chinese mentality of self-sufficient in economy, self-cultivation in enlightenment and self-contained attitude with little reciprocal curiosity about the West.

From the above we can see the English and Chinese views towards equality, liberty, trade and commerce were poles apart, which were shaped by different historical and geographical contexts and remained deeply embedded, therefore, a mission to bridge the incompatible world views can only be a mission impossible. However, unable to recognise these factors that doomed the mission to futility, the first embassy was sent to China with high hopes, armed with meticulously detailed instructions.

3. The First British Embassy Sent to China in 1787

The 1787 embassy should have made history in being the very first British embassy sent to imperial China. Although it never arrived in Beijing, the letter of credence and instructions from King George III survived, along with other documents and correspondence in the State Paper Office, the India House and the Board of Control. The instructions and letter appeared in Appendix B and C in Bannister's translation of *A Journal of the First French Embassy to China, 1698-1700* (1859, 209-29), but rarely studied or referenced by any modern scholars of Anglo-Chinese relations; yet, it adds so much to our understanding of the later Macartney embassy.

First of all, according to Bannister (1859, xxi, li), it was the "Emperor of China who had invited a mission of compliment, in a perfectly friendly

spirit, from the representatives of the East India Company in Canton." Therefore, the mission was a response to an invitation addressed by the Chinese court to the agents of EIC. Interestingly, this differs from all Chinese sources in the existent literature that emphasised the British enthusiasm to send an embassy. Of course, as there are no Chinese perspectives on the initial Cathcart embassy, we should be cautious in assuming the reliability of this source. Despite being a late-comer, Britain had quickly caught up with its European counterparts in trading with China: It had secured the largest market share since 1670, and ever since the James Flint incident in 1755, the Qing court became wary of the British merchants, who were seen as particularly recalcitrant. It directly led to the introduction of the Canton system in 1757, when British trade volume in China had already exceeded the total of other European powers, yet they had still never sent one mission to meet the emperor in Beijing, while other European neighbours had sent multiple ones since the sixteenth century. Therefore, it made good sense for the Qing court to make such a gesture.

However, observing that all former embassies had failed to conciliate the Chinese court, the EIC chief at the time, Mr. Thomas Fitzhugh, held strong reservations at the invitation as he could not see "a reason why one sent from England should be more favoured. The Chinese government looks with contempt on all foreign nations...nor do I think it looks on Embassies in any other light than acknowledgments of inferiority" (Bannister 1859, xxxii-xxxiii). It is true that the Qing court was willing to allow trade relations to develop without diplomatic relations, but the latter could only be permitted with allegiance under the tributary system. Fitzhugh also spelt out clearly that this meant "the prostrating himself before the Emperor's throne would not on any account be dispensed with" (Bannister 1859, xxxiv). This was further elaborated by Dr. John Ewart in the "Facts and considerations relative to the proposed Embassy to China" that the Emperor of China requires marks of submission of "prostrating before him and beating the forehead nice times on the floor; and without these condescensions no Embassador was ever received" (Bannister 1859, xliv). However, in the same paper, Ewart also talked about "best teas" from Fujian, "best porcelain" from its adjoining

province of Jiangxi, and "the best and most extensive productions of silk" from Zhejiang. He then argued that

> it appears hardly credible that the human mind, however prejudiced, can refuse a conviction of the benefits which the individuals of that great empire, and the nation itself, must derive from giving an outlet to its productions, and employment to its productive labourers, when the means of doing it to advantage are set before them (Bannister 1859, xlvi-xlvii).

We can see the continuity in the same assumptions made in 1553 here regarding the universal pursuit of benefits from trade. This made King George III believe that the "Emperor's call was really an indication of a good spirit, to be hailed with the warmest acceptance" (Bannister 1859, lii). This was met with support from both the Prime Minister William Pitt and Lord of Trade Henry Dundas, as well as their rivals, Charles James Fox and Edmund Burke, as the consensus was that Britain's prosperity depended on the growth of its trade. John Ewart's name can be found on the list of key members to accompany the ambassador to China on this mission.

From the 17-page long instructions from King George III to the ambassador, we can see the great expectations and motivations behind this first official mission to China. The first motive was to "draw the tea trade out of the hands of the other European nations"; and the second aim was to procure a secure place for the products and manufactures from "our territorial possessions in India" "in the extensive empire of China" (Bannister 1859, 209-10). Here it is important to put the two empires in synchronic comparisons to understand the global context. When the Canton System was introduced in 1757, it was the same year when the British captured Bengal and started an era of expansion and global trade. With hindsight, we can see the clash between the British expansion driven by the Industrial Revolution at home and the restriction of the Canton System that was also driven by China's domestic concerns that prioritised stability. It was 52 years into the reign of the Qianlong Emperor that forms the key part of the High Qing Era (1683-1799 under the three reigns of Kangxi, Yongzheng and Qianlong). Although the British were aware that "the Chinese in general are studious to avoid any intimate connection or intercourse with Europeans," they believed that "the policy of encouraging foreign trade is not ill

understood there" (Bannister 1859, 212). This was clearly stated in the King's letter to the Chinese emperor: "I am persuaded that your royal mind has long been convinced of the policy of encouraging such an interchange of commodities between our respective subjects, conducted upon fair and equitable principles consistent with the honour and safety of both sovereigns" (Bannister 1859, 228). So their appeal was "the fair competition of the market" and the protection of their merchants. However, as explained earlier, while Anglo-centrism viewed the rest of the world as an extension of its market, Sino-centrism viewed the rest of the world as an extension of its grace. The isolation from the West was not for seclusion from trade as many Westerners may perceive, but from Western ideas and influence that would penetrate China and threaten China's national security, internal stability and domestic harmony. In the eyes of the Chinese emperor, the potential benefits from overseas trade was outweighed by this perceived risk. However, not understanding this different "essential needs," the British had wrongly believed that the former endeavors to obtain trade privileges all failed from the intrigues of the mandarins and merchants of Canton, and from the inferior rank or character of the persons who have been on such commission. It has therefore been determined to attempt an embassy to the Emperor himself, in the name of His Majesty the King of Great Britain (Bannister 1859, 213-14).

In the British eyes, the emperor represented "wisdom and justice" that could redress the wrong, thus the British merchants' "lives and properties shall be safe under your imperial protection" as shown in the King's letter to the Emperor (Bannister 1859, 228-29). The instructions then discussed the possible routes to reach Beijing, showing their knowledge of the previous Portuguese and Russian embassies, but dismissed them as it "seems too long and hazardous" (Bannister 1859, 215). There was also a very clear and specific instruction to the ambassador to "conform to all ceremonials of that court, which may not commit the honour of your sovereign or lessen your own dignity, so as to endanger the success of your negotiation" (Bannister 1859, 217). This instruction remained in the exact same wording for the 1816 Amherst Embassy. The other instruction that had remained the same for the Macartney Embassy was regarding opium sale, that if asked for an exclusion

of the opium trade, then "you must accede to it, rather than risk any essential benefit by contending for a liberty in this respect" (Bannister 1859, 223).

As for the negotiation, the major points on the agenda included expanding mutually beneficial trade and obtaining a small tract of ground or detached island as a depot for goods. The third point was a repeated emphasis on their aim to be "purely commercial, having not even a wish for territory" (Bannister 1859, 219) to reassure the Qing court as by this time they they had colonised India. The first Chinese writer to leave a first-hand record of England was Xie Qinggao, whose book *Records of the Sea* (《海录》) was only published in 1820 as the first Chinese report on world geography, history and cultural customs. Xie's book did include the specific information that Bangladesh and Bombay were colonised by the British. As such, Xie sent messages to alert the Qing government of the British expansion but received no heed from the court.

The British knowledge about China at this time formed a stark contrast as shown in the King's instructions: regarding the best possible location for a depot of goods mentioned above, it was suggested that it "may be near the countries where the best sorts of tea are produced, which are described as lying between the 27th and 30th degrees of north longitude" (Bannister 1859, 221). The ambassador was also advised to keep a diary to record occurrences upon political, commercial and even natural subjects, which later became a part of the official remit of the Macartney Embassy. Another surprising detail mentioned in this 1787 instructions was that in the entourage, there was "a gentleman whom you state to be conversant in the Chinese Court language, and qualified to act as your interpreter" (Bannister 1859, 224). As we know, the Macartney Embassy was not able to find such a person in the entirety of Britain to act as the interpreter in 1792, and the two they found from Naples turned out to be not conversant in the court language. So who was this mysterious gentleman? So far, there has been little information that can be found. It cannot be James Flint who was EIC's first interpreter, but banished from China after being put in prison for three years for creating a petition directly to the emperor that violated the court protocol, and the Chinese person who wrote the petition for him was executed. This showed that even as a resident EIC staff, he was not conversant in the court language either.

Lacking such linguistic expertise and cultural knowledge of China has been identified as one of the key factors for the failure of the Macartney Embassy, but were there other contributing factors that have been overlooked by the British side? If so, what new lessons can we learn from them?

4. The Untold Stories of the Macartney Embassy

In 1773, in the wake of overseas expansion that followed Britain's victory in the Seven Years' War, Lord Macartney made the famous remark that Britain was now a "vast empire on which the sun never sets, and whose bounds nature has not yet ascertained" (Greene, 2014, 221). This victory confirmed British primacy in Europe and command at sea. Then, following the Industrial Revolution, driven by a combination of rapidly increasing demands for imports of tea from China and a bigger market to export their manufactured goods to, the British sought to expand their trade opportunities in China and wished to do so by establishing Western-style diplomatic relations. So, when Macartney set sail for China, Britain was not just the greatest sea power, but considered itself the bearer of international notions of reciprocity and modernity.

As the de facto first mission that reached Beijing, a wealth of literature has been made available throughout the past two centuries about the Macartney Embassy, including a new surge of writings in 1992 on its two centennial anniversary when additional Chinese sources were made available. Macartney returned home with the Chinese emperor's gifts and a letter addressed to King George III. This single text had become the most quoted legacy from this encounter, explaining in greater length the reasons for Qianlong Emperor's refusal to grant the requests of the embassy. Since the English version prepared for the King to read had toned down its grandiose and arrogant style, the short poem composed by the emperor himself and embroidered on a silk tapestry that was gifted back by the Emperor offered a highly condensed summary. Now being kept at the Royal Museums of Greenwich, the tapestry captured the scene of gift-giving from the Macartney Embassy, with the poem below embroidered on its right-hand corner, entitled "Recording the Visit of Ambassador of the Red-Haired English King,

Macartney, Came to Pay Tribute and Give Offerings" (《红毛英吉利国王差使臣马嘎尔尼奉表贡至, 诗以志事》):

> Formerly Portugal presented tribute;
> Now England is paying homage.
> They have out-travelled Shu Hai & Heng Zhang;
> My ancestors' merit and virtue must have reached their distant shores.
> Though their tribute is commonplace, my heart approves sincerely.
> Curio and the boasted ingenuity of their devices I prize not,
> Though what they bring is meagre, yet,
> In my kindness to men from afar I make generous return,
> Wanting to preserve my good health & power (Singer 1992, 85).

From the poem we can see the British "gifts" that were meant to impress the Emperor as a showcase of a modern industrialised power were presented as "tributes," which "boasted ingenuity" but were deemed too "meagre" to be prized by the Emperor. The two different words of "gifts" and "tributes" defined two completely different worlds, to which Britain was considered merely a new addition to the old China-centric world order. This was also made clear through a traditional opera that was specially scripted for Macartney's visit, the only occasion that the Qing court ever staged a show bespoke to a visiting embassy. Macartney's understanding of the plot as "the marriage of the Ocean and the Earth" revealed the British vision of the mission as bringing the two empires of ocean and earth, or even the two civilisations together, while the Chinese name of the play (四海升平) means "Peace within the Four Seas/the world." The lyrics below demonstrate that the British mission was only considered "unprecedented" for the distance it has travelled as it was further away than any other tributary missions that had been to China before:

> Here comes England with tributes, who was drawn to our land by admiration. This country is miles and miles further away than Vietnam, they have to travel for months and months to arrive in China...such an unprecedented grand event should go down in history (original Chinese quoted from Ye 2008, 99, translated by the author).[4]

4 Xiaoqing Ye, "Peace Across the Four Seas: A Tributary Play Created for the Macartney Embassy by Qianlong," *The Twenty-First Century*, no. 105 (2008): 98-106.
The line in original Chinese was: "故有英吉利国,仰慕皇仁,专心朝贡。其国较之越裳(指越南),远隔数倍。或行数载,难抵中华……载之史册,诚为亘古未有之盛事也".

However, its tributes were only considered to be "commonplace," "boasted," and "meagre" as shown in Qianlong's poem. Was this evidence of the emperor's arrogance and ignorance as commonly believed? Macartney himself was exasperated that "neither Qianlong himself nor those about him appeared to have any curiosity" with regard to the inventions and novelties (Cranmer-Byng 1962, 234). It seems it never crossed the British minds that this was because their gifts were not "novelties" at all as the Emperor had been entertained by many varied versions of the same devices since the age of Enlightenment from other West Ocean countries, and also internal tributes from the officials in charge of the trade in Canton. Therefore, the best gifts Britain had to offer as a latecomer—elaborate clocks and globes—seemed insignificant and indeed "commonplace" in the eyes of the Emperor. This can be evidenced in a letter dated 1786 from Jesuit Bourgeois,

> it is unbelievable how rich this sovereign is in curiosities and magnificent objects of all kinds from the occident. You ask me if the Emperor has any Venetian and French glass. Thirty years ago he already had so many pieces that, not knowing where to put them, he had a quantity of the first grade broken up to make window panes for his European buildings... You see, this hall, 70 feet long and of good width proportionally, is so full of machines that one can hardly move about in it. Some of these machines have cost two or three hundred thousand francs, for the work on them is exquisite and they are enriched with innumerable precious stones (Malone 1934, 160).

Even in the same year of 1793 when Macartney was on his way to China, Qianlong Emperor spent 100,000 ounces of silver—his biggest splurge on items from Europe (Crossley 2022, 31). Now with such knowledge, let us take another look at the most quoted lines in the emperor's reply to King George III regarding the British gifts: "Our dynasty's majestic virtue has penetrated unto every country under Heaven, and Kings of all nations have offered their costly tribute by land and sea. As your Ambassador can see for himself, we possess all things" (Liu 2023, 302). Actually, Macartney was only taken to view the imperial summer resort at Rehe and stopped to visit 50 pavilions filled with intricate European clocks and mechanical devices. This was noted in Macartney's own account: they "are all furnished...with every kind of European toys and sing-songs, with spheres, orreries, clocks, and musical automatons of such exquisite

workmanship, and in such profusion, that our presents must shrink from the comparison and hide their diminished heads" (Cranmer-Byng 1962, 125). He was also told that the fine things he had seen were "far exceeded by" others kept at Yuanming Yuan, let alone collections inside the Forbidden City and the Summer Palace.

This is true, and recorded in detail regarding the major pieces of British gifts in the Court Memorials with Emperor's Comments (《朱批奏折》): the celestial globe and terrestrial globe were no different from those already installed at Ning Shou Gong (宁寿宫; inside the Forbidden City) and Le Shou Tang (乐寿堂; at the Summer Palace); the orrery with stand was very similar to the one at Jing Fu Gong (景福宫; inside the Forbidden City), except that it was not as exquisitely ornamented; the barometer had similar functions to what they already had, and even the glass chandeliers was no more impressive than the one hanging at Chang Chun Yuan (长春园; inside Yuanming Yuan) (Qin and Gao 1998, 110, 113). Therefore, the emperor's claim that "we possess all things" was not an overstatement as the possessions here do not just refer to things produced and made in China by the Chinese themselves, but long before Macartney visited, exquisite European goods had been offered through traders, missionaries, embassies and tributes from local officials, all endeavoring to out-compete each other with the most ingenious and latest devices they could come by.

This naturally brings us to see why the British gifts were considered "boasted ingenuity" as these gifts were either less grand than what the court already possessed, or not as unique and extraordinary as claimed by the British themselves. It thus led to the Chinese impression of the British embassy as being arrogant, an interesting mirror image of the British view of the Chinese, both due to their self-perceived superiority and lack of knowledge of the other. For the British, this was largely due to their absence of missionaries stationed in Beijing, unlike their European counterparts since the early seventeenth century. In the King's instructions to Ambassador Cathcart in 1787, he was suggested to employ "some intelligent Portuguese, Spanish, or Italian missionary, who may be free from any national attachment

or prejudice" (Bannister 1859, 216), not knowing that it was perhaps more of a disadvantage to rely on their European competitors, who had every reason to deceive the British, than from the mandarins and merchants of Canton. The very first British expedition to China in 1637[5] was actually met with obstructions from the Portuguese in Chinese Macao whose interests were already in conflicts with the vying Spanish and Dutch, who all viewed the British as a new competitor to share "a slice of the cake." The sabotage role played by the interpreter in driving the expedition to a military skirmish (Liu 2023, 56-58) showed the price of knowledge deficit that the British paid and continued to pay during the Macartney Embassy: If the British had their own missionary in Beijing with inside court knowledge, they would have been advised on what to bring, how to describe the gifts, and also been informed of what happened to their "tributes" after they left. According to Guo (2019, 136), all the major British gifts were allocated a permanent place of display in January 1795. Careful considerations were put into site selections; for example, the weaponry was kept at the Military Achievement Temple, which showcased items of historical significance to commemorate the Qing's territory expansion. Keeping the British guns and cannons there showed Qianlong's wariness and vigilance of their military strength. Therefore, rather than taking Qianlong's open despise to the British gifts as ignorance and arrogance, a more calibrated and nuanced interpretation of his attitude is perhaps being "externally still but internally stirred; publicly contempt but privately contemplating" (Liu 2023, 153).

If the Court Memorials with the Emperor's Comments rarely appeared in any of the discussions due to lack of access to the Qing archives, other documents following the return of the embassy were simply overlooked when the mission was considered a complete failure. As a matter of fact, a number of letters and gifts were further dispatched in 1795 in an endeavour to consolidate the gains from the mission. Five letters in all were sent, each

5 This was not an official embassy, nor backed by the East Indian Company, but by a private group led by Sir William Courteen and included King Charles I's personal interest of £ 10,000.

of which was addressed from one British official to his presumed counterpart, including King George III's reply dated 20 June 1795 to the Qianlong Emperor's letter brought back by Macartney, yet this was almost forgotten and rarely studied. It might be a surprising read to see the British King's response:

> The expressions of regard towards us in your Imperial Majesty's Letters, which he delivered to us have given us great satisfaction. We are happy to find that the Embassy & Presents which we sent to you as marks of our friendship, as well as of our desires for a perpetual union with you, have been agreeable to you, and we thank you for the honour & attention shown by your Imperial Majesty to our Embassador & his Suite. By the pains he took to render himself acceptable to you, he has gained much favour in our eyes. He has brought to us the presents you committed to his care, for that purpose, we willingly accept them as testimonies of your good will, in the same manner as you accepted ours, though our respective Empires supply most things necessary or useful to either (British Library, IOR/G/12/93, 327).

From the wording of "satisfaction," "happy," "agreeable" and "honour," we do not sense at all that the emperor's letter was received as an insult; the humiliating gifting experience was reciprocated by the "same manner," that the British did not find Chinese presents "necessary or useful" either. What mattered to the British is that the two empires were "united in the bonds of friendship and of mutual good offices," and "your Majesty was pleased to convey to him (Macartney) your desire of having as a testimony of continuous amity on our part, soon again a representative from us to China" (British Library, IOR/G/12/93, 328). Indeed in the year 1796, Macartney recommended Staunton to return as the ambassador to participate in the Qianlong Emperor's abdication ceremony, but he fell ill and was not able to make the trip. Two days before the Emperor's abdication, he addressed the last letter to King George III, in which he again referred to the letter and gifts from the King as "a memorial and offerings, which have been conveyed by your barbarian vessels to Canton and transmitted to Us. Your reverent submission to Our person is manifest." While the emperor "raise absolutely no objection to the fact of his having omitted to send a mission on this occasion," he is "graciously pleased to accept his offerings... We have commanded Our Viceroy to accept your tribute in order that your reverence

may be duly recognised" (Backhouse and Bland 1914, 331-34). As the correspondence embodied, the Macartney Embassy was indeed a failure, but more in its failure to start a dialogue between the two empires, rather than failing to have its requests granted. The three underpinning assumptions made since 1553 about sovereign equality, trade and merchants discussed earlier meant that the British and Chinese understandings of the mission were as poles apart as their world views. Therefore, it is fairer to judge the embassy as a mission impossible rather than a failed mission, because there was no common ground to build any possible success on.

5. Pride and Prejudice: From Mutual Benefit to Mutual Understanding

From the first letter from King Edward VI in 1553 to the last reply from King George III in 1795, we can see the persistent British pursuit of free trade with China. A photocopy of the second letter from Queen Elizabeth I dated in 1596 was later hand delivered by Queen Elizabeth II as a special gift in 1986 when she visited China as the first and only reigning British monarch. The two countries have since been trying to forge a satisfactory and balanced relationship to heal the historical trauma scarred by the consequential gunboat diplomacy. Yet over 470 years on, with China becoming the world's No. 1 trading nation, the two countries are still on the road to reach mutual understanding.

For China, reaching genuine mutual understanding matters far more than reaping mutual benefits from trade. In a way, globalisation has played an important role in China's rise today, similar to that of the Industrial Revolution for the British. Globalisation has transformed China, changed the global power dynamics and smoothed transactions, but not erased the fundamental ideological differences. Actually, there is so much that has remained unchanged or even unchangeable. We can still see the recurrent themes of an open door to international trade and a closed door for national security. China's ongoing quest to strike a balance between foreign trade and foreign influence, between embracing globalisation and retaining a

distinctive "Chinese-style modernisation," in many ways represents a continuation of its management of relations with the West.

The historical encounters showed that both civilisations held pride in their unparalleled primacy, each being utterly convinced of their own superiority. Both looked upon the other as a foreign nation like any other, to be dealt with as any other, while believing themselves to be like none other: Britain became the first to challenge the Qing from beyond the "four seas" that claimed to rule over "the four quarters of the world" (King George III's first letter to Qianlong in 1792), and the Qing became the last non-Western power to openly despise Britain. This mutually-held pride explained the mirror narrative of "humiliations"—from the "mission of humiliations" to the "Century of Humiliation" that still shadow over the bilateral relations today. If the kowtow rhetoric used in the British Parliament today serves to caution the political leaders against yielding to China, the lessons of the "Century of Humiliation" have been ingrained in Chinese education for generations, hence not a distant memory but embedded knowledge in its political history and incorporated into its relations with the West.

If history is a mirror to reflect rises and falls, we can see a similar ambivalent sentiment throughout the changes: a paradox of rejection and emulation between the two nations, and a cycle of mutual perception continuum: for the British perception of China, it started from imagined to admired, from studied to re-examined, and then from criticised to despised. This was the starting point for the Chinese perception of the West, which is currently gravitating to criticism after the waves of learning from the West. Instead of exchanging accusations, both sides need to look into the mirror of history for self-reflections. For the Chinese, the open flaunting of British superiority with the surge of national pride and patriotic identity could serve as a reminder of how high nationalist sentiment may rise when a country is on the rise. For the British, it is important to recognise that the rejuvenated China seeks to be admired but not feared, a difference to respect, but not a flaw to correct. This time, it is China who has opened up itself to the world, while refusing to be changed by the West. But if you perceive China as a threat because of this stance, you risk turning into one.

Reading history lends us light in seeing where we are going ahead into the future. Standing today in the new challenging terrain beyond Orientalism and Occidentalism, we should stop looking up or down at each other, but contemplate each other: Will today's reflection about "us" and "other" generate a new thinking about "we" in the future? Can we transform the relationship between the two from a see-saw shift of rise and fall against each other to a Yin-Yang nexus of enhancing each other? Only time will tell, but we are still learning lessons from 1553 and generating debates for future historians.

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Appendix (Full Texts of the Five Letters)

1. The 1553 letter can be found in Richard Hakluyt's book *The Principal Navigations, Voyages, Traffiques and Discoveries of the English Nation: Made by Sea or Over-Land to the Remote and Farthest Distant Quarters of the Earth, at Any Time Within the Compasse of These 1600 Years*. London: George Bishop and Ralph Newberie, 1599, pp. 231-32. Available at: https://archive.org/details/principalnavigat1and2hakl/page/n261/mode/2up. The instructions can be found on p. 226.

Also available at: https://archive.org/details/principalnavigat02hakl/page/n241/mode/2up, published in 1903, p. 209. The instructions can be found on p. 195.

2. The 1583 letter can be found in Richard Hakluyt's book *The Principall Navigations, Voyages, Traffiques and Discoveries of the English Nation (1589-1600)*, Imprinted at London by George Bishop, Ralph Newberie and Robert Baker. vol. 2, p. 245.

Also included with Chinese translation in Liu Xin. 2023. *Anglo-Chinese Encounters Before the Opium War, A Tale of Two Empires Over Two Centuries*. New York and London: Routledge, pp. 285-88.

3. The 1787 instructions and letter appeared in Appendix B and C in Bannister, 1859. *A Journal of the First French Embassy to China, 1698-1700*, pp. 209-29.

4. The 1793 Qing court memorial with the Qianlong Emperor's comments can be found in Qin and Gao, 1998. *The Qianlong Emperor and Lord Macartney, An Account of the First Embassy to China.* p. 110.

5. The reply from King George III to the Qianlong Emperor dated 20 June 1795 can be found in The British Library at Asian and African Studies with shelfmark/reference of IOR/G/12/93, in both English and Latin on pp. 327-41.

Author: Xin Liu, Senior Lecturer, School of Humanities, Language and Global Studies, University of Central Lancashire, Preston, UK; email: XLiu13@uclan.ac.uk.

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