CHERISHING

MEN FROM AFAR

Qing Guest Ritual and the Macartney Embassy of 1793

James L. Hevia

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no more and no less than a spatial inscription which still realized a supreme lord–lesser lord relationship. In the formation of this relationship, kneeling, like koutou, completed inclusion and differentiation; it provisionally incorporated the strength of the English king in the emperor’s rulership.

The audience participated in by Macartney demonstrates quite clearly the degree to which the Qing court was willing to alter a rite in order to realize its own perception of how relations between superior and inferior lords ought to be formed. That koutou could be waived and other actions introduced that would accomplish the same purpose raises interesting questions concerning the nature of conflict between the Qing and British empires in the nineteenth century. Not the least of these is whether to reconsider many areas of contestation in terms of the difference between two modes of ceremony: signifying practices, understood as constitutive of relations of power in a cosmo-political imperial formation, and “symbolic” representations, which are taken to express or reflect transcendent realities of power in a world of discrete sovereign nations.

In his “Observations on China,” Lord Macartney concluded that as a result of his embassy “the Chinese had, what they never had before, an opportunity of knowing us, and this must lead them to a proper way of thinking of us and of acting towards us in the future” (MD, 213). To an extent, as I have argued above, Macartney was right, although not quite in the way he presents matters here. Yet, if his assessment of the embassy appears quixotic, particularly when placed beside the evaluations of the Qing court, subsequent reactions in Europe, North America, and China have been no less caught up with problems of interpreting and assessing the significance of the embassy. In this closing chapter, I want to consider some of the themes in the historiography of the Macartney embassy.

In doing so, one of my main purposes is to destabilize the taken-for-granted relationship between sources (facts) and interpretation. What I would like to foreground is a kind of forgetting or erasure that seems particularly pertinent to this study. One example of the kind of problem I wish to address has to do with what transpired when British troops entered the Yuanming Gardens in 1860. While looting the premises, soldiers identified the carriage and cannons Macartney had presented to the Qianlong emperor. Of the carriages we hear no more, but the cannons were shipped back to their place of manufacture, the Woolwich Arsenal. The repatriation of gifts once given by George III to the Qianlong emperor signals a particular assessment of the embassy—perhaps that it was an embarrassing failure that could only be set right by British arms or that it was a sign of weakness ever to have thought that China’s rulers would respond in a positive way to such gestures (see Hevia 1994a). Missing, therefore, in most accounts of Sino-Western relations is how the interests of the present, or
perhaps more properly, many presents, shape historical recollection of an event like the Macartney embassy. In this sense, reconstructing the past is not simply about bringing new evidence to light, applying new methodologies, or exposing previous biases. It is also about engaging in the politics of the production and distribution of knowledge with which all scholarship is involved. At issue, then, is not how to make accounts less interested or less ideological, but how to locate our own historiography in relation to multiple interpretative positions and the structures of power that we deal with daily. One way of beginning is by critically evaluating discussions of reality, or, in the context of this study, deconstructing historical reconstructions.

10.1 The British Embassy as Qing Precedent

As noted in the previous chapter, the courts of the Qianlong and Jiaqing emperors treated the first British embassy to China as part of their world-ordering processes. As an aspect of Manchu imperialism in East and Inner Asia, the embassy had a palpable place in the production of a cosmopolitical universe that grounded the Qing claim to supreme lordship. It was in this sense that the embassy became a precedent for the treatment of West Ocean ambassadors when they arrived at the Qing court. This was the case with the Dutch in 1794 and with Lord Amherst in 1816. At the same time, however, certain occurrences during the Macartney embassy became objects of political contestation and struggle, particularly with respect to issues surrounding imperial audiences between Qing emperors and European ministers after 1840. At the center of the controversy was whether Lord Macartney had performed koutou before the Qianlong emperor. In this section, I will briefly discuss the koutou issue as it appears in Chinese sources over what had transpired in 1793. Some, like Wang Zhi-chun, only indicated that Macartney had been seen by the emperor in a tent in the Garden of Ten-thousand Trees (1879:140). The Guangdong Gazetteer simply recorded that the British had entered to present a tribute of local products, while other official sources mentioned audience and tribute or simply imperial audience, with no mention of particulars related to the ritual. The most interesting of these accounts, however, was a rendition by Chen Kangqi, who, after noting that Macartney was only willing to bend one knee, claims that once in the presence of the Qianlong emperor, the British ambassador fell on both knees and prostrated (shuanggui juju) (see Pritchard 1943:175-179).

The question of what happened in the tent at Rehe arose again during the audience negotiations of 1873. Court records, as well as the reports of the British minister Thomas Wade, indicate that one strategy used by officials from the newly created Zongli Yamen was to suggest that it might of Works Suling'e and Changlu Salt Commissioner Guang Hui, were being urged by the Grand Council to force the issue, the emperor reminded everyone about centering and the fact that it was better to receive them than send them off. In the process he noted that some sort of compromise (jiangjiu) had been made during the Macartney embassy (wxcb, 30a). Later however, when he explained in a letter to George III why Amherst had not been granted an audience, he indicated that Macartney had knelt and touched his head to the ground (guikou) in his audience with the Qianlong emperor (wxcb, 37b). These contradictory comments by the Jiaqing emperor remain unresolved in the published Chinese language sources on the Amherst embassy.

After the first Opium War, it was possible to find a number of variations in Chinese sources over what had transpired in 1793. Some, like Wang Zhi-chun, only indicated that Macartney had been seen by the emperor in a tent in the Garden of Ten-thousand Trees (1879:140). The Guangdong Gazetteer simply recorded that the British had entered to present a tribute of local products, while other official sources mentioned audience and tribute or simply imperial audience, with no mention of particulars related to the ritual. The most interesting of these accounts, however, was a rendition by Chen Kangqi, who, after noting that Macartney was only willing to bend one knee, claims that once in the presence of the Qianlong emperor, the British ambassador fell on both knees and prostrated (shuanggui juju) (see Pritchard 1943:175-179).

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1. On August 15, 1816, the Grand Council instructed these officials to remind George T. Staunton that on the occasion of the earlier embassy, the Qianlong emperor had not allowed the British to perform their own ceremony; it was only when Macartney had relented on this point that an audience had been granted (wxcb, 20b). Staunton and other members of the embassy denied that Macartney had performed the koutou; see Pritchard 1943:170 n. 20. Staunton's recollection of events in 1793 is also worth drawing attention to since his "eyewitness" account of the Macartney audience is the only one in English that suggests that the British ambassador might have done more than kneel on one knee and slightly bow his head.

2. The Qing court created this institution to deal with the European legations established in Peking after 1860; see Ban no 1964. The title is a contraction of Zongli gegguo.
be appropriate for Europeans to kneel before the emperor at present since others had done so in the past. Wade and his colleagues not only rejected this logic, but made it clear that they were unwilling to go down on one knee as Macartney had.

During these negotiations, the issue of the Macartney embassy was also raised by the Zhili governor-general Li Hongzhang in a conversation with the British consul at Tianjin, Thomas Meadows. According to a report he sent to Wade, Meadows explained that Li claimed to have checked court records on the two British embassies as well as the Dutch embassy of 1793. The records indicated that Macartney and the Dutch ambassador had both performed koutou, but that when Amherst refused, he was not granted an audience. In reply, Meadows told Li that the Dutch had made themselves a laughingstock. Macartney and Amherst had not done so because, in addition to the fact that "we English kneel to Heaven on praying to it, but we never kneel to men," had they complied, they would have had their heads cut off when they returned to England (PRO, FO 748:376-377).

From the 1873 audience negotiations until the Boxer settlement of 1901, Qing authorities and the ambassadors of the European powers continued to struggle over audience forms much as Macartney and the court had in 1793. In what was increasingly constructed as a clear polar opposition, both sides claimed small victories, until in 1901 the allied powers were able to impose Euro-American-style diplomatic forms on the court as part of the Boxer settlement (see Rockhill 1905 and Hevia 1990b). After the fall of the Qing dynasty in 1911, the government of the Republic of China seems to have unequivocally accepted the forms dictated by the North Atlantic imperial powers. At the same time, the Macartney embassy and the koutou question expired as a living political issue between powerful Asian empires and became history.

### 10.2 The Macartney Embassy as British Precedent

In addition to its use in diplomatic negotiations, the Macartney embassy was often treated as a point of origin for new kinds of knowledge about China. S. Wells Williams, for example, stressed that as a result of the embassy, more was known about the true nature of China than ever before (1895:2:455). The embassy also had an important place in treaty port histories produced in the second half of the century (Bickers 1993a,b,c) and figured prominently in numerous popular histories of China produced from the first Opium War forward. In some of these histories, the following epigram became a kind of shorthand assessment of the British undertaking.

It has justly been observed, that the ambassador was received with the utmost politeness, treated with the utmost hospitality, watched with the utmost vigilance and, dismissed with the utmost civility.

In pre- and post-Opium War English-language histories of the British in China the epigram seems to have derived its appeal as a means for justifying a much more aggressive stance by the British government toward the Qing empire. Recall, for instance, that the codification of rules for diplomatic practice did not occur until the "Concert of Europe" in the 1820s (Hinsley 1969:284-285). Coupled with this development was the breaking of the East India Company's monopoly on trade with China in 1834 and the massive increase in opium imports to China, both of which led to student calls by British merchants for the opening of China to "free trade" (e.g., Matheson 1836). These developments served to narrow British perceptions and solidify what came to be perceived as the great divide between "East" and "West." Gone was the optimism expressed by Macartney over the possibility of overcoming differences through rational exchange. In its place emerged a discourse that appropriated many of the categories used to characterize the Chinese during the 1790s in order to argue for a direct confrontation with Chinese "jealousy" and "exclusiveness."

In some cases, the absolute difference between Chinese and Europeans was expressed in lurid tones. But this globally dismissive approach was less...
popular than one that focused attention on those who were really responsible for restraining contact between England and China, namely corrupt and self-interested officials in Canton and, eventually, the monopolistic hong merchants (Auber 1834:397; Matheson 1836:77; and Davis 1836, 1:57-58). The elimination of these officials would, from most perspectives, open China to British penetration because the Chinese people were anxious for contact with Europeans (Gutzlaff 1834:305 and Lindsay 1833:178, 182).

From these premises a typology emerged that took as its point of departure the Macartney embassy. While conflicting views appeared regarding the success of Macartney's embassy, with at least one observer claiming that after it conditions improved for foreign merchants at Canton (Davis 1836, 1:72), there was general agreement that one of the major lessons learned was that Chinese officials would abandon their unreasonable practices and demands when faced with firmness and reasonableness, and if those failed, with force. Any submission to the Chinese was more than an insult to European honor; it accomplished nothing except to perpetuate Chinese isolation, exclusionism, and sense of superiority (Matheson 1836:17-19), while blocking access to the basically pragmatic Chinese people. In this regard, Lord Napier's mission to Canton in 1834 is particularly instructive. When his efforts to deal directly with Canton officials failed because of their "ignorance and obstinacy" and led to a stoppage of trade, Napier circulated handbills among the Chinese population denouncing Qing officials and extolling the benefits of free trade. When this, too, failed to produce the desired results, Napier threatened to move British frigates before the city walls. From the first Opium War forward, firmness and reasonableness were augmented by the use of force, which many viewed as fundamental to the maintenance of treaty rights won as a result of the war. In this atmosphere, some British and American observers questioned the actions of Macartney, implying that he went too far in efforts to please the Chinese and might even have "kowtowed" before the Qianlong emperor (Eames 1909:121 and Rockhill 1905:31).

The significance of the epigram cited above is important in the context of this history because it defines in easily reproducible and memorable form the essential "problem" of China prior to the complete reordering of relations from 1840 forward—the Qing court's refusal to allow British penetration of China in British terms. But though part of the epigram's charm lies in its repeatability, there is something else interesting about it. In a book published in the wake of the first Opium War, an additional clause appears, absent from other sources, that reads "answered with the utmost firmness" (Abbott 1843:232). I would suggest that the reason for the absence of the clause in other sources is that it imputes to Qing officials the very same behavioral characteristic that was to become so critical for the British interpretation of their intercourse with China. In a discourse that was rigidly constructed along lines of absolute binary oppositions, such leakage between poles had, in the end, to be carefully policed.

By the end of the nineteenth century, such dichotomies dominated British perceptions of intercourse with China. For example, Chinese "superiority" stood in opposition to British notions of sovereign equality, Chinese isolation and antiforeignism to British cosmopolitanism, Chinese exclusiveness to British free trade, and the jealousy of Chinese officials to the open-mindedness of British diplomats. From these oppositions, additional ones emerged to define the inner constitution of the Chinese polity. The monarch as despot stood in opposition to the official bureaucracy, the state to society, local government to the village, and officially dominated relations with outsiders to the natural desire among the Chinese people for "free" intercourse (e.g., Morse 1910, 1:1-2). In the last polarity, these same Chinese people could be constructed as xenophobic if, for example, they attacked European or American missionaries or traders.

One suspects, however, that while the sorts of representations discussed above continued to find a place in newer interpretative frameworks (e.g., modernization theory), what sustained them over time were powerful etymonic images that provided stable representational references. I wish to take up in turn two of the most important of these images, not only because of their intrinsic importance to the historiography of Sino-Western relations, but because they are "Chinese" objects brought to England by the Macartney embassy. I refer to the word kowtow and the letter from the

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6. Davis 1836, 1:29, who also argued that the restrictions on trade were a relatively recent phenomenon, dating from the beginning of Manchu rule in China (20-21). Also see, Holman 1835, 4:245; Matheson 1836:21; and Gutzlaff 1834:305.
8. The Oxford English Dictionary indicates that the first use of the term was in Barrow's account of the embassy, where it appeared as "koo-too" (1806:213). The first use of kowtow is attributed to Rennie (1864:232). For further discussion see Hevia 1995.
Qianlong emperor to George III, whose careers I will sketch in the next two sections.

It is important to note at the outset, however, that the history of the kou-tou and the Qianlong letter in Euro-American discourse hardly run parallel to each other. The letter, for instance, is virtually absent from nineteenth-century Western accounts of relations with China, only appearing in print, it would seem, with E. H. Parker’s 1896 publication of a version found in the Donghua lu. The kou-tou, on the other hand, was, as might be surmised from a reading of the previous section, extremely prominent in nineteenth-century English language sources on China. Indeed, by the 1840s it had become so thoroughly fetishized that former American president John Quincy Adams claimed that it, rather than opium, was the real cause of the first Anglo-Chinese war. The purpose of the next section is to attempt to explain why this was so.

10.3 The Koutou Question in Euro-American Discourse

The whole life of the Emperor is ruled by the same petty ceremonials, which sometimes reveals a touch of Oriental imagination, sometimes is merely barbarous. Nothing is more curious and comical than a state dinner. When the gong sounds, the Emperor enters with his guard and proceeds to a low, golden throne. The favorite courtiers who are present throw themselves on the ground to worship the “Son of Heaven.” The chief of the imperial eunuchs thrice cracks his whip, music begins, and the officials who are to serve the Emperor enter, throwing themselves down nine times, and bending their knees five times. (Literary Digest 20 [11] [17 March 1900]:344)

In its rendition of the comical and ludicrous behavior of the Chinese, this entry from the Literary Digest stands at one side of representations of China. The other was made up of depictions of Chinese as brutal, nighting, or barbarous (MacKenzie 1986a:212). In either case, Qing court ceremony and the koutou loom large in a Euro-American imaginary as objects at which one might hurl ridicule or antipathy. One may well question why so much enmity was expended, especially by North Atlantic diplomats, at an act that could also be seen as humorous. Since such men are usually portrayed as highly rational in their actions, particularly as they sought to maximize gains and minimize losses in their pursuit of their nation’s interests in China, it would follow that British diplomats, for instance, ought to have performed the koutou before the emperor of China if they had any hope at all of achieving the objectives of their embassies. Yet, no British diplomat ever did. The question that remains open is why this was the case.

One possible explanation can be found in the remarks of former American president John Quincy Adams in an address he made before the Massachusetts Historical Society in 1840. According to Adams, in shutting out European trade and enclosing themselves behind high walls of exclusion, the Chinese had violated the law of nations that imposed a “moral obligation” on countries to facilitate commercial intercourse. Such obligations were, in turn, rooted for Adams in “Laws of Nature” and “Nature’s God.” Put in these metaphysical terms, Adams was then able to locate the real scandal of the koutou: it was only natural law and God “to which we bow the knee…” (1909-1910:305). Citizens of Christian nations did not, in other words, worship human beings. China’s “arrogant and insupportable” pretension that it could hold intercourse with others on the basis of an “insulting and degrading” act was, Adams argued, the sole cause of the conflict with Great Britain.

By presenting his justifications for British actions in China in these terms, Adams enunciated a North Atlantic diplomatic consensus with universalist pretensions, a consensus that became increasingly impatient with what it saw as the backward practices of the rest of the world. The difference between the diplomatic practices to be found in China and those that had emerged in northern Europe from the middle of the eighteenth century forward, particularly with respect to differences in bodily actions, was crucial and animated many accounts of China into this century. For the point was that members of North Atlantic nation-states entered the realms of others on their feet; only vassals and slaves entered on their knees. Adams’s reference to the “arrogant and insupportable pretension” of China’s leaders serves as a kind of refrain justifying the increasingly aggressive Euro-American penetration of China over the second half of the nineteenth century.

Yet why should such “pretensions” be so closely tied to a practice like koutou; why should koutou take precedence in Adams’s thinking over all other known aspects of China? Is it simply a question of distaste for acts
that are believed to be more proper for addressing a transcendent as opposed to a worldly realm — a Christian god as opposed, for example, to a Catholic Pope? While I believe that there may well be a strong aversion to things that appear to mimic Catholicism running through comments like those of Adams, there is probably more at work here than this.

Kneeling had long been associated in Great Britain with subjugation, but such associations took on added urgency in the nineteenth century as a result of the transformations of physical space in the emerging bourgeois world. The opposition between kneeling and standing upright resonates with others such as high/clean and low/dirty, distinctions which figured not only social class and the geography of the nineteenth-century city, but, as Stallybrass and White (1986) have argued, the feminization of servitude in the figure of the kneeling chambermaid. The Victorian gentleman and maker of empire was just the opposite — stalwartly upright, only touching the ground with more than one knee when wounded or dead at the hands of savage barbarians.

Running parallel to these developments were new notions of court ceremonial that displaced the nineteenth-century practices of the British monarchy from the realm of political ritual onto a new domain that might be called political theater or, perhaps more precisely, the pageantry of British imperialism. David Cannadine has argued that by 1820, attacks on courtly ceremony pivoted on the fact that the enlightenment of humanity exposed such practices as ridiculously hollow shams, as mere artifice. And yet, contrary to what utilitarian thought and instrumental reason might lead us to expect, neither monarchy nor ritual disappeared in Great Britain. Instead, foreshadowed by Edmund Burke’s unsettling notion that reason unwise laid bare the mechanism of state power (see 3.6 above), court ceremonial and other state rituals went public, and in so doing reclothed power. In spectacular displays of grandeur, in international expositions, celebrations of conquest, royal weddings and funerals, and dedications of monuments, all reported in the illustrated press and celebrated in commercial advertising (Richards 1990), representations of state power became objects of mass consumption. As spectacular commodities adorned with old and new symbols of the nation, statist representations helped to build mass consent for imperial adventures abroad.

Curiously, however, the same sort of sensibility that might ground class hegemony in the ability to stage power as spectacular performance had scant patience with the ways in which power was fashioned outside of Europe. A century after Lord Macartney’s almost reverential ruminations on the superiority of Asian over European courts with respect to ceremonial splendor and royal pomp (MD, 123–124, 131), his successors not only refused to participate in the “pageantry” of Asia, but set about systematically destroying the structures of “Asian” power and building new ones upon the same ground.

The reasons for this assault are not far to seek; they reside in a second trajectory of reconstituted court ceremonial, one that looked outward, rather than inward. By the end of the eighteenth century, diplomatic ceremonies had been refashioned through the “Law of Nations.” Ceremonial encounters between the head of one state and the ambassador of another became the primary site for the mutual recognition of sovereign equality (see Hevia 1989 and 1994b). In essence, such recognition necessarily constituted the rational subjects required for the completion of contractual arrangements in the form of treaties. Treaties, in turn, increasingly regulated what had become the partner of European diplomacy on the global stage, commercial exchange. Ambassadors and consuls sought to facilitate the movement of merchants and their goods across the same borders they themselves traversed. And like diplomacy, trade revolved around notions of sovereign equality, exchange, and contract.

It was precisely at the site of inter-state ceremonial that the new notions of diplomacy and commerce converged with emerging pronouncements about acceptable bodily posture for the bourgeois gentleman. By the time of the Congress of Vienna, not only had the definitions of sovereignty, diplomacy, and commercial exchange been worked out in detail and regularized, but diplomatic audiences in European courts had been standardized. Ambassadors entered the presence of the host sovereign, bowed three times in their approach, placed directly into the sovereign’s hands credentials or letters, exchanged pleasantries, and retreated as they had entered. They did not kneel on either one or two knees, and when they bowed their heads, they did so from a standing position, bending at the waist. By the beginning of the twentieth century, this form of sovereign recognition and state-to-state equality was “universal” (Hinsley 1969 and Jones 1984:20–21).

The Qing empire was finally forced to comply with these globally imposed standards in the Boxer Protocol of 1901, a little over a year after the publication of the Literary Digest piece with which this section opened.

The formal imposition of Euro-American-style audience procedures on the Qing court transformed these events into the kind of spectacle they had become in Europe. It also marked the demise of koutou as a living political issue between the Qing empire and European powers. In turn, representations of koutou also changed. Certainly people still saw it as a humiliation for Westerners, but some began to argue that it had other meanings for the Chinese. The Empress Dowager’s portrait painter Catherine Carl argued in 1905 that kneeling and bowing did not “imply any slave-like inferiority” on the performer, but was rather a “time honored” way of expressing thanks to the sovereign.

Reginald Johnston, the tutor of Puyi, seemed to agree with Carl when he discussed the “kotow” two decades later. Refiguring the act as a matter of style and perhaps good manners, Johnston admitted that given the right clothing and training, he himself would have performed it on occasions such as the ex-emperor’s birthday. In her reminiscence, titled simply Kowtow, the popular conveyor of Qing court culture, Princess Der Ling, claimed that her father required it of his secretary as an apology for a slanderous act committed against her.

By the 1930s and ’40s, the act had undergone several other transformations. In his early discussion of it, John K. Fairbank spoke of koutou as good manners and also in economic terms; it was a kind of repayment for imperial room and board. The latter interpretation he would drop from editions subsequent to 1948. At about the same time, E. H. Pritchard published his seminal essay on the koutou and the Macartney embassy. While accepting Fairbank’s general characterization, Pritchard also argued that there was nothing intentionally “humiliating or degrading” in the act. Coming very close to treating the Western understanding of koutou as a fetish, Pritchard claimed that it was not a central and ultimate act of submission as generally believed. In contrast, he suggested that the very dispatching of embassies and participation in the embassy routine was submission. “To refuse to kowtow,” he concluded, “after having conformed to all other parts of the suzerain-vassal relationship was in reality pointless, and grew out of a profound misunderstanding of the meaning of the act itself…”

What allowed both Fairbank and Pritchard to cast matters in these terms was not simply the transformation of koutou from an object of political contention to an object of historical investigation. Equally significant was the fact that their revisionism relied on new conceptual apparatuses and categories emerging from fields such as sociology and cultural anthropology. For what these two scholars did was to refigure koutou as a cultural issue located within patterns of universal historical development—that is, koutou became part of the cultural scheme of a premodern or traditional society. By the 1950s, such interpretations had been mobilized into Cold War area-studies discourse, where they provided ways to explain China’s failure to modernize along European lines as well as the success of communism in China.

It should also be recalled, however, that while the scholars I have just mentioned might have put a more benign face on koutou, the more negative representations did not completely disappear. There were those, in other words, who, while accepting a twentieth-century social-systems approach, continued to treat koutou as a distasteful and scandalous act typical of China’s premodern sense of universal superiority. Fairbank himself led the way here by taking a more critical approach from the time of his Trade and Diplomacy on the China Coast (1953) forward, eventually characterizing the koutou as one of those “rituals of abject servitude” common in traditional China (Fairbank 1988:14). This line of representation dovetailed in part with the English word “kowtow,” which remains a term of derision and ridicule, and gives it a history outside its incidence as a Chinese act.

11. From the New Year of 1902, when the protocol was first applied until the fall of the dynasty, thirty-three audiences for the entire diplomatic corps were held at either the Qianqing palace or the new summer palace. Even more extraordinary, during the same period I have counted 158 individual audiences held for ambassadors and visiting dignitaries. There may have even been more. These figures come from printed audience notices in the Number One Historical Archive, Peking. As the number of audiences increased, Sir Robert Hart, director of the Imperial Maritime Customs, was led to exclaim that, in allowing so many audiences, the court was “over-doing it in civility; not only will the Empress Dowager receive Minister’s wives, but also Legation children!” (cited in Fairbank 1987:139).

The Qianlong Letter and the Tribute System Synthesis

The Celestial Empire, ruling all within the four seas, simply concentrates on carrying out the affairs of Government properly, and does not value rare and precious things. ... We have never valued ingenious articles, nor do we have the slightest need of your Country's manufactures.

These few sentences from the letter of the Qianlong emperor to George III ought to be recognizable to most historians of modern China; they are perhaps the most frequently quoted lines in histories of Sino-Western relations. Yet, one of the great ironies of such citation is that as far as can be ascertained, neither the letter as a whole nor this brief passage from it ever appeared prominently in the considerations of nineteenth-century British diplomats dealing with China. In fact, the letter seems to have been given scant attention after Lord Macartney returned it to England, only having been translated fully into English in 1896 by E. H. Parker and more widely circulated in the version done by Backhouse and Bland in 1914. When it did appear in print, it seems that, like the head quote of the last section concerning "state dinners," the letter was greeted with much amusement. This was perhaps why, after reading the translation, Bertrand Russell argued that "no one understands China until this document has ceased to seem absurd" (1922:47).

Russell's interpretation of the letter is consistent with the shift in representations of koutou that were occurring around the same time, and as

13. Among many other places, the Qianlong letter and/or this passage appears or is referred to in Parker 1896; Backhouse and Bland 1914; MacNair 1923; Teng and Fairbank 1954:18; Mancall 1963:18; Cranmer-Byng 1965-1966 and 1968-1969; and Fairbank, Reischauer, and Craig 1978:257; Rozman 1981:22-23; and Spence 1990:122-123. Lessing, drawing on the *ZGCB*, translated portions of both letters to George III, see Hedin 1933:203-210. Uncited mention also occurs; see the New York Times about the visit of the U.S. secretary of state Warren Christopher to China (27 March 1994, p. 5). It also circulates prominently in world history textbooks; see Duiker and Spielvogel (1994), who reference Spence citing Cranmer-Byng, Stearns, Adas, and Schwartz (1992) reproduce a large portion of the letter and ask students, "What do these excerpts tell you about the Chinese view of themselves, the English, and the wider world at the time? How well do these attitudes correspond to the actual situation? Why were they likely to cause serious problems for the Chinese?" I suppose the correct answer is that the Chinese were aware in illusions, all of which would lead to trouble; hence the next section in the textbook on the Opium War.

such heralds the rather swift movement of the Qianlong emperor's letter from the realm of the comical to the land of cultural relativism. For what the letter came to stand for was China's traditional culturalism, isolationism, and sense of self-sufficiency nicely and conveniently compacted into one text. As such, the letter as well as the Macartney embassy were soon incorporated into the tribute system synthesis that defined traditional China's foreign relations and the Chinese world order.

On this line of reasoning, a number of writers during the 1960s argued that broad areas of continuity existed in foreign relations between traditional China and the People's Republic. A spate of articles appeared carrying the message that American policy makers should approach Chinese Communist rhetoric cautiously and be aware of China's long-standing cultural influence within East and Southeast Asia. While it may well be the case, as John Fairbank has suggested (1982:408), that these arguments about tradition within Chinese modernity played a positive role in lessening tensions between the United States and the People's Republic, my concern here is with the effect of representing the Qianlong letter as a cultural essence, as sign par excellence of China's isolation and (false) sense of superiority.

Not only does such citation distort the nature of the encounter between the Qing and British imperial formations, but if current world civilization textbooks are any indication, it also helps to perpetuate the stereotype of a passive East and a dynamic West. Qing "foreign relations" remain, as a result, ahistorically frozen within the boundaries of the "China's response" model, while the inside of China percolates with change.

10.5 From Routines of Empire to the Narrative Histories of the Nation-State

By the 1930s, the Macartney embassy had also become a significant historical event in Chinese writings on the history of Sino-Western relations and the process of modernization in China. In the *Qinghua University Journal*, for example, Tsiang T'ing-fu published an article titled "China and the Great Transformation of the Modern World," in which he treated the Macartney embassy as a failure. What is particularly interesting, however, is not only this conclusion, but how Tsiang arrived at it. Citing the work of Zhang Dechang, Tsiang noted that from the Ming period forward China

had linked trade and tribute together (1934:526). In an address given at the London School of Economics in 1936, he referred to a tributary system that linked trade and diplomacy in a dogma asserting that "national security could only be found in isolation" and in suzerain-vassal relations (1936:3-4). The result of this system was that China had no notion of international relations and no conception of equality between states. Secure in its peaceful traditionalism, Ming and Qing China assumed that it was superior to all other countries in the world until the first Opium War. The Macartney embassy did not alter Chinese perceptions. Rather it demonstrated that China would not give up its traditional notions peacefully (1934:548).

For Tsiang, then, the failure of the Macartney embassy and the struggle that ensued in the nineteenth century were both products of the differences between Chinese and Western civilizations, differences which worked themselves out as a kind of inevitable clash between tradition and modernity. There are a number of points in Tsiang's argument worth emphasizing, especially because they continue to circulate in contemporary representations both in and outside China. First, the entities at play are civilizations or cultures, not specific imperial formations with their own political agendas. They are, in other words, China and the West, not the Qing and British empires. Second, the distinctions between China and the West are grounded on a series of absences within the traditional world: China had no notion of international society or international law. Third, the traditional world is a closed system sealed off from outside communication on all levels critical to modernity. China refused to accept "equal" intercourse in diplomacy and commerce, while, in what was probably the greatest shortcoming for a modernist post-Qing intellectual, turning a blind eye to Western science and technology. In this formation, Tsiang not only anticipated the "China's response to the West" thesis, but positions contemporary Chinese scholars as participants in the construction of a twentieth-century history of international relations. Moreover, those who have followed Tsiang have taken the next logical step in the argument: "Sino-Western" conflict was a case of cultural misunderstanding, rather than an example of aggressive British imperial expansion (see, for example, Wang 1993).

In the post-1949 People's Republic of China, by contrast, there has remained until quite recently a strong emphasis on the role of British imperialism in the history of modern China.15 In this formation, a distinction has often been drawn between feudal China and capitalist Britain, with the former usually presented as passive or defensive in foreign relations and the latter aggressive. Conflict was accepted as inevitable, but its cause was not cultural misunderstanding. Rather, it was seen as an unavoidable product of expansive capitalism and Western imperialism. In recent renditions of this position, Hu Sheng (1981) and Zhu Jieqing (1984) emphasized that Macartney came to China as an agent of the East India Company. The Company's goal was to expand its influence in the China market, preferably by gaining trade concessions and a special site to conduct its commerce. In this regard, Zhu has argued that the long-range British policy toward China was aggression and that once the British had the opportunity, they imposed force on the demands that Macartney had made in 1793. Accordingly, the Qianlong emperor and the Qing court were wise to reject the British demands, because not only would acceptance have infringed on Chinese sovereignty, but it would have led to much faster expansion of the opium trade (1984:555-562).

These particular views of the Macartney embassy constituted a consensus within China until quite recently. In the current political climate a number of new interpretations have emerged which, while not directly challenging the anti-imperialism interpretation, have developed in alternative directions, most of which begin with the basic premise that the Macartney embassy was a failure for both sides. In the late 1980s, Zhu Yong completed a study that utilized records from the Qing archives in Peking, as well as the works of E. H. Pritchard and other Euro-American historians of the embassy. Rejecting explanations that focused on Qing xenophobia and a completely closed China, Zhu contended that the Macartney embassy failed because of the Qing policy of "limited contact for self-defense" (xianguan zhihe), itself informed by a notion of "severity tempered with gentleness" (kufang zhangfu). As a practical consideration, this meant that the Qianlong emperor had to maintain a moderate policy toward the British and avoid going to extremes. This notion of restricted or managed contact was the reason why the embassy was unable to open China more fully to British penetration (1989:280-281).

At around the same time, Zhang Shunhong was completing work in England at the India Office archives and combining them with published

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15. To a certain extent the shift in emphasis I explore in Chinese writings on the Macartney embassy are similar to what is explored by Paul Cohen in his discussion of

the historiography of the Boxer movement in China; see 1992. Unlike Cohen, however, my focus is not on mythologizing the past, but with the politics in which we all engage in representing the past.
and unpublished archival sources in China. He also argued that the embassy was a failure, but saw the cause as the unwillingness of the Qing court to communicate with the outside world. Because of this “closed-door policy,” the Qianlong emperor and his advisers failed to realize the great changes in the international balance of power then under way. As a result, they lost an ideal opportunity for catching up with the West (1993).

A third kind of revision can be found in the work of Dai Yi (1992). In his study of the Qianlong era, Dai moves close to the position expounded by Tsiang T'ing-fu. Arguing that the Qing empire was isolated and ignorant of modern international relations (430), he has focused on the debate over court ritual and koutou as indicative of the great gap between the Western world of capitalism and science and China’s feudal political order, its cultural system (wenhua zhida), and its ideology. The magnitude of difference meant that it would require a substantial amount of time and change before China could enter the world and adapt to the new situation (426).

While Zhu, Zhang, and Dai emphasize different causal factors, they also share certain characteristics. In the first place, they generally accept the embassy as a failure, rather than a Qing success. Second, in emphasizing Qing failures, they locate multiple causes rather than a single one. Third, they seem less concerned with the question of Western imperialism in China and more involved with issues of modernization. The Macartney embassy helps to explain why China remained “backward” and now has to “catch up” with the West.

An international conference commemorating the bicentennial of the Macartney embassy was held at Rehe in September 1993, where these three scholars joined others from China, the United States, Great Britain, France, and Germany. At this meeting, a number of Chinese scholars, along with Alain Peyrefitte, the author of The Immobile Empire, emphasized the “closed-door” policy of the Qing dynasty, the conservative nature of the Qianlong emperor, and China’s backwardness (Du Jiang 1993, Liu Fengyun 1993). Although not always overtly stated, this position suggested that the embassy was a lost opportunity for China. Presumably, a more farsighted Qing court would have opened its door allowing European technology and capitalism to flow into China. As a result, the gap between China and the West would have narrowed greatly during the nineteenth century. These arguments appear consistent with those of the present Chinese government, which has advocated similar policies since 1980. Thus, the Macartney embassy becomes part of a cautionary tale: China must never again repeat the folly of the Qianlong court.

The more difficult problem at the conference, however, was accounting for the Qing policy. No particular cause was singled out. Rather scholars emphasized a variety of factors that might account for the court’s reaction to the British proposals, including distractions caused by domestic economic and political problems, the Qianlong emperor’s disinterest in European technology, and the emphasis placed on ritual in the Chinese cultural tradition (Zhang Jiqian 1993 and Liu Fengyun 1993). Also within this line of reasoning was the view that the closed-door policy was not part of the Chinese cultural tradition, but rather something unique to the Qing period (Ye Fengmei 1993). Most of these arguments also emphasized cultural misunderstanding as a major cause of the embassy’s failure.

Thus, with the nation as the horizon or irreducible unit of analysis in these critical engagements, some Chinese scholars appear (wittingly or not) to reproduce Euro-American interpretations of Sino-Western conflict. These interpretations, it will be recalled, tended to discount imperialism as the major source of conflict between China and the West. Instead, they foregrounded cultural difference and the inevitable clash between tradition and modernity. Chinese scholars who point to Qing backwardness and a false sense of superiority seem to be mirroring the American sinological construct of the 1950s and ’60s.

These various positions are also of interest because of the distance they have moved away from the anti-imperialist approach of earlier decades and toward arguments to be found in Nationalist Chinese scholarship and American sinology. Indeed, if the conference in Chengde is any indication, imperialism seems to have reentered the background as some Chinese scholars attempt to explain China’s “backwardness” on the basis of endogenous, rather than exogenous factors. At the same time, however, the anti-imperialist critique has not completely disappeared. In a 1991 publication, for example, Guo Yunjing argued that there were a number of problems with shifting the emphasis for the failure of the Macartney embassy to the Qing court’s “closed-door policy.” Guo observed that such an interpretation relieved the British of responsibility for aggression against China and placed the blame on the Qing court (186). Reminding everyone that the Qing had ended multi-port trade because of the behavior of foreigners, she noted that the single-port system at Canton allowed for better surveillance of the foreign merchants and sailors, and fewer incidents of conflict. With respect to the Macartney embassy, Guo argued that the British proposals not only alerted the Qing court to the larger ambitions the British harbored in China, but allowed the court to carry out a series of reasonable
actions to combat those ambitions (188). At the same time, however, because of the failure of the embassy, the British became more aggressive on the China coast, leading to harsher policies during the reigns of the Jiaqing and Daoguang emperors. But even if these policies placed certain restrictions on contact, the moves were defensive, reasonable, and in keeping with the right of any country to protect itself (189).

In providing a timely reminder to others, Guo's position appears consistent with pre-1980s interpretations. Imperialism had, after all, served as a crucial component in explaining "modern" Chinese history: it simultaneously accounted for a century of humiliation and served dialectically to explain the coming into being of the consciousness of the Chinese people as a nation. I believe this is not the only significance of her observations. Rather, it strikes me as one among other indications that "reform" in China has produced competing and conflicting views of the nation, and of nation-building (see Anagnost 1993).

10.6 Horizons of History

At the risk of stating the obvious, it should be clear that more is at work in these alterations than simply the bringing to light of new evidence, or access to previously unavailable archival sources. How do we account for the twists and turns in the historiography of the Macartney embassy? How do we explain such changes over time? What kind of events are interpretative changes? Is it either possible or desirable to separate the embassy from its historiography? These are not easy questions to answer, particularly when we consider the usual form in which historical knowledge is produced. According to de Certeau, historians seem to be primarily engaged in separating "fact" from "fiction" in various kinds of Popperian falsification projects (1986:199-202). The operation itself is, therefore, a negative one designed (as it were) to purify both event and the writing of history, to cleanse them of fictions so that the narratives of the past can be relied upon. But suppose purification is not the issue? How would we go about conceptualizing a different sort of history—one less concerned with falsification, and more concerned with events through their multiple recounts? Perhaps we might start with a few generalizations suggested by the historiography of the Macartney embassy.

The particulars of the Macartney embassy were displaced in a significant way by the monumental events of the second half of the nineteenth century. Assaulted by rebellion from within and invasion from without, the Qing imperium collapsed, dissolving its empire and its particular notions of rulership. In its stead emerged, however feeble and incomplete, a nation-state comprised of ethnic groups and individual citizens—new identities, new allegiances, and perhaps most importantly new ways of looking at the past. The historiography after 1911 reflects these revolutionary changes. The writings considered above are cross-cut with narratives about the coming into being of the nation; with stories of ancient and contemporary civilizations, with the differences between old China and the new West, with assumptions about the inevitability of conflict between tradition and modernity, and with the particular demands nation-states seem to make of their intelligentsia.

There were at least two dominant moments in this historiography. The first was when Chinese thinkers reworked China's imperial past in Euro-American terms, accepting notions of time and categories of organization quite different from anything that had previously existed in China. This shift was, in turn, part of the more general process of the "Westernization" of Chinese education (Y. C. Wang 1966). The metaphysics of rites and the discourse of pattern that dominated imperial rulership were overwhelmed by this change. Such sensibilities had been broadly defused throughout the Qing imperium, providing common ground for fashioning and resisting the Qing imperial formation. For over half a century, the new discourses from the "West" have provided ways for intellectuals to explain China's "backwardness," and to justify social and economic change.

The second dominant moment was the Cold War. Beginning in the early 1950s, the historiography of China, particularly in the realm of foreign relations, underwent important changes. In the first place, the field was predominantly made up of Americans, most of whom were located at a few key institutions. Second, the Cold War saw both the pervasive application of social scientific terminology to the study of "non-Western civilizations" and the birth of area studies as strategic disciplines. Third, Chinese scholars in the People's Republic of China continued efforts begun in the 1920s to reorganize Chinese history in terms of Marxist categories (Dirlik 1978).

16. I can only draw attention to the latter observation at this point. The history of area studies and the nation-state has only begun to be written; see, for example, Marks 1985 and Barlow 1993. For an excellent introduction to the broader issues involved, see Buxton 1985 on Parsons.
In each of these cases, scholars in both “China” and the “West” were involved in purification and falsification projects. They arranged their narratives in terms of clearly bounded spatial and temporal entities; naturalized the civilization and the nation as stable units of historical analysis; organized events in linear cause-effect relationships; clearly demarcated the social into its religious, political, economic, and cultural components; and drew a clear distinction between stages of historical development. Whether in the service of the state, of the nation, or some abstract notion of truth, scholars have tended to treat all these categories as essential to useful scholarly inquiry. These words, phrases, and categories provided the foundation of research agendas. They also authorized an interpretation of the Macartney embassy that was thoroughly modernist, and hostile or dismissive toward the concerns and beliefs of Qing leaders. The question that remains open is whether there are other possible ways of engaging the past.

I believe that there are, and that we need not venture very far to find them. One reason why this is the case is that the historical projects of building hegemony within modern nation-states have never been complete—the has always been an excess of the social that slips outside the disciplinary apparatus of the state or the authoritative discourses found in the academy or in the public sphere (see, for example, Laclau 1990:89–92). Secondly, modernist historiography, with its emphases on demarcating and creating pure categories for analysis, has never been totally successful. It is not simply that the total knowledge project of the enlightenment remains incomplete (Habermas 1983). It is also, as Bruno Latour has argued, that we have never been modern (1993). Modernism had sought to carve up the world into discrete essences and completely knowable parts. But hybrids not only did not disappear, they have proliferated, while leakage across borders occurs simultaneously with their creation. The imperial audience in which Lord Macartney participated is a case in point. Reducible neither to the naturalizing discourse of European sovereign equality nor to the Qing process of hierarchical inclusion, the audience was a hybrid, which also may account for continued interest in and concern over it.

Or consider the examples, cited above, of the post-Qing Chinese intelligentsia. Appropriating the intellectual framework of the colonizer, Chinese thinkers made their arguments and constructed their narratives in thoroughly hybridized languages. The historiography of their Euro-American counterparts was no less tainted. Fairbank’s tribute system, for example, showed signs of functional anthropology, Weberian–Parsonian sociology, fragments of British imperial historiography, and the efforts of Chinese intellectuals to place China in the global history of civilizations. Pollution, in other words, was everywhere.

Processes of hybridization are also worth noting in terms of the subjects of this study. The Qing imperial formation can be dealt with rather quickly on this score. It is difficult to imagine anything more thoroughly hybrid than the Qing notion of rulership. The imperium can easily be pictured as an ever shifting contingent network made up, for example, of ritual sites, lower Yangtze academies and clans, Sons of Heaven, European “sing-songs,” Korean and Gurkha embassies, cakravartin kings, the Mountain Retreat for Escaping Summer Heat, and celestial bodhisattvas. Moreover, Qing leaders seem not only to have acknowledged as much, but had a means for operating within such a universe—that’s what patterning discourse and centering were all about.

The British imperial formation creates other sorts of problems, but it was no less hybridized. On the one hand, the embassy to China was shot through with easily identifiable modernist elements, not the least being the notion of sovereignty that Macartney presented to the Qianlong emperor. Yet, the sovereign state that Macartney ventured from was also itself part of an empire, one upon which not long afterwards the sun would never set. It is especially dubious to speak of pure forms existing in England at the end of the eighteenth century, since British global empire building provided pathways for all kinds of diversity to leak into Britain. By the end of the nineteenth century, Great Britain was a thoroughly hybridized social realm over which sat a wholly new sovereign, the Queen-Empress. It goes without saying that this was no less the case in the United States. Is it any wonder, therefore, that a major symptom of bourgeois hysteria involved pollution?

I wonder, therefore, how seriously we should take statesmen or historians who talk to us about national uniqueness, national essences, or the special qualities of a people. Or how much credence we should give those triumphalist histories that glorify the present at the expense of the past. Or tell us about the oversights and failures of other peoples in other times and places? How much longer should we limit our inquiries to what increasingly seem to be artificially bounded units such as the individual, the nation, or the culture?

Given these concerns, perhaps conceptualizing a different sort of history is not very difficult. Such a history would focus its attention on networks of relationships among heterogeneous agents, rather than discrete units orga-
nized around uncomplicated notions of cause and effect. Moreover, if we are indeed all hybrids of one sort or another, then the presumed gap between past and present, between "us" and "them" may be no more than a particular kind of modernist fiction. It is not a temporal or spatial gap that is at issue here, but an imaginary distance that we must cross. Being born in a particular nation and speaking its language does not give one privileged access to the past of that place. One still has to translate and interpret; they both require empathy and imagination.

In a sense, then, engaging the past becomes part of the ongoing process of hybridization. Our reward for transgressing boundaries is that we might be able to grasp, however fleetingly, that there were other ways of doing things, other ways of being in the world. We also can see that there were other kinds of constraints, other limitations, other forms of power that shaped subjectivities quite different from our own. Without reducing the past to identity with the present or, conversely, without affirming our own superiority over those who preceded us, such engagements with difference allow the possibility of other forms of critique, ones that may be more broadly humanistic than those so far imagined by enlightened reason. Perhaps such considerations will allow us to begin to address the questions with which this section opened. Perhaps they will also allow us once again to sense patterns, where now we can see only the presence or absence of progress.

APPENDIX

Calendar of Events While the British Embassy was in Rehe

September 8, 1793
The emperor bestows a feast for his retinue, imperial princes and dukes, high officials, the Mongol princes, and the prince of Qinghai.
An official is ordered to sacrifice at the ancestral temple.
Three imperial instructions are issued (GZCSL, 1434:3b–7a).

September 9, 1793
The emperor bestows a feast identical to that of the day before with the addition of the ambassador of the Burmese king.
An imperial instruction is issued regarding the shortcomings of the English embassy.
Various rewards are conferred (GZCSL, 1434:7a–8b).

September 10, 1793
An imperial order is dispatched to Liang Kentang on matters unrelated to the British embassy (GZCSL, 1434:8a).

September 11, 1793
An imperial prince is ordered to perform a sacrifice to Confucius.
An imperial instruction is issued amending the revisions to plans for the British embassy (GZCSL, 1434:8a–9a).

September 12, 1793
Imperial princes are ordered to perform two sacrifices.
An imperial instruction is issued and various rewards are conferred (GZCSL, 1434:9a–b).