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# The Qianlong Emperor's Letter to George III and the Early-Twentieth-Century Origins of Ideas about Traditional China's Foreign Relations

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ALMOST ANY EUROPEAN OR AMERICAN READER who has taken a course in Chinese history will be familiar with the following quotation, which comes from the edict in which the Qianlong emperor responded to an embassy sent by Britain under the leadership of Lord Macartney in 1793:<sup>1</sup>

Swaying the wide world, I have but one aim in view, namely, to maintain a perfect governance and to fulfil the duties of the State: strange and costly objects do not interest me. If I have commanded that the tribute offerings sent by you, O King, are to be accepted, this was solely in consideration for the spirit which prompted you to dispatch them from afar. 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. I set no value on objects strange or ingenious, and have no use for your country's manufactures.<sup>2</sup>

Since the 1920s, historians, scholars of international relations, journalists, and teachers have used this quotation to illustrate the failure of traditional China to acknowledge the rising power of the West: the Qianlong emperor foolishly imagines that George III is paying tribute to him, while his deprecation of the British gifts is interpreted as a rejection of Western science and even the industrial revolution. China's foreign relations, associated with the giving of tribute and embodied in the ritual of the kowtow, are thus contrasted with the egalitarian diplomatic practices of the rising European states. The wider interpretation of Qing political culture implied by such conclusions has been the subject of much criticism by specialists over many years. So

Versions of this article have been presented at Peking, Sichuan, and Manchester Universities, and I am grateful to the audiences for their questions. I am particularly grateful to Bian He, Sun Lin, and Robert Bickers for interesting and helpful comments, to Malcolm Watson for assistance with the *Donghua xulu*, and to all the *AHR* reviewers.

<sup>1</sup> The quotation has even entered *The Oxford Dictionary of Quotations* (Oxford, 2009).

<sup>2</sup> *Yingshi Magaerni fang Hua dang'an shiliao huibian* 英使馬嘎爾尼訪華檔案史料匯編 [Collected Archival Materials on the English Envoy Macartney's Visit to China], ed. Zhongguo di yi lishi dang'anguan 中國第一歷史檔案館 (Beijing, 1996), 56. This translation, which being out of copyright is now widely republished, is from Edmund Trelawney Backhouse and John Otway Percy Bland, *Annals and Memoirs of the Court of Peking (from the 16th to the 20th Century)* (London, 1914), 324–325. Also translated in Ssu-yü Teng and John K. Fairbank, *China's Response to the West: A Documentary Survey, 1829–1923* (Cambridge, Mass., 1954), 19.

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how did the traditional interpretation of this quotation come into being, and what are the reasons for its enduring popularity? Reading broadly across the Qing archival record suggests that the quotation does not reflect the Qianlong emperor's response to the British embassy, which was primarily to see it as a security threat, but demonstrates rather eighteenth-century British concerns with protocol and their influence on Chinese and Western scholars in the early twentieth century, when the letter first began to circulate widely. Looking at how the letter has been interpreted illustrates both the power of the processes through which archives are made available to historians and the extent to which many of our ideas about Qing history are still shaped by the tumultuous politics of China's early twentieth century.

Critiques of the ideas about premodern China's foreign relations embodied in the quotation have existed for many years and fall into two main categories: studies of the influence of Western science on the Qing court, and studies that focus on the Qing as a Manchu conquest dynasty. Scholars who work on the history of the Jesuits in China have pointed up the interest in Western astronomy and mathematics at the Qing court. The Kangxi emperor worked through Euclid's *Elements* and other mathematical texts with Jesuit tutors, while his grandson the Qianlong emperor had a huge collection of European-made clocks, automata, and astronomical instruments.<sup>3</sup> In an influential study of the early Qing emperors' interest in the European military technology provided by the Jesuits, Joanna Waley-Cohen attributes the quotation above to the emperor's need to stress China's cultural superiority and self-sufficiency for the purposes of domestic politics.<sup>4</sup> Another group of scholars has made use of sources in Manchu and other Inner Asian languages to argue that while the Qing emperors employed Confucian institutions and philosophy to govern their Han Chinese subjects, they did not necessarily impose these ideas on other parts of their empire, but structured their relations with their Mongol, Tibetan, and Turkic-speaking subjects according to the institutions and ideas of those cultures.<sup>5</sup> Laura Newby has shown that this also applied to their external relations in Central Asia, which were not necessarily determined by the Confucian ideals of the tribute system.<sup>6</sup> More recently, Matthew Mosca has argued that Qing officials in the eighteenth century were aware that they were part of a global trading system in which Britain and Russia were major players, and that the idea of handling each country's foreign relations through a single frontier where its envoys came to pay tribute was maintained because it was embedded in the dynasty's institutional structures.<sup>7</sup>

Despite all this scholarship, however, the familiar version of the Macartney em-

<sup>3</sup> Catherine Jami, *The Emperor's New Mathematics: Western Learning and Imperial Authority in China during the Kangxi Reign (1662–1722)* (Oxford, 2012); Catherine Pagani, *Eastern Magnificence and European Ingenuity: Clocks of Late Imperial China* (Ann Arbor, Mich., 2004). The Gugong bowuyuan 故宫博物院 [National Palace Museum] in Beijing, <http://www.dpm.org.cn>, is a major source for information about Qianlong's collection.

<sup>4</sup> Joanna Waley-Cohen, "China and Western Technology in the Late Eighteenth Century," *American Historical Review* 98, no. 5 (December 1993): 1525–1544. See also Zheng Yangwen, *China on the Sea: How the Maritime World Shaped Modern China* (Leiden, 2014), 190.

<sup>5</sup> For a survey of this literature, see Joanna Waley-Cohen, "The New Qing History," *Radical History Review* 88 (Winter 2004): 193–206.

<sup>6</sup> L. J. Newby, *The Empire and the Khanate: A Political History of Qing Relations with Khoqand, c. 1760–1860* (Leiden, 2005), 6–10.

<sup>7</sup> Matthew Mosca, "The Qing State and Its Awareness of Eurasian Interconnections, 1789–1805," *Eighteenth Century Studies* 47, no. 2 (2014): 103–116.

bassy remains influential. The most recent studies, made by James Hevia and Alain Peyrefitte in the 1990s, both place culture and ritual at the heart of their interpretations of the emperor's response to the British, even though in every other respect they are entirely different in approach and argument.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, the Qianlong emperor's letter continues to be a familiar part of public understanding of China. Students in high schools and colleges continue to analyze it, and journalists continue to quote it. It is also now being taken up by scholars of international relations interested in historical alternatives to contemporary ideas of global international society. The idea that China today hopes to return to the China-centered world order that existed until the arrival of European international relations in Asia lies at the basis of important new interpretations of Asia's contemporary international relations.<sup>9</sup>

MUCH OF THE QUOTATION'S POWER COMES from its status as the authentic voice of the emperor expressed in a major diplomatic document. However, there have been repeated calls in recent years to think critically about the political processes through which such documents are presented to historians.<sup>10</sup> This began with scholars working on topics that were at odds with the mindset of those who wrote and structured the archives they were using. Social historians looking for the lives of the voiceless hoped to read against the grain of the documents.<sup>11</sup> Further thought led to Ann Laura Stoler's insight that the structure of an archive could shape political power as well as document it.<sup>12</sup> Since then, Kirsten Weld has looked at how the structure of an archive compiled to implement, but also to conceal, violence can resist the efforts of those hoping to use it to seek redress.<sup>13</sup> However, thinking about how we use archival materials is valuable not only in understanding the voiceless and assisting the powerless, but also for studies of high politics and diplomacy, particularly in the aftermath of major political transitions which demand that the past should be reconstituted to justify the present.<sup>14</sup>

After the fall of the Qing in the 1911 revolution, the dynasty's archives came to be understood no longer as a collection of documents that would inform decision-making

<sup>8</sup> James L. Hevia, *Cherishing Men from Afar: Qing Guest Ritual and the Macartney Embassy of 1793* (Durham, N.C., 1995); Alain Peyrefitte, *The Collision of Two Civilisations: The British Expedition to China in 1792–4*, trans. Jon Rothschild (London, 1993).

<sup>9</sup> E.g., David C. Kang, *China Rising: Peace, Power, and Order in East Asia* (New York, 2007); Shogo Suzuki, Yongjin Zhang, and Joel Quirk eds., *International Orders in the Early Modern World: Before the Rise of the West* (London, 2014).

<sup>10</sup> Ann Blair and Jennifer Milligan, "Introduction" to *Toward a Cultural History of Archives*, Special Issue, *Archival Science* 7, no. 4 (2007): 289–296; Farina Mir, "Introduction" to "The Archives of Decolonization," *AHR Roundtable, American Historical Review* 120, no. 3 (June 2015): 844–851.

<sup>11</sup> Harriet Bradley, "The Seduction of the Archive: Voices Lost and Found," *History of the Human Sciences* 12, no. 2 (1999): 107–122.

<sup>12</sup> Ann Laura Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense* (Princeton, N.J., 2009).

<sup>13</sup> Kirsten Weld, *Paper Cadavers: The Archives of Dictatorship in Guatemala* (Durham, N.C., 2014). Another recent example in this vein is Caroline Elkins, "Looking beyond Mau Mau: Archiving Violence in the Era of Decolonization," *American Historical Review* 120, no. 3 (June 2015): 852–868.

<sup>14</sup> Todd Shepard, "'Of Sovereignty': Disputed Archives, 'Wholly Modern' Archives, and the Post-Decolonization French and Algerian Republics, 1962–2012," *American Historical Review* 120, no. 3 (June 2015): 869–883; Jennifer S. Milligan, "The Problem of *Publicité* in the Archives of Second Empire France," in Francis X. Blouin Jr. and William G. Rosenberg, eds., *Archives, Documentation, and Institutions of Social Memory: Essays from the Sawyer Seminar* (Ann Arbor, Mich., 2007), 20–35.

and glorify the emperor, but as sources for a critical history that would legitimate the dynasty's fall. Central to this process was the work of a group of Chinese scholars who published the first sets of documents from the archive in the 1920s. The political context of the time shaped the selection of documents on the Macartney embassy that they included in their publication, documents that were then interpreted as the authentic voice of the Qing. In particular, they chose documents that would illustrate the dynasty's formalistic concern with ceremony and ritual, while omitting those relating to its military response to the British threat. This narrative was passed on to English readers through the work of John K. Fairbank, who was committed to using Chinese archival documents to balance familiar Western perspectives on China's diplomatic history. However, this very commitment to archival research meant that his work was heavily influenced by the selection of documents that were being released to historians by the Chinese scholars in charge of the archives.

Terry Cook has called on historians to consider seriously the role of archivists as "co-creators" of history in the choices they make about what to keep and what to exclude from the archive.<sup>15</sup> In the case of the Macartney embassy, it happens that the archivists' decisions about what to publish in the 1920s were superseded by a much larger collection of documents released in the 1990s. Moreover, archivists in early-twentieth-century China were significant intellectual figures, and a wide range of sources and studies are available that make it possible to study their attitudes and role in the shaping of the archive. A careful examination of the two sets of documents of the Macartney embassy not only transforms the story from one about ceremony and ritual to one about a military response to a perceived threat, but also shows the power of selection and exclusion in the presentation of archives to shape the stories we tell ourselves and others about the past.

WHAT IS INITIALLY SURPRISING ABOUT the popular interpretation of the Qianlong emperor's letter is how little resemblance it seems to bear to the Qing dynasty's response at the time, as seen in the documents on the embassy that were published by the First Historical Archives in Beijing in 1996. Since the Qing archives were far from completely preserved, this compilation does not include every document that was written at the time. Nor does it include every remaining document relevant for a study of the embassy, since only documents that actually refer to the embassy were selected. Nevertheless, the volume contains more than six hundred documents, ranging from the emperor's edict quoted above to a letter of thanks for a gift of English woolen cloth to make a jacket.<sup>16</sup> The volume is arranged by archival fonds, but it has a useful index, which makes it possible to read the documents in date order.

The narrative of the embassy that emerges begins in October 1792 with a letter from the East India Company announcing that the king of England intends to send an embassy to congratulate the emperor on his birthday. This is followed by much correspondence as the governors of China's coastal provinces waited for the British ships to be sighted. In July 1793 the embassy arrived near Tianjin, and there is a considerable

<sup>15</sup> Terry Cook, "The Archive(s) Is a Foreign Country: Historians, Archivists, and the Changing Archival Landscape," *Canadian Historical Review* 90, no. 3 (2009): 497–534.

<sup>16</sup> *Yingshi Magaerni fang Hua dang'an shiliao huibian*, 451.

amount of correspondence that was written as its members traveled by boat toward Beijing and then on beyond the Great Wall to the summer palace in Chengde, where Macartney and his immediate entourage were received by the emperor. Most of the letters concern the travel arrangements, and there is also a great deal of discussion of the British gifts: persuading the British to provide a list of them, how they are to be transported, set up, and displayed. There is also some discussion of protocol for the imperial audience, though only a few letters mention the issue of the kowtow, and of those that do, several merely scold the official Zhengrui for self-importance in imagining that the ambassador should kowtow to *him*.<sup>17</sup>

A turning point occurs at the end of September 1793, when two crucial events took place. Firstly, the embassy returned from Chengde to Beijing, and Qing officials began arranging for their journey south to Guangzhou. Secondly, the list of British demands was translated into Chinese.<sup>18</sup> When the emperor read them, he found them most unpalatable: the British wanted not only to keep a permanent ambassador in Beijing (to bypass the provincial government in Guangdong), but also to trade at ports along the coast and in Beijing, to receive tax reductions, and to be given one of the Zhoushan Islands off the coast near the port of Ningbo as well as a base near Guangzhou. These requests had significant political and fiscal implications, which the emperor was not slow to grasp. A formulaic letter to the English king that had previously been drafted in response to the embassy was thrown out, and a new version was written in accordance with the emperor's personal instructions. The letter goes through each of the British requests and rejects them all. Although many readers have assumed that this rejection was caused by the emperor's anger at Macartney's refusal to kowtow, there is no mention of the kowtow or other protocol issues, and the focus is on a detailed rejection of the substantive British demands.<sup>19</sup> This letter is the source of the famous quotation, which is taken from the preamble, where the emperor lays out his general response while emphasizing his own generosity and playing down the value of the British gifts. The letter was formally presented to Macartney, and the embassy was hurried out of Beijing.

Thereafter the surviving correspondence is extensive and is primarily concerned with avoiding the possible military consequences of having rejected the British demands. A key letter was sent out by the Grand Council to the governors of coastal provinces just before the embassy left Beijing. In it the emperor warns the governors about what has happened and that "England is stronger and fiercer than the other countries in the Western Ocean. Since things have not gone according to their wishes, it may cause them to stir up trouble." He then urges the governors to strengthen their defenses and instructs the authorities in Guangzhou not to give the British any excuse for military action:

Now that country speaks of wanting us to give them a place near the sea for their trade, so the forts along the coast should not only organize a show of military force but also make

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 38.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 536.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 126–127, 536; Hevia, *Cherishing Men from Afar*, 181; Zhao Gang 趙剛, "Shi shenme zhebizi shijia de yanjing? 18 shiji shijie shiyezhong de Magaerni shituan lai Hua shijian" 是什麼遮蔽了史家的眼睛?—18 世紀世界視野中的馬嘎爾尼使團來華事件 [What Is It That Has Blindfolded the Historian? Revisiting the Macartney Embassy in the World of the Eighteenth Century], *Shijie 視界 [Horizons]* 9 (2002): 2–28.

defensive preparations. So, for example, you should consider and estimate the situations of each of the islands of Zhoushan and the surrounding area and islands of any size near Macao, and make advance plans so as not to let the English foreigners infiltrate and occupy them . . . Next, the Guangdong Customs Superintendent who takes the taxes on the foreign merchants should in any case levy them according to the rules, and should firmly ban his clerks from extorting money. The English trading ships that come to Guangdong are greater in number than those from other countries, so in future when their goods ships come and go, it will certainly not be convenient to suddenly reduce the duty on them, but you should also not make the smallest increase that would give the foreign merchants an excuse.<sup>20</sup>

This instruction from the emperor is followed by much correspondence as his officials report the various actions they have taken to comply.<sup>21</sup> There are also a great many letters about how to get rid of the five British ships now anchored at Zhoushan, especially the heavily armed warship HMS *Lion*.<sup>22</sup> The island provided a deep water anchorage, which was one of the reasons the British hoped to get a base there, and Macartney had explained that many of the sailors were sick and needed to rest on land, which was indeed the case, as the *Lion* had a major outbreak of dysentery and many deaths.<sup>23</sup> The emperor accepted this, but was urgent with his officials in demanding that they get the ships to leave.<sup>24</sup> (Captain Ernest Gower recorded in his log being pursued by Chinese ships as he sailed down the coast, local people throwing filth in their wells so his ships could not water, the gun salutes he fired, and Chinese ships in the harbor firing their guns both in response and at other times.<sup>25</sup>) There are also a number of letters reporting to the emperor military displays intended to impress the British as the embassy journeyed south. (These too appear in the British accounts, which note the large numbers of soldiers on parade along the route while commenting critically on the artillery they displayed.<sup>26</sup>) Intermingled with these orders are a series of letters from Songyun, who was accompanying the embassy, and Changlin, a member of the emperor's clan who was traveling to Guangzhou to take up the position of governor general of Guangdong and Guangxi and who took over the task of escorting the embassy in Zhejiang. Their responsibility was to conduct trade negotiations that would dissuade the embassy from causing trouble but nevertheless not give way on any of the British demands. Their reports to the emperor and Macartney's to the British home secretary, Henry Dundas, both suggest that this endeavor was remarkably successful.<sup>27</sup> The overall impression

<sup>20</sup> *Yingshi Magaerni fang Hua dang'an shiliao huibian*, 176–177.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 411, 418–421, 427–428, 441, 446.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 171–172; also 393–397, 402–404, 434–435.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 389–390; Ernest Gower, "A Journal of His Majesty's Ship *Lion*, Beginning the 1st October 1792 and Ending the 7th September 1794," Add. MS 21,106, British Library, London, 62, 70, 85.

<sup>24</sup> *Yingshi Magaerni fang Hua dang'an shiliao huibian*, 171–172, 179.

<sup>25</sup> Gower, "A Journal of His Majesty's Ship *Lion*," 90–92.

<sup>26</sup> George Macartney, *An Embassy to China: Being the Journal Kept by Lord Macartney during His Embassy to the Emperor Ch'ien-lung, 1793–1794*, ed. J. L. Cranmer-Byng (London, 1962), 179–180, 218; J. C. Hüttner, *Voyage à la Chine* (Paris, 1798), 139; Aeneas Anderson, *A Narrative of the Embassy to China, in the Years 1792, 1793, and 1794* (London, 1795), 254; George Thomas Staunton, *Childhood Travel Diary, 1793 Aug. 30–1794 Feb. 1*, especially October 20, 1793, and December 2, 1793, George Thomas Staunton Papers, David M. Rubenstein Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Duke University.

<sup>27</sup> *Yingshi Magaerni fang Hua dang'an shiliao huibian*, 57, 65–68, 78, 401–402, 405–407, 413–417, 429–433, 437–440, 442–444; Macartney to Henry Dundas, November 9, 1793, India Office Records and Private Papers, British Library [hereafter IOR], IOR/G/12/92, 95–105; Macartney to Henry Dundas, November 23, 1793, IOR/G/12/92, 399–401.



FIGURE 1: William Alexander, Fort and soldiers on parade, sketched from the boats taking the embassy south down the Grand Canal. © The British Library Board, IOR Prints and Drawings, WD961, f 135.

given by the archives is that the need for an effective military and diplomatic response to the British demands loomed much larger in the mind of the Qianlong emperor than the kowtow and other protocol issues discussed before the embassy arrived in Beijing.

Chinese accounts of the embassy throughout the nineteenth century conveyed a similar story. The *Veritable Records* (*Qing shilu*) for the Qianlong emperor's reign, which were compiled after his death as a record for future emperors and based on documents available to the Outer Court, lacked some of the military detail that can be found in the emperor's private correspondence. Nevertheless, the editors took a broad view of the embassy, including both the emperor's letter to the English king and his instructions for a military response.<sup>28</sup> The *Veritable Records* were available to only a very small number of readers before the 1930s; however, several works published in the context of the Opium War also emphasized British demands for territory and the Qing military response. The *Survey of Guangdong Maritime Defense* (*Guangdong haifang huilan*, 1838) included the formal letter to the English king, but also a much tougher version of Qianlong's response to the English demands written for internal consumption, and his instructions to Songyun and Changlin on the military and commercial response.<sup>29</sup> Meanwhile, the *Guangdong Maritime Customs Gazetteer* (*Yue haiguan zhi*, 1839) includes an additional stern letter from the emperor stressing the importance of not allowing the English to seize an island, and ends with an order to

<sup>28</sup> *Yingshi Magaerni fang Hua dang'an shiliao huibian*, 27–88; *Ming Qing shilu* 明清實錄, in *Shuzi guji congshu* [Digitized Ancient Books Series], Airusheng shuzihua jishu yanjiu zhongxin, Beijing, <http://server.wenzibase.com/dblist.jsp>, Qianlong 58.

<sup>29</sup> Lu Kun 盧坤 and Deng Tingzhen 鄧廷楨, *Guangdong haifang huilan* 廣東海防彙覽 [Overview of Guangdong Maritime Defenses], ed. Wang Hongbin 王宏斌 (1838; repr., Shijiazhuang, 2009), 893–899.

build up coastal defenses.<sup>30</sup> The same themes can be found in a history of Qing foreign relations published in the 1890s, which sets the embassy in the context of Qing strength: victories against the Ghurkhas and successful border negotiations with the Russians.<sup>31</sup> In all these accounts written during the Qing dynasty, the embassy is seen as a defense issue, and the emphasis is on military preparations and the administration of the British trade in Guangdong.

SO IF THE QING PERCEIVED THE EMBASSY in terms of a British military threat, what is the source of the familiar interpretation of the embassy focused on the issue of the kowtow? To understand this, we must first look at the contemporary British sources. The Qianlong emperor was both completely clear about the expected protocol for foreign envoys, and sufficiently flexible not to require his officials to enforce the full rituals of the kowtow for a somewhat informal meeting with Macartney held in his summer residence beyond the Great Wall and far from the Chinese court in Beijing.<sup>32</sup> Macartney, by contrast, came from a European context where the relationships between rulers were undergoing great changes, and alterations in diplomatic protocol were central to how those changes were negotiated.

Historians of early modern Europe have noted that although the Peace of Westphalia in 1648 is conventionally seen as marking the start of the diplomatic equality of sovereign states, in fact ideas of sovereignty developed gradually, and as late as the eighteenth century were still in interaction with the older hierarchical system of relations between princely courts.<sup>33</sup> As D. B. Horn commented in his classic study of British diplomacy, “the importance attached in the eighteenth century to questions of ceremonial and etiquette seems disproportionate to present-day writers.”<sup>34</sup> He noted that the European great powers in this period would not have accepted an ambassador except from their equals, and provided a lengthy description of the difficulties posed by issues of ceremonies and privileges. Among these was the fact that the Habsburgs, as rulers of the Holy Roman Empire, refused to give the English king the title of His Majesty, since he was only a king, not an emperor, making it difficult at times for the British to send ambassadors to Vienna.<sup>35</sup> The American and French revolutions exacerbated such problems by creating powerful new states that were republics, traditionally among the lowest-ranking entities in the hierarchy of princes. They also brought to political prominence Enlightenment ideas of equality, which began to be applied to states as well as individuals. However, such ideas were still heavily contested in the 1790s. Shortly after the embassy's

<sup>30</sup> Liang Tingnan 梁廷柅, *Yue haiguan zhi* 粵海關志 [*Guangdong Maritime Customs Gazetteer*] (1839), 22: 2–12.

<sup>31</sup> Wang Zhichun 王之春, *Guochao rouyuan ji* 國朝柔遠記 [*A Record of the Dynasty's Kindness to Those Who Come from Afar*] (1891), 6: 1–9.

<sup>32</sup> For the issue of whether or not Macartney performed the kowtow, see Earl H. Pritchard, “The Kowtow in the Macartney Embassy to China in 1793,” *Far Eastern Quarterly* 2, no. 2 (1943): 163–203; Peyrefitte, *The Collision of Two Civilisations*, 224–225.

<sup>33</sup> Christian Windler, *La diplomatie comme expérience de l'autre: Consuls français au Maghreb (1700–1840)* (Geneva, 2002), 86–91; Windler, personal communication, 2014, based on his “Symbolische Kommunikation und diplomatische Praxis in der Frühen Neuzeit: Erträge neuer Forschungen,” in Barbara Stollberg-Rilinger, Tim Neu, and Christina Brauner, eds., *Alles nur symbolisch? Bilanz und Perspektiven der Erforschung symbolischer Kommunikation* (Cologne, 2013), 161–186.

<sup>34</sup> D. B. Horn, *The British Diplomatic Service, 1689–1789* (Oxford, 1961), 204.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 22, 204–208.



return to England, Thomas James Mathias published a poem that he claimed was a translation of the Qianlong emperor's response to George III. In it the emperor condemns the revolutionary leaders of France who

O'er th'astonished world  
The flag of dire EQUALITY unfurl'd,  
Drizzling with blood of millions streams in air,  
The scroll, FRATERNAL FREEDOM, DEATH, DESPAIR!<sup>36</sup>

Mathias was a member of the queen's household and a prolific satirist whose anonymous attacks on the literary celebrities of the day as well as on French philosophy had a broad appeal to conservatives.<sup>37</sup> As the poem suggests, equality was still far from generally accepted even as an ideal. It was not until 1816 that the Congress of Vienna consecrated the equality of states as part of European diplomatic protocol, though this ideal has remained just as much unfulfilled as the ideals of the Chinese tribute system.

In this context where hierarchical diplomatic relations were still the accepted norm in Europe, it is not surprising that concerns over the ceremonies with which the emperor of China would receive the envoy of an English king were a major issue for the British well before the embassy left London. Macartney, in his correspondence with Dundas, anticipated trouble with "genuflexions, prostrations and other idle oriental ceremony" and said that he would handle the matter flexibly.<sup>38</sup> The well-known cartoon by James Gillray captioned "The Reception of the Diplomatique and His Suite at the Court of Pekin," in which Englishmen bow their heads to the ground before a reclining oriental monarch, has often been used to illustrate the importance of the kowtow to the reception of the embassy. However, this image was actually published before the embassy left London. Rather than suggesting Chinese concerns with ceremonial, it points to the intensity of popular British concern with the bodily posture of diplomats and the centrality of this issue in judging the success of the embassy.

The frequent references in Macartney's diary to protocol issues, and especially the kowtow, point to his own anxieties and are clearly intended as a record of how carefully he handled this issue.<sup>39</sup> John Barrow, who went on from the embassy to become Macartney's secretary, wrote an influential account that placed strong emphasis on Macartney's refusal to kowtow. He claimed that it was in fact the Chinese who were excessively rigid on ceremonial issues.<sup>40</sup> Laurence Williams has argued that this reflected a broader process in which contemporary British satire influenced later depictions of the embassy through defensive writings that inverted the satirical critiques.<sup>41</sup>

<sup>36</sup> Thomas James Mathias, *The Imperial Epistle from Kien Long, Emperor of China, to George the Third, King of Great Britain* (London, 1796), 30.

<sup>37</sup> Paul Baines, "Mathias, Thomas James (1753/4–1835)," in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford, 2004).

<sup>38</sup> Macartney to Henry Dundas, March 17, 1792, IOR/G/12/91, 85.

<sup>39</sup> Macartney, *An Embassy to China*. The diary was not published until the twentieth century, but it is a major source for George Staunton, *An Authentic Account of an Embassy from the King of Great Britain to the Emperor of China* (London, 1796), and John Barrow, *Travels in China: Containing Descriptions, Observations, and Comparisons, Made and Collected in the Course of a Short Residence at the Imperial Palace of Yuen-Min-Yuen, and on a Subsequent Journey through the Country from Pekin to Canton* (London, 1804).

<sup>40</sup> Barrow, *Travels in China*.

<sup>41</sup> Laurence Williams, "British Government under the Qianlong Emperor's Gaze: Satire, Imperialism, and the Macartney Embassy to China, 1792–1804," *Lumen* 32 (2013): 85–107.



FIGURE 2: James Gillray, "The Reception of the Diplomatique and His Suite at the Court of Peking," 1792. © National Portrait Gallery, London.

These concerns were carried down through the nineteenth-century English-language literature on the embassy because diplomatic protocol continued to be an issue for the European powers in China. The Westerners saw acceptable protocol as essential to their relations with China, and their representatives refused to conform to standard forms of Qing court etiquette on the grounds that they were not the representatives of tributary states. The Qing vacillated between an absolute refusal to allow the 1816 embassy led by Lord Amherst to proceed unless its members performed the kowtow, and suggestions for alternative ceremonies that would avoid a formal reception.<sup>42</sup> The ongoing political importance of the issues is suggested by James Bromley Eames's dedication of his influential general history *The English in China* (1909), which criticized Macartney's flexibility over the kowtow, to one of the principal British military officers who fought against the Qing during the Boxer uprising.<sup>43</sup> William Woodville Rockhill, who in 1897 published "Diplomatic Missions to the Court of

<sup>42</sup> Tseng-Tsai Wang, "The Audience Question: Foreign Representatives and the Emperor of China, 1858–1873," *The Historical Journal* 14, no. 3 (1971): 617–626.

<sup>43</sup> James Bromley Eames, *The English in China: Being an Account of the Intercourse and Relations between England and China from the Year 1600 to the Year 1843 and a Summary of Later Developments* (1909; repr., London, 1974).

China: The Kotow Question” in the new *American Historical Review*, was appointed as the U.S. plenipotentiary on the committee that imposed reformed ceremonials on the Qing court after the 1900 Boxer Uprising.<sup>44</sup> Thus up until the fall of the Qing dynasty in 1911, the focus on diplomatic protocol during the Macartney embassy was a primarily Western concern, while published Chinese accounts emphasized the British threat and the military measures taken to deal with it.

Meanwhile, the Qianlong emperor’s letter to George III was largely unknown. The English translation lay forgotten in the archives of the East India Company, ignored even by the indefatigable Hosea Ballou Morse in his research for the monumental history of Qing China’s international relations that he began to publish in 1910.<sup>45</sup> The Chinese original was available in works that dealt with Guangdong’s maritime customs and defenses, but it does not appear to have been noticed until it was reprinted in a new set of the *Court Records of the Donghua Gate* (*Donghua xulu*, 1885), an abridged version of the *Veritable Records*.<sup>46</sup> The first modern translation into English was made from this text in 1896 by Edward Harper Parker, who was interested in using these newly available Qing records to examine the history of the Ghurkha wars of the 1790s, but although he published his translation in a London journal, it does not seem to have provoked any particular response.<sup>47</sup>

WHAT BROUGHT THE QIANLONG EMPEROR’S letter to public prominence was the fall of the Qing dynasty in 1911 and the rise of Han Chinese nationalism. In 1914, a translation was included in a new history of the Qing by two British writers living in China.<sup>48</sup> It was from this English source that it was picked up by Chinese scholars, for whom the Qianlong emperor’s apparent ignorance and complacency fitted neatly with a revolutionary agenda. The letter was one of a number of well-known documents for the study of Qing history that emerged and circulated widely in the years before and after the 1911 revolution. Another is the *Record of Ten Days at Yangzhou* (*Yangzhou shi ri ji*), a vivid and emotive description of the brutality of the Qing armies in the seventeenth-century conquest in China that has also frequently been published in translation.<sup>49</sup> The dynasty’s archives became available to historians through this same process, a fact that has made aspects of the revolutionary narrative particularly effective and long-lasting.

<sup>44</sup> William Woodville Rockhill, “Diplomatic Missions to the Court of China: The Kotow Question,” 2 pts., *American Historical Review* 2, no. 3 (1897): 427–442 and 2, no. 4 (1897): 627–643.

<sup>45</sup> Hosea Ballou Morse, *International Relations of the Chinese Empire* 3 vols. (London, 1910–1918).

<sup>46</sup> Wang Xianqian 王先謙, *Donghua xulu* 東華續錄 [*Additional Court Records of the Donghua Gate*], 1,800 juan (1884), Qianlong 116: 26, 118: 3–8.

<sup>47</sup> E. H. Parker, “From the Emperor of China to King George the Third,” *The Nineteenth Century: A Monthly Review* 40 (1896): 45–55. For Parker’s research interests, see Parker, *32 Pamphlets on Chinese History Etc.* [catalogued as 29 Articles Extracted or Reprinted from Periodicals, 1884–1914], Bodleian Library, Oxford, 24631 d 16.

<sup>48</sup> Backhouse and Bland, *Annals and Memoirs of the Court of Peking*, 322–331.

<sup>49</sup> Wang Xiuchu 王秀楚, *Yangzhou shi ri ji* 揚州十日記 [*Record of Ten Days in Yangzhou*], in Liuyun-jushi 留雲居士, ed., *Ming ji baishi huibian* 明季稗史彙編 [*Collected Minor Histories of the Late Ming*] (Shanghai, 1896); Peter Zarrow, “Historical Trauma: Anti-Manchuism and Memories of Atrocity in Late Qing China,” *History and Memory* 16, no. 2 (2004): 67–107; Zhu Xinwu 朱新屋, “Yangzhou shi ri ji yu xinhai geming yige shujishi de yuedushi de fenxi” “《扬州十日记》与辛亥革命——一个书籍史和阅读史的分析” [*The Record of Ten Days at Yangzhou and the 1911 Revolution—An Analysis from the Perspective of Book History and Reading History*], *Jindaishi xuekan* 近代史学刊 [*Journal of Modern History*] 13 (2015): 45–65.

For British writers, the failure of the Macartney embassy to achieve its goals was a longstanding part of the justification for British power in China.<sup>50</sup> For this purpose, the demands presented by Macartney were summarized as being for diplomatic relations and free trade (rather than tax reductions and territorial bases). Morse called them a “modest Charter of Rights for the English trade put forward in 1793 and won by force of arms in 1842.”<sup>51</sup> By beginning their narratives of Sino-British relations with the embassy, authors told a story of two failed British attempts to use diplomacy to achieve the rightful equality of nations, which then justified the use of force. A side effect of omitting the more substantive demands was to make it appear that the Qing were responding primarily to cultural affronts.<sup>52</sup>

Sir Edmund Backhouse and John Otway Percy Bland published their history of the Qing court, which included a complete translation of the Qianlong letter, shortly after the 1911 revolution.<sup>53</sup> The book was lighthearted, racy, and a bestseller. It brought the letter to a wide public, some of whom took it as evidence of just the kind of culpable Chinese arrogance that justified British power in China.<sup>54</sup> However, Bland and Backhouse themselves leaned toward a romantic conservatism, presenting the letter as evidence of the greatness of the Qianlong emperor in comparison with China's subsequent decline: “How swift and complete has been the process of the Great Celestial Empire's decline and humiliation, since its sovereign could describe himself in all sincerity as ‘swaying the wide world.’”<sup>55</sup>

The letter quickly became well known to Western readers. Confident in their own cultural superiority, they usually responded to the Qianlong emperor's words with laughter. The philosopher Bertrand Russell, who toured China lecturing, read Bland and Backhouse and included a lengthy quotation from the letter in *The Problem of China* (1922), commenting that “no one understands China until this document has ceased to seem absurd.”<sup>56</sup> Arnold Toynbee, who quoted the letter in the 1930s, thought that “the best cure for such insanity is ridicule” (though his point was the folly of similar attitudes in the contemporary West).<sup>57</sup> He, like Bland, saw the piquancy of the joke in the contrast between China's eighteenth-century arrogance and its contemporary weakness. The complicity of the reader in the joke and the resulting potential for an author to expound some reality that lies behind the emperor's words is undoubtedly part of the staying power of the quotation in Western sources. However, in these early years the point most often made was the size and power of the Qing empire under Qianlong.

Bland and Backhouse's writing was also a good fit for the complex mix of conser-

<sup>50</sup> For this historiography, see Robert Bickers, *The Scramble for China: Foreign Devils in the Qing Empire, 1832–1914* (London, 2011).

<sup>51</sup> Hosea Ballou Morse, *The Chronicles of the East India Company Trading to China, 1635–1834*, 5 vols. (Oxford, 1926–1929), 2: 225.

<sup>52</sup> Eames, *The English in China*, 152.

<sup>53</sup> It seems likely that Backhouse found the letter in the *Donghua xulu*, since he bought a 100-volume set for the Bodleian Library at about this time. See David Helliwell, *A Catalogue of the Old Chinese Books in the Bodleian Library*, vol. 1: *The Backhouse Collection* (Oxford, 1983), 37.

<sup>54</sup> Harley Farnsworth MacNair, *Modern Chinese History: Selected Readings* (Shanghai, 1927); Hosea Ballou Morse and Harley Farnsworth MacNair, *Far Eastern International Relations* (Boston, 1931), viii.

<sup>55</sup> Backhouse and Bland, *Annals and Memoirs of the Court of Peking*, 322. See also Hugh Trevor Roper, *Hermit of Peking: The Hidden Life of Sir Edmund Backhouse* (Harmondsworth, 1978), 46–49.

<sup>56</sup> Bertrand Russell, *The Problem of China* (London, 1922), 51.

<sup>57</sup> Arnold J. Toynbee, *A Study of History*, 12 vols. (Oxford, 1935–1961), 1: 160.

vatism, national pride, and republicanism shared by many Chinese elites, with the result that the book was translated into Chinese within a year.<sup>58</sup> Combining stories of Qing depravity and corruption with a critique of the Westernized elite who formed the new political establishment, the Chinese translation was a hit and went through four editions between 1915 and 1931. To a Chinese reader, there is nothing particularly amusing about the Qianlong emperor's grand words, which come from familiar classical sources and were simply part of the diplomatic boilerplate of traditional China, so the letter was merely absorbed into the book's general romantic and tragic narrative of the Qing past. Liu Bannong was inspired by reading it to translate Macartney's diary of the embassy, which had also recently been published in English. Liu's preface presents both Macartney and the Qianlong emperor as impressively flexible in their negotiations and a model for China's future foreign relations.<sup>59</sup> However, this new Chinese view of the embassy was populist rather than scholarly: Liu Bannong was a novelist, not a historian, and the translators of Bland and Backhouse's work felt duty-bound to note how unreliable it was.<sup>60</sup>

It was this popular narrative that brought the English sources on the Macartney embassy to the attention of Chinese historians and archivists.<sup>61</sup> In 1924 the remnants of the court were expelled from the palace, the National Palace Museum was established, and the archives of the Grand Council, which had been inherited by the Department of State, were transferred to it. The museum also took over the archives that had remained in the palace, including the original copies of the emperors' correspondence with provincial officials.<sup>62</sup> The version of the embassy that we know today was part of the broader project to reinterpret Qing history, which became rooted in how these archives were made available.

However, the reinterpretation of the content of the Qing archives has been overshadowed by stories of the struggle to rescue and reassemble the documents themselves. Before the dynasty fell, many documents had already been lost to poor maintenance, efforts to save space, and on two occasions destruction by foreign armies. Then the Republican government that came to power after the 1911 revolution got rid of material its officials considered useless.<sup>63</sup> Decisions not to preserve documents, although naturally dismaying to historians, are an inevitable part of running a state

<sup>58</sup> Backhouse and Bland, *Qing shi wai ji* 清室外記 [*The Story of the Qing Court*], trans. Chen Yixian 陳詒先 and Chen Lengtai 陳冷太 (Shanghai, 1915).

<sup>59</sup> Helen Robbins, *Our First Ambassador to China: An Account of the Life of George, Earl of Macartney* (New York, 1908), chaps 10–12. Pages 244–392 were abridged and translated by Liu Bannong 劉半農 (Liu Fu 劉復) as *Qianlong Ying shi jinjian ji* 乾隆英使觀見記 [*The British Ambassador's Notes on a Meeting with Qianlong*] (Shanghai, 1916).

<sup>60</sup> Backhouse and Bland, *Qing shi wai ji*, translator's preface, 1.

<sup>61</sup> See, for example, the sources referenced in Xiao Yishan 蕭一山, *Qingdai tongshi* 清代通史 [*A History of the Qing Dynasty*] (1927; repr., Shanghai, 1932), 751–765; Inaba Kunzan 稻葉君山, *Qing chao quanshi* 清朝全史 [*A Complete History of the Qing*], trans. Dan Tao 但燾 (1914; repr., Shanghai, 1935), 2: 68–80.

<sup>62</sup> “Junjichu dang'an yicun gugong bowuyuan” 軍機處檔案移存故宮博物院 [Moving the Grand Council Archives to the Palace Museum], *Tushuguanxue jikan* 圖書館學季刊 [*Librarianship Periodical*] 1, no. 2 (1926): 351–353.

<sup>63</sup> *Ming Qing dang'an yu lishi yanjiu—Zhongguo di yi lishi dang'anguan liushi zhounian jinian lunwenji* 明清檔案與歷史研究—中國第一歷史檔案館六十周年紀念論文集 [*Ming Qing Archives and Historical Research—Collected Papers from the Commemorations of the 60th Anniversary of China's First Historical Archives*], ed. Zhongguo di yi lishi dang'anguan 中國第一歷史檔案館 (Zhonghua shuju, 1986), 12, 35, 125–126, 129.

archive.<sup>64</sup> By the 1920s, however, in addition to the political transition, Rankean historiography had influenced Chinese studying abroad, who came to see the use of archives as part of a Western scientific approach to history. These ideas fitted well with the dominant Qing tradition of evidential learning, which encouraged detailed studies of the precise meaning of texts. Thus when scholars found sack-loads of Qing archival documents for sale as wastepaper in the Beijing markets, their shocked reports in the press reinvested those documents with scholarly (and also monetary) value.<sup>65</sup>

However, the struggle to rescue the Qing archives was part of a wider, politically motivated project to use them to discover the truth of China's modern history—in other words, to create a new critical history of the Qing. Two senior scholars were put in charge of the archive section of the National Palace Museum: the historian Chen Yuan and Shen Jianshi, a prominent scholar now best known for his work as an archivist. They invited Xu Baoheng, who had served in both the Qing and Republican administrations, to manage the archive. These men came from the transitional generation who had lived through the 1911 revolution and been active members of the Republican governments that followed. Chen had been a member of Sun Yat-sen's revolutionary Chinese League, and was elected to the National Assembly after the revolution, from which he moved on to a series of positions in the government in Beijing. He was also a leading expert on the early history of foreigners in China, and was employed by the Institute of Sinology at Beijing University. Additionally, he was a member of the new Academia Sinica's Institute of History and Philology, which was headed by Shen Jianshi.<sup>66</sup> Xu Baoheng was a career bureaucrat who moved in the same social circles: he and Chen Yuan were both members of the Society for Considering Errors (Siwushe), a group that met twice a month to edit texts and discuss scholarship.<sup>67</sup> Another member of this society was the historian Meng Sen, best known for his interest in one of the great scandals of the Qing dynasty, the murky maneuvering through which the Yongzheng emperor came to the throne. Dan Shiyuan, who as Xu's assistant selected and transcribed many of the documents, was Meng's student.<sup>68</sup> The new archivists' background and the circles within which they moved made it almost inevitable that they would privilege documents that contributed to a revisionist narrative of the Qing.

Xu Baoheng made his first visit in December 1927. Like many people who visit an archive, he was inspired by the idea of uncovering secrets. He spotted a box labeled "Imperial Edicts of a certain year of the Yongzheng reign. Reading forbidden without prior permission from the emperor under penalty of immediate execution."<sup>69</sup>

<sup>64</sup> Terry Cook, "Remembering the Future: Appraisal of Records and the Role of Archives in Constructing Social Memory," in Blouin and Rosenberg, *Archives, Documentation, and Institutions of Social Memory*, 169–181.

<sup>65</sup> Shana J. Brown, "Archives at the Margins: Luo Zhenyu's Qing Documents and Nationalism in Republican China," in Tze-ki Hon and Robert J. Culp, *The Politics of Historical Production in Late Qing and Republican China* (Boston, 2007), 249–270; Q. Edward Wang, *Inventing China through History: The May Fourth Approach to Historiography* (Albany, N.Y., 2001), 14–19; Xiao Qiqing 蕭啟慶, "Tuichenchu xin de shixuejia Chen Yuan" 推陳出新的史學家陳垣 [Molding a New Historian, Chen Yuan], *Xin shixue* 新史學 16, no. 3 (2005): 101–132.

<sup>66</sup> Xiao Qiqing, "Tuichenchu xin de shixuejia Chen Yuan."

<sup>67</sup> Sang Bing 桑兵, "Minguo xuejie de laobei" 民國學界的老輩 [The Older Generation in the Scholarly World of the Republic], *Lishi yanjiu* 歷史研究 [Historical Research], no. 6 (2005): 3–24.

<sup>68</sup> Dan Shiyuan 單士元, *Gugong zhaji* 故宮札記 [Notes on the Palace Museum] (Beijing, 1990), 42, 158.

<sup>69</sup> Xu Baoheng 許寶衡, *Xu Baoheng riji* 許寶衡日記 [Diary of Xu Baoheng], ed. Xu Geru 許恪儒, 5 vols. (Beijing, 2010), 3: 1216. See also Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain*, 26–27.

Naturally he opened the box. Inside he found lots of small packets of documents from the cases of Chinese scholars accused of writing material hostile to the Manchus. He decided then and there to begin publishing material from the archives. A few days later, he found a set of letters that the Kangxi emperor had written while he was traveling to one of his eunuchs back in Beijing. Xu was excited by these personal documents, which were “like ordinary people’s family letters.”<sup>70</sup> He would put them at the beginning of his new volume.

Over the next few months, working together with assistants and under the direction of Chen Yuan and Shen Jianshi, Xu Baoheng edited what was to become the first volume in a series known as *Collected Historical Documents* (*Zhanggu congbian*). The forty-seven documents on the Macartney embassy included in this volume were the main Chinese source for the embassy until the 1990s, and were partially translated into English by John Launcelot Cranmer-Byng, who published them as “Lord Macartney’s Embassy to Peking in 1793 from Official Chinese Documents.”<sup>71</sup> Cranmer-Byng thought that these documents were a “very full record” of the embassy, but in fact they were a tiny proportion of the more than six hundred documents that existed in the archive, and their selection was influenced by the structure of the archive itself, the editors’ preoccupations, and the political context of the day.<sup>72</sup>

Like other archivists dealing with political transition, Chen and Shen were faced with a situation in which the bureaucracy that had originally created the archive gave rise to narratives that they could work against only with difficulty.<sup>73</sup> They had brought in Xu Baoheng because they hoped his inside knowledge, which came from having been a staff member of the Grand Secretariat and later the Grand Council, would give him a better understanding of the structure of the archive.<sup>74</sup> The sheer volume of material, however, combined with the limits of Xu’s experience, constricted them. Many of the documents about the military response to the embassy were in what was known as the palace archives, which contained the Qianlong emperor’s personal correspondence, but these had not been opened. The documents were there precisely because these defense issues were both important and secret, unlike the questions of ceremony and ritual, which were part of the public presentation of Qing diplomacy.<sup>75</sup> However, it was the Grand Council that was the most powerful state institution in the late Qing, when Xu was working in the administration, and its archives had been sufficiently important to be handed over to its Republican successor. The decision was made to begin by opening those archives, rather than the emperors’ personal correspondence.

The choice of materials for publication was also shaped by political considerations. At a basic level, the editors’ general view of Qing history was influenced by the nation-

<sup>70</sup> Xu Baoheng, *Xu Baoheng riji*, 1218. These letters are translated in Jonathan D. Spence, *Emperor of China: Self-Portrait of K’ang-hsi* (London, 1974), Appendix A, 155–166.

<sup>71</sup> J. L. Cranmer-Byng, “Lord Macartney’s Embassy to Peking in 1793 from Official Chinese Documents,” *Journal of Oriental Studies* 4, no. 1–2 (1957–1958): 118–187. A later, far more comprehensive set of translations (into French), overseen by Pierre-Henri Durand, is Alain Peyrefitte, ed., *Un choc de cultures: La vision des Chinois*, (Paris, 1991).

<sup>72</sup> Gugong bowuyuan zhanggubu 故宮博物院掌故, ed., *Zhanggu congbian* 掌故叢編 [*Collected Historical Documents*] 1 (1928).

<sup>73</sup> Weld, *Paper Cadavers*; Mir, “Introduction.”

<sup>74</sup> Xu Baoheng, *Xu Baoheng riji*, 1.

<sup>75</sup> Waley-Cohen, “China and Western Technology in the Late Eighteenth Century.”

alist and anti-Manchu ideas of their generation. Shen Jianshi, who instructed the graduate students who did much of the actual work of selecting and transcribing the documents, wrote simply that subjects such as the fall of the Ming dynasty and the cases of Chinese accused of anti-Manchu writings were naturally important, while other documents could be used to compile statistics.<sup>76</sup> There was also a more immediate political context: in the early months of 1928, when the volume was being compiled, Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalist Party was marching north to seize power from the Beijing government. This created a precarious situation for the Palace Museum. Conservatives in the Beijing government were already unhappy that the museum had displaced the former emperor in the palace: Chen Yuan, who was both Cantonese and a former supporter of Sun Yat-sen, had been arrested in a crackdown on prominent supporters of the Nationalists. At the same time, the museum was also under threat from radical elements within the Nationalist Party: as its troops moved north, the party passed a proposal to sell off the entire palace and its contents as rebel property.<sup>77</sup> Under such circumstances, the editors of *Collected Historical Documents* could scarcely avoid thinking about how to make their work acceptable to the new government, which saw itself not only as the successor to Sun Yat-sen and the revolutionaries who had overthrown the Qing, but as an anti-imperialist force that was moving to take back foreign concessions from the British.

The first volume of *Collected Historical Documents* is the product of this political context, and its selection of documents combines the editors' revolutionary nationalism with the Nationalist Party's emphasis on anti-imperialism in its view of Qing history. The volume begins with photographs and the personal letters from the Kangxi emperor that Xu Baoheng had found so exciting.<sup>78</sup> These give the reader a feeling that the archives are a way of getting behind the formal exterior of the Qing dynasty into a real backstage story. Then follow the documents from the Macartney embassy. The remainder of the volume threads together personal documents that bring the emperors to life with cases relating to anti-Manchu Han nationalism (documents on the seventeenth-century edict requiring Chinese to adopt the Manchu queue), the defense of China's borders (reports from a famous Chinese general who campaigned in Tibet and was executed in the power struggles that accompanied the Yongzheng emperor's rise to the throne), and Qing control of Chinese thought and culture (the cases that have become known in English as the literary inquisitions). The volume was not state-directed propaganda, but it was driven by its editors' interests and the circumstances of its production. Drawn from the Qing's own records, the documents are not explicitly hostile to the dynasty, but taken together, they contribute to the anti-Qing narratives of the day. The prominence of these topics in this and other archival collections of the period would shape scholarship inside China and beyond for years to come.

The choice of documents about the Macartney embassy was made in light of these same concerns. In a brief introductory paragraph, Xu Baoheng explained that his aim

<sup>76</sup> Shen Jianshi 沈兼士, *Shen Jianshi xueshu lunwen ji* 沈兼士學術論文集 [Collected Academic Writings of Shen Jianshi], ed. Ge Xinyi 葛信益 and Qi Gong 啟功 (Beijing, 1986), 373; Dan Shiyuan, *Gugong zhaji*, 166.

<sup>77</sup> Dan Shiyuan, *Gugong zhaji*, 159; *Beijing zhi, shijie wenhua yichan juan, gugong zhi* 北京志·世界文化遺產卷·故宮志 [*Beijing Gazetteer: World Cultural Heritage Volume—Palace Gazetteer*], ed. Beijing shi difangzhi bianzuan weiyuanhui 北京市地方志編纂委員會 (Beijing, 2005), 671.

<sup>78</sup> *Zhanggu congbian* 1 (1928).



was to provide new material not available in the *Court Records of the Donghua Gate*, and that the embassy was the start of China's international relations. The documents that follow begin with Francis Baring's letter announcing the embassy. The bulk of the letters cover the period of the journey to Beijing and the reception at Chengde. The collection ends with the embassy's departure from Beijing. The effect is to foreground the period when the gifts and protocol were discussed, omit all the archives relating to the military response, and make the emperor's letter to George III the culmination of the narrative. This was partly an effect of using the Grand Council archives, which dealt with the journey from Tianjin to Beijing and the embassy's residence in Beijing and Chengde, while much of the emperor's personal correspondence with Songyun, Changlin, and the provincial governors responsible for coastal defense arrangements was in the palace archives. However, Xu chose to end with the emperor's letter to George III, and not his letter to provincial governors a few days later ordering a military response. Both documents were available in the Grand Council archives, and both had already been published.

Xu also chose to publish three of the total of eight documents about the kowtow.<sup>79</sup> His decision to do so gave the issue a prominence quite unrelated to its position in the archives as a whole and was directly affected by the longstanding British scholarship that emphasized protocol and ritual. Xu's diary records that he visited the British-educated Malaysian Chinese Gu Hongming to get a translation of Francis Baring's letter. Afterward he went out, presumably at Gu's suggestion, and bought the Chinese translation of Macartney's diary and the Japanese Inaba Kunzan's *Complete History of the Qing* (*Qingchao quanshi*, 1914). Macartney's diary repeatedly referred to ceremonial issues, while Inaba framed the embassy as a contest over equal diplomatic rituals and ended his account with the Qianlong emperor's letter to George III.<sup>80</sup>

As a whole, the selection of archives published in *Collected Historical Documents* had the effect of depicting the Qing as ignorant and passive in the face of the rising power of the West. Qing officials appear excessively concerned with ritual details and unaware of the military threat they were facing. What we have here is an argument about the causes of China's military weakness in the nineteenth century. It fits with the standard early-twentieth-century critique of Confucian culture, often associated with the May 4th Movement, and also with a wider interest in using cultural differences to explain disparities of power. Both calls for increased Westernization and historical research conducted by scholars such as Chen Yuan into Sinicization (the process by which peoples on China's frontiers had adopted Chinese culture) were politically resonant components of this debate. Aspects of this critique remain convincing to many scholars today; the problem with *Collected Historical Documents* is that, as is so often the case with exclusion from archival sources, the editorial process with all its historical and political context disappeared in the final publication. After a few sentences of introduction, with no hint as to the number of documents that have been omitted, the reader is immersed in what appear to be the unmediated voices of eighteenth-century Qing officials.

<sup>79</sup> The numbers are merely an indication. The practice of copying and recopying all or parts of previous letters into each new letter makes it impossible to count letters relating to a particular topic with any degree of accuracy.

<sup>80</sup> Xu Baoheng, *Xu Baoheng riji*, 1221; Inaba Kunzan, *Qing chao quanshi*, 2: 67–88.

THIS READING OF THE MACARTNEY EMBASSY reached the Western public through the works of John K. Fairbank and his emphasis on using the Chinese archives, an ideal that he then conveyed to his graduate students, who went on to dominate Chinese studies in the United States. Fairbank used the embassy, and especially the Qianlong emperor's letter, as a symbol of the conflict between Western egalitarian diplomatic relations and China's claims to universal rule, a conflict that he saw as the driving force behind China's modern history. By making use of the archival sources that were being published, he was able to present aspects of this argument as the authentic voice of Qing officials, but because his access to the archives was shaped by those who selected the archival documents he read, the results could be misleading.

Fairbank began his academic career studying with Morse, the great expert on the British archives, but he was determined to find the Chinese side of the story.<sup>81</sup> In 1935 he traveled to Beijing to look for materials. As an American graduate student with limited language skills and few connections, he had little opportunity to meet the senior scholars who controlled the archives in the Palace Museum. His access to this material was mediated through Jiang Tingfu, who was only a few years older, spoke excellent English, and had written a doctorate on British Labour Party foreign policy at Columbia University. Jiang was by then head of the Qinghua University history department, though he was also politically active in the new Nationalist Party government and is probably best known for his later role as the Republic of China's representative to the United Nations in the 1950s. He had just completed work on his own influential compilation of archive materials, *A Collection of Major Historical Documents on Modern China's Foreign Relations* (*Jindai Zhongguo waijiaoshi ziliao jiyao*, 1932–1934).<sup>82</sup>

Jiang was working out an analysis of China's modern history that combined on the one hand his generation's fascination with the differences between Chinese and Western culture, and on the other hand the claim made in the English-language literature that the European countries were pursuing the ideal of equality between states. He argued that China's early experience with northern barbarians had led to its having tributary relations rather than international relations.<sup>83</sup> However, he was also critical of the idea that European states were motivated by ideals of equality in their foreign relations.<sup>84</sup> In his 1938 survey of China's modern history, he remarked ironically, "Sino-Western relations are peculiar. Before the Opium War, we were not prepared to treat the foreigners with equality; and afterward, they were not prepared to treat us with equality."<sup>85</sup> He wrote at the outbreak of war with Japan, and in his crisis-struck vision

<sup>81</sup> John King Fairbank, *Chinabound: A Fifty-Year Memoir* (New York, 1982), 21; Fairbank, *Trade and Diplomacy on the China Coast: The Opening of the Treaty Ports, 1842–1854* (1953; repr., Cambridge, Mass., 1964), dedication. See also Robert Bickers, "Purloined Letters: History and the Chinese Maritime Customs Service," *Modern Asian Studies* 40, no. 3 (2006): 691–723.

<sup>82</sup> Fairbank, *Chinabound*, 87–90; Jiang Tingfu 蔣廷黻, *Jindai Zhongguo waijiaoshi ziliao jiyao* 近代中國外交史資料輯要 [*A Collection of Major Historical Materials on the History of Modern China's Foreign Relations*], ed. Shen Weibin (1932–1934; repr., Changsha, 2008); Jiang Tingfu, *Jiang Tingfu huiyilu* 蔣廷黻回憶錄 (Beijing, 2011); Fairbank, *Trade and Diplomacy on the China Coast*, Acknowledgments.

<sup>83</sup> T. F. Tsiang (Jiang Tingfu), "China and European Expansion," *Politica* 2, no. 5 (1936): 1–18.

<sup>84</sup> For universal rule, see Jiang Tingfu, "Zhongguo yu jindaishi de da bianju" 中國與近代史的大變局 [The Great Changes in China's Position in Modern History] (1935), in *Jiang Tingfu xuanji* 蔣廷黻選集 [*Selected Works of Jiang Tingfu*] (Taipei, 1978), 519–567.

<sup>85</sup> Jiang Tingfu, *Zhongguo jindai shi* 中國近代史 [A History of Modern China], ed. Shen Weibin 沈渭濱 (Shanghai, 1999), 9.

there was only one important question: “Can the Chinese modernize? Can they catch up with Westerners? Can they use science and machinery? Can they get rid of our family and native-place thinking and organize a modern nation-state?”<sup>86</sup>

Fairbank engaged directly with Jiang Tingfu’s ideas about the tribute system in a series of articles he published on the Qing archives between 1939 and 1941 with his contemporary Deng Siyu (S. Y. Teng).<sup>87</sup> Backed up by Deng’s detailed research on the *Collected Statutes of the Great Qing (Da Qing huidian)*, an encyclopedic work that abstracts diplomatic ideals and protocol from the practice of diplomacy, Fairbank and Deng argued that the tribute system was primarily a matter of trade, and that ceremonial was more important in it than the realities of power. Unlike Jiang, they accepted the idea that Western nations were seeking equality, seeing this as a cultural characteristic.<sup>88</sup> But like Jiang, Fairbank used these topics to address the question of whether China was capable of modernizing. A few years later, shortly after the Communist victory, he argued that “more than any other mature non-Western state, China has seemed inadaptable to the conditions of modern life.”<sup>89</sup> The aspects of modern life that he suggested were incompatible with China’s traditions included nationalism, industrialization, the scientific method, rule of law, entrepreneurship, and invention. However, his own research was focused on issues of foreign relations, and located the problem in the tributary system.<sup>90</sup>

These ideas about China’s foreign relations reached the broader English-reading public as a result of the massive success of Deng and Fairbank’s 1954 textbook *China’s Response to the West*.<sup>91</sup> This was an edited sourcebook that combined texts “chosen and in some cases condensed for the greatest possible significance” with a strong underlying narrative.<sup>92</sup> The book’s outline was originally created by Deng following the standard frame of Chinese revolutionary history, beginning with anti-Manchu Chinese nationalism in the early Qing and ending with the Communist revolution.<sup>93</sup> However, the plan was cut back by Fairbank, who created a first section titled “The Problem and Its Background.” The problem remained the same issue that had perplexed Jiang Tingfu and many others of his and Fairbank’s generation: Could China modernize? Fairbank reformulated the question, however, so that it would also include how the Communists came to power. He framed the answer in terms of a transition from the traditional tributary system to the system of modern international relations, with the tensions imposed by this being the driving force for other changes. The chapter ends with a heavily abridged version of the Qianlong emperor’s letter: it omits any reference to the main British demands, and ends with the famous sentence “We have never set much store on strange or ingenious objects, nor do we need any more of your

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>87</sup> J. K. Fairbank and S. Y. Teng, “On the Transmission of Ch’ing Documents,” *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 4, no. 1 (1939): 12–46; Fairbank and Teng, “On the Types and Uses of Ch’ing Documents,” *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 5, no. 1 (1940): 1–71; Fairbank and Teng, “On the Ch’ing Tributary System,” *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 6, no. 2 (1941): 135–246.

<sup>88</sup> Fairbank and Teng, “On the Ch’ing Tributary System,” 139.

<sup>89</sup> Fairbank, *Trade and Diplomacy on the China Coast*, 4.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>91</sup> Teng and Fairbank, *China’s Response to the West*.

<sup>92</sup> “Author’s Statement,” Harvard University Press, July 24, 1952, John K. Fairbank Papers, Harvard University Archives [hereafter Fairbank Papers], call no. HUGFP 12.8, box 22.

<sup>93</sup> “Reform and Revolution in Modern China,” *ibid.*; S. Y. Teng to John K. Fairbank, November 9, 1948, *ibid.*, box 7.

country's manufactures."<sup>94</sup> Fairbank then points up the effect by adding: "In such terms the Englishmen and Scotsmen who were about to batter down the gates and destroy the Middle Kingdom's ancient superiority over all other peoples were still categorized as uncultured barbarians outside the pale of civilization."<sup>95</sup> Deng had originally intended to publish the letter and several other documents on the embassy from the set in the *Collected Historical Documents*. Fairbank reduced this to the single letter, which he introduced as the most famous example of the Qing court's effort to fit Western nations into the "traditional and outmoded tributary framework."<sup>96</sup>

At the beginning of the Cold War, when it was compiled, *China's Response to the West* addressed a major political problem. As Fairbank phrased it, the rise to power of Chinese communism was the most portentous event "in the whole history of American foreign policy in Asia," and therefore "every intelligent American must strive to understand its significance."<sup>97</sup> He then proposed a solution to this problem: understanding history. Fairbank wrote in the prospectus for the volume that without knowledge of China's modern history, "our diplomacy is blindfolded and our own subjective assumptions may well lead us to disaster."<sup>98</sup> In depicting what befell Qing China when its officials failed to understand a foreign culture, Fairbank was also making an argument about what would happen to Americans if they did not apply themselves to learning about China. As one reviewer wrote, "The Chinese are not the only people to suffer from the reluctance of their leaders to accept unpalatable truths. But certainly they have paid a heavy price, from which we might all take a warning."<sup>99</sup> Thus the volume was both a critique of U.S. foreign policy and a plea for the expansion of area studies, arguments with which many university teachers would find themselves in sympathy for several decades.

*China's Response to the West* was to be the textbook for generations of American and British undergraduates. Not only is it still in use, but it has continued to influence later source compilations.<sup>100</sup> The effect of using the Qianlong emperor's letter to George III to frame an argument about the United States' foreign policy toward China was that, as James Hevia has noted, the letter came to stand for China's culturalism, isolationism, and sense of self-sufficiency in the 1960s.<sup>101</sup> Throughout the Cold War, a generation of textbooks used the quotation to illustrate traditional China's isolation from the rest of the world (quite implausibly given the extensive trade that gave rise to the embassy).<sup>102</sup> From these the letter spread to textbooks in world history, and

<sup>94</sup> Teng and Fairbank, *China's Response to the West*, 19.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, 19–20.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, 19. The footnotes published in Ssu-yü Teng and John K. Fairbank, *Research Guide for China's Response to the West: A Documentary Survey, 1839–1923* (Cambridge, Mass., 1954), give the source as the *Qing shilu*, but the early outline of the volume by Deng has it labeled as from the *Zhanggu congbian*. "Reform and Revolution in Modern China," Fairbank Papers, HUGFP 12.8, box 22.

<sup>97</sup> Teng and Fairbank, *China's Response to the West*, 2.

<sup>98</sup> "Prospectus—China's Response to the West: A Sourcebook," February 2, 1950, Fairbank Papers, HUGFP 12.8, box 22.

<sup>99</sup> William W. Lockwood, review of *China's Response to the West*, *Far Eastern Survey* 24, no. 10 (1955): 158–159.

<sup>100</sup> E.g., Pei-kai Cheng and Michael Lestz with Jonathan D. Spence, eds., *The Search for Modern China: A Documentary Collection* (New York, 1999); David G. Atwill and Yurong Y. Atwill, *Sources in Chinese History: Diverse Perspectives from 1644 to the Present* (Upper Saddle River, N.J., 2010).

<sup>101</sup> Hevia, *Cherishing Men from Afar*, 239.

<sup>102</sup> Nathaniel Peffer, *The Far East: A Modern History* (Ann Arbor, Mich., 1958), 51; Franz Schurmann and Orville Schell, eds., *The China Reader*, 3 vols. (New York, 1967), 1: 104–105; J. Mason Gentzler,

in the last twenty years to international relations, where it is primarily used to help readers understand contemporary China's attitudes toward Southeast Asia.<sup>103</sup> Here, for the first time, the joke embedded in the quotation is no longer mentioned: China's rising power means that scholars of international relations are prepared to take the normative statements of the Qianlong emperor on their own terms. It is hard not to sympathize with the aims of a new generation of scholars who use the Macartney embassy to challenge the Eurocentrism of much scholarship in international relations and to argue that until the quite recent past, non-Westerners often set the terms of engagement for diplomatic relations.<sup>104</sup> In doing so, however, they too easily fall back on a vision of European egalitarianism and Chinese hierarchy in international relations that originated in the tensions of the transition to rituals of equality in relations between European states and was written into history by Chinese scholars who accused the dynasty they had overthrown of confounding ritual with reality.

SO WHAT CAN WE CONCLUDE FROM THIS STORY of the ways in which Lord Macartney's embassy has been interpreted? At one level we have here the historian's familiar cautionary tale about the importance of context in interpreting archival documents and the potentially misleading nature of isolated quotations. But going beyond this, we are reminded that how records are made available affects how historians can use them. A story about published archives may seem irrelevant in an age of massive digitization projects, but the very size of such projects can mean that the process through which some items have been selected and others excluded is invisible to users, and an approach to reading driven by searches for particular terms exacerbates the problem.<sup>105</sup> When we begin to examine these issues of archival exclusion, we see that while the Qianlong emperor operated within the formal framework of Qing claims to universal rule, he also took action to deal with the embassy as a military threat while avoiding potential economic losses. He correctly perceived that by pacifying Lord Macartney with vague promises of future trade negotiations, he would be able to avert immediate trouble, but he remained extremely cautious. While the Qing court's knowledge of the details of British expansion was extremely limited, the emperor and his advisors were clearly clever and competent political operators. Looking beyond the immediate details of the embassy, we should also remember that the frames we use to interpret Qing history were shaped in the early twentieth century and reflect its concerns, and that these may have been written into the way in which the archives are presented. There has been a great deal of argument about whether these frames reflect Chinese or Western views of Chinese history.<sup>106</sup> In fact, as

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*Changing China: Readings in the History of China from the Opium War to the Present* (New York, 1977), 23.

<sup>103</sup> Majid Tehranian, *Rethinking Civilization: Resolving Conflict in the Human Family* (London, 2007); John Baylis, Steve Smith, and Patricia Owens, *The Globalization of World Politics: An Introduction to International Relations* (Oxford, 2014).

<sup>104</sup> Suzuki, Zhang, and Quirk, *International Orders in the Early Modern World before the Rise of the West*.

<sup>105</sup> Lara Putnam, "The Transnational and the Text-Searchable: Digitized Sources and the Shadows They Cast," *American Historical Review* 121, no. 2 (April 2016): 377–402.

<sup>106</sup> Paul A. Cohen, *Discovering History in China: American Historical Writing on the Recent Chinese Past* (New York, 1984).

we have seen, there was much interchange between scholars writing in English and those writing in Chinese. What is more important to understand is that the political context of the early twentieth century posed particular questions. "Can China modernize?" was at the core of scholarly inquiry for both Chinese and Westerners. The Qianlong emperor's letter was used to pose the question of whether or not China could accept equal diplomatic relations, science, and industrialization. Today such questions seem simply anachronistic, and China's growing power on the world stage is contributing to a new rewriting of the history of the Qing.

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