

following from this genre and they involve literature, performing arts, society, and the politics and history of the period. Wan has uncovered and analysed these implications with remarkable skill, sensitivity, and attention to detail.

So I regard this book as a truly a monumental piece of scholarship and a major contribution to the literature in its field. I recommend it strongly to specialized readers. Ordinary readers will also find much of interest here.

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The Last Embassy: The Dutch Mission of 1795 and the Forgotten History of Western Encounters with China. By Tonio Andrade. Princeton, NJ and Oxford, England: Princeton University Press, 2021. Pp. xi + 408. \$35.00/£28.00.

In 1795, The Dutch East India Company (VOC) sent Isaac Titsingh (1745–1812), a high-ranking official in its company in Batavia, to Guangzhou, where he would organize an embassy to travel to Beijing to congratulate the Qianlong Emperor (r. 1735–1796) on the sixtieth year of his reign. This “ceremonial diplomacy” was a success, judging from the benevolent response from the emperor and his high officials, and stood in sharp contrast with the failure of the British mission led by George Macartney (1737–1806), undertaken just two years previously. The difference between the two European missions lay not only in the refusal of Macartney to conform to Chinese ceremony—to kowtow to the emperor—but also in the Qing perception of British assertiveness and aggression. Hurriedly dismissed from the capital, without having the opportunity to discuss opening trading ports and permanent diplomatic representation, the Macartney mission turned British opinion sharply against Qing China and represented for many the prelude to Anglo-Chinese armed conflict in the First Opium War. The Dutch embassy, despite not being commissioned by the King in The Hague, and with gifts much less impressive than the British, received a warm welcome. Titsingh and Jacob Andries van Braam (1771–1820), the VOC Factor in Guangzhou, who acted as the deputy ambassador, were shown extraordinary favours by the old emperor. Bearing the Macartney mission in mind, Titsingh and van Braam judged their own diplomacy a success, as did their superiors at the VOC. Yet the disastrous British mission would have a long-standing impact on Sino-Western relations, while the

successful Dutch mission faded into insignificance. Whence the paradox? Andrade's lively and thoughtful book is an answer to that question.

Why the difference? In the last decade of the eighteenth century, Britain was the leading economic power in the world and her navy dominated the seas; British commerce had surpassed the French and Dutch after a series of naval victories against these rivals between the 1660s and 1750s. Macartney's mission was conceived as an overture by a mighty world power to another, and the rebuff of it injured British pride. The Dutch had arrived more than a century before the British in China. But during the eighteenth century their country was torn politically between republican-minded patriots and supporters of the royal Orange dynasty. Moreover, Dutch commerce was in a period of long decline. In 1795 French revolutionary armies conquered the Netherlands and helped the Dutch patriots set up the Batavian Republic. The Dutch royal house fled to Britain, the VOC was disbanded, the old world order represented by Titsingh's diplomatic mission vanished, and the success of his mission found no sounding board, neither in Asia nor in Europe. In light of the two Opium wars of the mid-nineteenth century and European/Japanese aggression in the late nineteenth century, the 1795 Dutch mission seemed to belong to a bygone era, the last act of an old world order that pivoted around the Qing Empire, the fulcrum of *Tianxia* (all under heaven), or the centre of a Central/East Asian Empire.

These reasons for neglect do not diminish the historical interest of the Dutch mission, for which there are abundant sources, much of which have been neglected by scholars. First, Titsingh and van Braam, chief and deputy ambassadors, kept detailed records. The young Frenchman, Louis de Guignes (1759–1845), son of the well-known French Sinologist Joseph (1721–1800), who was hired in Guangzhou to serve as secretary/interpreter, also vented his humours (often choleric) and scribed his observations (sharp and biting) in a diary. Added to these journals are many drawings of places, buildings, and people made or commissioned by Titsingh, van Braam and Guignes. Besides mining these sources for vivid details, Andrade also searched for documents of the VOC in The Hague and in the former imperial archive in Beijing to round out the picture of the embassy. Thanks to his narrative flair, the result is a carefully researched and vividly written history, helpfully illustrated with maps of the routes travelled by the Dutch embassy and figures of landscapes and cities, some of which are selected from the drawings made or commissioned by members of the diplomatic mission.

The Last Embassy is divided into a prologue, twenty chapters, and a conclusion. Readers interested primarily in a good-read may want to skip the prologue and conclusion and plunge right into the story that tells the origins, the organization, and the progress of the embassy. The scholarly bits, besides being addressed in

detailed footnotes, are to be found in the “Prologue: A Clash of Cultures?” and in the “Conclusion: A Contested Embassy and the History of Sino-Western Relations.” I shall discuss these conceptual “bookends” after reviewing the historical narrative in the middle.

Three short chapters 1–3 (pp. 16–33) introduce the three main protagonists: in Beijing, the venerable eighty-four-year-old Qianlong Emperor, in the sixtieth year of his long and prosperous reign, who dispatched to all corners of his empire notices of this momentous year; in Guangzhou, the director of the VOC factory, Jacob Andries van Braam, Sinophile, amateur, entrepreneur, and a collector of all things Chinese; and in Batavia, Isaac Titsingh, high official of the VOC, sometime Dutch factor in Deshima, Japanophile, corpulent, rich, decadent, and nostalgic for his homeland, being approached for one final task for his company and fatherland.

The next four chapters, 4–6, take place in Guangzhou. In lively prose, Andrade guides the reader in the company of Titsingh, as the Dutch ship approached Macau and sailed up the Pearl Estuary before it moored at Guangzhou. Through the Dutchman’s eyes we see the exotic, teeming life on the Pearl: passing the redoubt at Humen 虎門 (Tiger’s Mouth), stormed by the British in 1839, which guarded entrance into the Pearl River, the VOC ship passed hundreds of junks and sampans, rice paddies and villages, pagodas and temples, before setting anchor pass Whampu, where a delegate from the Governor of Guangdong met the Dutch. This embassy, first proposed by the Governor of Guangdong to van Braam and other Western merchants, was fraught with political perils and rewards for the provincial officials. They were the ones who supervised the lucrative foreign trade, restricted exclusively to Guangzhou and to the monopoly of the thirteen Chinese *hong* 行 (companies) that paid large sums to the mandarins in lubricating this lucrative yet risky commerce. Andrade paints a lively picture of this bustling port, drawing on the pioneering research of Paul van Dyke, the foremost expert on the Canton trade. Interactions between Titsingh and Manchu officials, descriptions of the VOC House, and brief sketches of the relations between the Dutch, British, and Spanish diplomats form the background of a scene, in which the actors were madly scrambling to prepare the embassy because Qianlong, pleased with the arrival of a delegation from the Far West in his honour, instructed his mandarins to convey the Dutch to arrive in Beijing before the Lunar New Year. The imperial edict, dated 1 November, took just twelve days to cover the 1,500 miles from Beijing to Guangzhou. It gave the Guangdong mandarins and Titsingh just two weeks to prepare presents, personnel, and provisions for the long trek in the midst of coming winter. The prospects of a harsh journey filled Titsingh with trepidation and remorse for having accepted the diplomatic commission.

Chapters 7 and 8 describe the journey to Beijing. The first part was pleasant enough, as the embassy, escorting Qing mandarins and soldiers, and hundreds of porters sailed north of Guangzhou along the Beijiang 北江 to Nanxiong 南雄, a river market town on this well-travelled route linking Guangdong province to Central China. From Nanxiong, people, presents, and provisions were transferred onto the backs of beasts and porters, as they trekked up the middling mountain pass of Meiling 梅嶺, situated at the watershed that divided Guangdong and Jiangxi provinces. This was an ancient route. Actually built in the Tang dynasty, the famous Meiling Road served numerous travellers through the centuries, including the majority of European missionaries who arrived in China during the Ming and Qing dynasties. The first Westerner who traversed the Meiling was the Italian Jesuit, Michele Ruggieri (1543–1607), who journeyed from Guangzhou to Jiangsu in 1584–1585; he did not bequeath a detailed description. However, his younger companion, Matteo Ricci (1552–1610), who would become world famous in the annals of Sino-Western cultural history, travelled north in 1594 and recorded his vivid memories.

Almost two centuries later, the Dutch embassy followed their path. At each stopover, Titsingh and company were greeted with ceremonious shots, fed more or less by local mandarins, and hurried onto their next station, as the imperial deadline for arrival was omnipresent. Normally, travellers would transship in Nanchang from the Gan River 贛江 to the Qiantang, sailing all the way to Hangzhou, cross the Yangtze, and float along the Grand Canal to Beijing. But this would take too long. Instead, the Dutch embassy headed straight north by land through Hubei, Anhui, Jiangsu, Shandong, Bei Zhili, toward the imperial capital.

As they travelled north, the embassy experienced dropping temperatures and rising winds; they encountered downpours, mud, ice, and snow as winter approached. For a relentless month and more, Titsingh and his party were awakened at two or three in the morning, often arriving at their next stop at dinner time if not much later, going hungry and cold due to poor lodgings, with their cooks and provisions lagging far behind. Titsingh and his companions were shocked by the poverty of some of the places they passed, wondering about the discrepancies between the prosperous and well-ordered society described by generations of Catholic missionaries for Western readers. They came to detest Wang Shiji 王仕基, the mandarin in charge of their escort, whom they suspected of corruption and duplicity, taking the best lodgings and horses for himself, underpaying the porters, and earning the scorn of young Guignes, who called him “the stupidest, vainest, and most ignorant person I’ve ever seen in my life” (p. 96). The journey was not made easier when crowds rushed to gawk at these exotic

foreigners, when unpaid porters abandoned their sedan chairs and passengers, when the heavy cases holding the two large clocks—the main presents for the emperor—were dropped and shattered, damaging the expensive time-pieces, when they passed Christmas and New Year's Eve without warm suppers and fortifying European alcohols, when many nights were spent on improvised beddings as the large travelling party was scattered, lost, and dispersed. Finally, on 9 January, they staggered into Beijing, having made almost thirty miles a day for over a month on their long journey. Despite their privations—the Westerners hardly recognized their own gaunt and exhausted appearances in the mirror—Titsingh and his companions have made the deadline.

If Act One of this diplomatic drama is about trials and tribulations, the dominant themes in Act Two are reward and rejuvenation. During their visit in the imperial capital (9 January–17 February), the Dutch were honoured by many invitations and gifts from Qianlong. Andrade describes these episodes in short, succinct scenes (chapters 9 to 16, pp. 124–215): the lodgings of the embassy, their surveillance, their summons to the first imperial encounter, and their encounters with Qing officials and other foreign envoys. A particularly colourful event is described in Chapter 10, whereby Qianlong first met the Dutchmen, when he invited them to witness the winter games—racing and archery on skates, fireworks and pageantry—that took place on the frozen Beihai 北海, a large lake to the west of the Imperial Palace. It is entertaining to read these pages. We tour the Yuanmingyuan with the Dutch, exclusive foreign guests to the private quarters of the emperor; we celebrate Lunar New Year and the Lantern Festival with them; we see the firework displays, taste the dishes of their banquets (Titsingh generally disliked Chinese cuisine and spirits), admire the many imperial gifts of purses, tobacco, food, silk and others, of which the strangest must have been a 200-pound sturgeon from the Amur River, full of meaning for Qianlong, who waxed nostalgic for the Manchu lands and ancestral ways.

All of this was, of course, unknown to the Dutch and beyond the scope of Andrade's book. That Qianlong happened to be an extraordinarily vain man—intelligent, talented, but vain—would be apparent to anyone who has sampled his prodigious production of poetry and paintings and knows his hypersensitivity to cultural slights. Vanity and urbanity found the perfect synthesis in Qianlong. Considering himself without equal in his mastery of classical Chinese culture, Qianlong also waxed nostalgic for the less sophisticated but purer ways of his people. On the cultural front, he tried, in vain, to revive the Manchu language and Manchu ways among the bannermen. On the military side, Qianlong depicted his reign as the apex of imperial achievements. “The Ten Perfect Military Victories” that glorify his reign were, in fact, expensive and bloody campaigns to suppress

rebellions, or outright defeats against the Kingdom of Burma. The Dutch envoys would not know any of this, but they did meet the second most powerful man in the Qing Empire, whose ascendancy symbolized the inner corruption of this regime that seemed to be at the apex of its powers. This was Heshen 和珅 (1750–1799), described as the most corrupt official in Chinese history! Titsingh, van Braam, and Guignes had a good impression of him: he was gracious, urbane, and cultured, exactly the image cultivated and favoured by the octogenarian emperor.

The stories told in the pages of the Dutch embassy resemble narratives written by generations of European missionaries: they were the privileged few, granted access to the innermost power sanctum of an exotic and powerful empire; their prose, no doubt inspired by awe (and by the ability of the Chinese regimes to produce it), also represented the value of their writers to readers in the West. Oddly, the Dutch embassy had only a brief encounter with one of the missionaries, a Frenchman and ex-Jesuit, although they negotiated with their mandarin handlers a compromise to pass on the letters they were entrusted with for the missionaries. Little did Titsingh and company know, that like the missionaries, their own future would also be overtaken by historical events. As the dissolution of the Society of Jesus in 1773 and the outbreak of the French Revolution in 1789 made orphans of the Catholic fathers in Beijing, cut off from funds and contacts with Europe, the Dutchmen would also find themselves swept away by the tides of history.

Blissfully unaware of destiny, they departed Beijing, travelled in style and comfort, basking in the afterglow of imperial favour, sailing down the Grand Canal. In a short Act Three (chapters 17–19), Andrade takes the reader on a tour with the Dutch embassy through some of China's most prosperous and beautiful places: Yangzhou, Suzhou, and Hangzhou. Despite the gorgeous sceneries and comfortable journey described in these pages, the reader feels an anticlimax, which degenerated into a tragic-comedy when the embassy returned to Guangzhou. The end of the old order (the United Provinces) left the main protagonists in dire financial straits. Titsingh and van Braam fell out publicly. The latter abruptly departed for the United States via Cape Town; the former eventually settled in Britain and later France. The memories of this last embassy—the material objects received and purchased in China, and the immaterial reminiscences in journals, texts, and drawings—were also overtaken by time. Neither Titsingh nor van Braam found publishing success in their lifetime; and the latter's collection of Chinese art and cultural objects, displayed for a while in his mansion on the Delaware River, was scattered after his life.

In the Conclusion Andrade picks up the threads from his Introduction and reflects on the historical significance of the Dutch mission for Sino-Western relations. He traces the influence of the negative British views in the aftermath

of the Macartney mission and sees its impact on John K. Fairbank's idea of a Sinocentric tributary system. He follows historiographical developments in the works of John Wills and others, who, having worked on the late Ming and early Qing periods, have abandoned the Sinocentric model. Dating modern Chinese history to the First Opium War, Fairbank was unduly influenced by the negative British diplomatic views after 1792. He was also writing in years when Chinese Studies in the United States grew rapidly alongside a new communist China, seemingly hostile, like the Qing Empire, to Western powers. Historians are always writing their narratives in the context of their own times, whether they are conscious of this or not. Andrade is quite right in pointing out the flexibility of Qing imperial diplomacy, shifting from *realpolitik* to ceremony when needed. It may also be added that Qing diplomacy itself changed over the course of the dynasty; the reigns of Kangxi (r. 1661–1722) and Qianlong, grandfather and grandson, showed notable differences. The grandfather was more receptive to new Western ideas and curious about the world; the grandson, jaded perhaps by a superficial knowledge of the West, showed far less interest.

The 1795 Dutch mission reminds us that there were other European nations dealing with China for a far longer period than the British. The Portuguese, Dutch, and Russians did not assume innate Chinese arrogance and xenophobia; they did not deal with the Ming and Qing empires as a self-centred realm uninterested in intercourse between states. Indeed, the history of Sino-Russian relations starting from the first Russian expansion into the Amur River, the siege of Fort Nerchinsk by a Qing army, and the negotiation of a peace treaty in 1692 is instructive. Here is *realpolitik* in action: two Jesuit missionaries (one French, the other Portuguese) helped negotiate in Latin, through a Polish member of the Russian side, the first Sino-Western treaty. Qing rulers were aware of the balance of power in the world. In 1795, the Dutch received benevolent kindness and were treated like the Korean, Mongolian, and Central Asian envoys, who represented polities in the orbit of the Qing Empire. In 1792, the British, whose expansion in India and interest in Tibet already alarmed the Qing, refused to play with all the rules of the Qing ceremonial diplomacy. Worse yet, the British mission exposed Qing military weakness. In his journal, Macartney noted the antiquated military equipment of Qing forces and the scarcity of coastal forts. In case of war, he predicted, the Royal Navy could control the Chinese coast in a matter of weeks. This ominous prophecy, noted in Macartney's journal, was still a small shadow against the brightness of Qianlong's prosperous reign, of which *The Last Embassy* renders a superb account.

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