

# 5

## **Amherst's Preparations for the Embassy**

An examination of Amherst's notes (Amherst, 'Notes on policy to be pursued by the British Embassy to China' in BL IOR MSS EUR F 140/36) prepared at the time of his appointment as ambassador to the Qing court is important for a number of reasons. First, it reveals the body of knowledge on Chinese diplomacy available to the British at the time. This appears meagre when compared to information accessible to modern scholars, yet it represented a significant increase on what was at hand for Macartney 23 years earlier. Second, while historians have focused on the issue of Amherst's struggle to resolve the question of whether or not to perform the kowtow after his arrival in China, they have provided no insight into what informed his decision beyond the role played by Staunton (Tuck, 2000; Gao, 2016). His notes reveal his thinking, as well as offering insights into the strategies adopted by Macartney during his embassy, which, in turn, strongly influenced Amherst. Finally, Amherst's research shows that he approached his assignment in a diligent and conscientious manner in an endeavour to learn in advance as much as he could about Chinese diplomatic practice in order to achieve a successful outcome. While he did not have the cultural knowledge or in-country experience of Staunton, he may be judged as initially having an open mind and as having considered practical strategies and approaches from a systematic review of the limited information available to him. This attitude was to equip him well when he was faced with weighing up the advice he received from his two commissioners, Staunton and Ellis.

Amherst drew on three main sources of information in his research. The first consisted of the published accounts of previous Western embassies to the Qing court. Amherst's chief reference in preparing for his mission was Macartney's journal, provided to him by Foreign Minister Lord Castlereagh, as well as other extracts published in the second volume of Barrow's (1807) biography of Macartney (Castlereagh to Amherst, 1 January 1816, in BL MSS EUR F 140/43 (a)). Barrow was also consulted for his views, presumably at an official level in his office, as well as unofficially during working dinners held at Amherst's Mayfair townhouse (Lord Amherst's 'Dinner Book' in Kent History and Library Centre, Amherst Manuscripts: Family Papers, U1350-E16).

A major source was the accounts of the reception of two Russian embassies sent to the Qing court, namely, the Ismailof Embassy of 1721 and the Golovkin Embassy that arrived at the Chinese border in 1806.<sup>1</sup> Historians have overlooked their significance in shaping Amherst's thinking, but their influence is readily apparent in the official dispatches he wrote to George Canning, President of the Board of Control, dated 12 February 1817, 8 April 1817 and 21 April 1817.

Amherst's second resource consisted of the letters and reports written by foreign missionaries at Peking containing their views on the failure of Macartney's mission and providing their advice on what might be required for a successful mission.

Amherst's third and final source of information were reports containing intelligence from Canton whose significance had been overtaken by events by the time they reached London.<sup>2</sup> Castlereagh sent Amherst two dispatches dated 1 January 1816 together with instructions for discharging his duties at the Qing court that were based on events that had occurred at Canton in late 1814. The state of Company trade at Canton featured in several pages of Amherst's notes and are evidence that he was aware of all the main British grievances responsible for precipitating this embassy to the Qing court. His mastery of the issues represents a substantial increase in his knowledge of China when compared with his first pencilled jottings

---

1 Amherst had access to John Bell's (1763) *A Journey from St. Petersburg in Russia to Peking in China*, but the reference he used for the Golovkin Embassy is not recorded. Staunton (1821, p. xvii) wrote regarding this embassy, 'No official accounts of its proceedings have been published, or at least have reached [England]'.

2 The latest intelligence received in July 1815 referred to events that took place in Canton at the end of 1814.

written on a scrappy piece of paper where two queries are noted, namely, 'What European nations have residents at the Court of Peking?' and 'What was the name of the island [Taiwan] in the Yellow Sea in which the English had formerly an established hub from whence they were expelled (within the memory of man) for improper conduct?' (Amherst, 'Notes on policy to be pursued by the British Embassy to China' in BL IOR MSS EUR F 140/36).

## Historical Background: Earlier Embassies

The British may have been late comers to the Qing court, but they nevertheless had considerable experience engaging with the Mughal courts of India where their diplomats were confronted with similar protocol issues as faced by Macartney in China, in particular, the ceremony of the kowtow. Sir Thomas Roe, the first English ambassador to the Jahangir emperor in 1615, 'refus[ed] the demand of touching the ground with his head' before the prince in contrast to the Persian ambassador 'who came to court splendidly attired, and prostrated himself many times, knocking his head against the ground' (as quoted in Murray, 1820, vol. 2, p. 148).<sup>3</sup> Roe's firm and resolute refusal to compromise English honour in the face of the degrading ceremonial demands made of him at this time may be seen as setting a precedent for the behaviour of British ambassadors at other eastern courts (Sir William Foster's comment on Roe in Roe, 1899, p. xxiii).

Barrow had read an account of the Dutch embassy sent by the Dutch East India Company (VOC) to the Shunzhi Emperor (r. 1644–1661) in 1655 and his views on this and other diplomatic events were no doubt discussed with Amherst (Nieuhof, 1669; Wilkinson, 2000, p. 759).<sup>4</sup> Received as vassals before the Shunzhi emperor, the Dutch were also confronted with troublesome Jesuit missionaries who 'searched after all means possible to hinder the Hollanders access to the Court' (Kops, 2002, p. 554). Although the Dutch ambassador performed the kowtow and the Dutch were granted permission to return to China every eight years to pay tribute, they were not permitted any other trade (p. 565). Evidence of other unsatisfactory outcomes and dismissals of European embassies from the Qing court were

3 See also Roe (1899, p. 295).

4 The reference to the great popularity of Nieuhof's (1669) book is quoted in Kops (2002, p. 545).

available to the British. The first Russian ambassador, Iskowitz Baikov, sent in 1656, refused to kowtow and was dismissed without an audience (see Baikov, 1732), as was a second Dutch embassy sent in 1667 for the same reason (see Wills, 2009, pp. 41–86).<sup>5</sup> The Kangxi court, however, showed its pragmatic side when it signed a formal treaty with the Russian Government in 1689. The Treaty of Nerchinsk secured Russian and Chinese borders and established set trade routes between the two countries that were further ratified with the Treaty of Kyakhta in 1727. ‘This was the first time in modern history’, the historian Harry Gelber pointed out, ‘that there were serious negotiations between China and a major foreign power’ (2007, p. 140). The precedent of Western-style treaties negotiated by the Qing court with the Russians, although a special case resulting from a common border, was read by Europeans as representing a formal recognition of mutual obligation and national sovereignty based on equal status, and was noted by Amherst, indicating at least an example of negotiation if mutual interests were involved (Amherst, ‘Notes on policy to be pursued by the British Embassy to China’ in BL IOR MSS EUR F 140/36).

As indicated above, Amherst’s focus was drawn in historical sequence to three earlier embassies: the Russian Ismailof Embassy of 1719–1722, the Macartney Embassy of 1792–1794 and the Golovkin Embassy of 1805–1806. Amherst drew points from each embassy that were instrumental in shaping his strategies for approaching the Qing court in 1816.

## **An Important Precedent: The Russian Ismailof Embassy of 1719–1722**

Amherst’s notes reveal his interest in the Scotsman John Bell’s (1763) account of the Ismailof Embassy sent by Peter the Great to the Kangxi court in 1720. Ismailof’s goals were similar to those of Macartney, namely, to negotiate trade concessions and open diplomatic representation at Peking. Ismailof initially refused to kowtow and insisted on delivering the Tsar’s letter directly into the hands of the emperor. Seven days of negotiation took place before a compromise was reached. Amherst noted:

---

5 This was the embassy led by Pieter van Hoorn. Wills (2009, p. 41) wrote that ‘despite their very substantial investment in this Embassy, the people who sent it did not have very high hopes for it. And they were right’.

The Russian ambassador Ismailoff endeavours to avoid the ceremony of prostration, but at last conforms to it under a stipulation that any Chinese Ambassador\* who may be sent to St. Petersburg shall conform to all the ceremonies of that court. (Amherst, 'Notes on policy to be pursued by the British Embassy to China' in BL IOR MSS EUR F 140/36)<sup>6</sup>

Amherst's asterisk placed next to the words 'Chinese Ambassador' in this passage is a rare suggestion in the literature of Western embassies to China of a potential Chinese envoy embarking on a mission to a European court. Macartney adopted a reversed variation of this idea when he advocated that any future Chinese ambassador at the Court of St James's kowtow before the British sovereign, which in turn was advocated by Amherst during his mission. Amherst was clearly attracted to Ismailof's compromise at this stage of his research. The Russian ambassador, Amherst noted, was subsequently 'well and honestly treated' and invited to a 'great entertainment on new year's day [and] when the Chinese prostrated themselves, the Russians were allowed to salute the Emperor after their own fashion' (Amherst, 'Notes on policy to be pursued by the British Embassy to China' in BL IOR MSS EUR F 140/36). Amherst noted further that Ismailof met the Kangxi emperor on 10 or 12 occasions and was permitted to remain in Peking for three months, which exceeded the usual period of 40 days allotted to a foreign embassy.<sup>7</sup> Such impressive access to the emperor enjoyed by Ismailof resulting from the performance of a solitary kowtow was in stark contrast to Macartney who only had two formal audiences with the Qianlong emperor.<sup>8</sup> Intelligence received by the British that the Jiaqing emperor was better disposed to Westerners than his father would have suggested to Amherst that he could expect a favourable reception if he followed Ismailof's precedent of making an initial kowtow, followed thereafter by performing the British ceremony of kneeling on one knee and bowing before the Jiaqing emperor.

6 Naquin and Rawski (1987, pp. 30–31) pointed out that the Qing court's relations with Russia were quite different from that of other Western countries by noting that a Qing ambassador was prepared to perform the kowtow before the Tsar in Moscow in 1731 and St Petersburg in 1732. Nevertheless, Amherst classified the Russians as 'Westerners' for the purposes of his research.

7 His first meeting with the emperor was on 28 November 1720 and his last on 23 February 1721 (Amherst, 'Notes on policy to be pursued by the British Embassy to China' in BL IOR MSS EUR F 140/36).

8 Macartney also met the Qianlong emperor at an 'entertainment' but no business took place despite Macartney's efforts to 'lead him towards the subject of my Embassy' (Cranmer-Byng, 1962, p. 137).

## The Impact of Macartney's Journal on Amherst: The Importance of Rank

Amherst turned his attention to Macartney's journal. Barrow thought the inclusion of several extracts from Macartney in his second volume of Macartney's biography 'may not ... be wholly uninteresting to those who shall be concerned in any future mission to the court of Peking' (Barrow, 1807, vol. 1, p. 348). Amherst noted these and also took copious notes from Macartney's journal handed to him by Castlereagh.

Amherst quotes Macartney's remarks on his escorts in his notes: 'Van [Wang] and Chou [were] family names. Taqin annexed to their Rank & signifies great man. Blue button inferior red, white to blue' (in Cranmer-Byng, 1962, p. 71).<sup>9</sup> Cheng, the 'Tartar legate' who met Macartney at Tianjin, Amherst noted, was unfriendly and exhibited a 'settled prejudice against the Embassy' arising out of a dispute over the delivery of the British presents to Jehol.<sup>10</sup> Amherst highlighted Macartney's passage, 'I have taken great pains to conciliate him; but I suspect he is not of a conciliable [sic] nature' (Amherst quoting Macartney's journal, pp. 201–202 in 'Notes on policy to be pursued by the British Embassy to China' in BL IOR MSS EUR F 140/36). The mandarins Wang and Chou, despite their high rank, were portrayed as men with 'no great regard to Truth' for they had no scruples in asking 'for a present saying the Emperor's allowance was not sufficient' (Amherst quoting Macartney's journal, p. 220 in 'Notes on policy to be pursued by the British Embassy to China' in BL IOR MSS EUR F 140/36). Amherst made a special note that his embassy would be subject to constant surveillance where its 'appearance, deportment and conversation' and 'Every thing they say & do [is] minutely reported & remembered' and brought to the attention of the emperor (Amherst quoting Macartney's journal, p. 233 in 'Notes on policy to be pursued by the British Embassy to China' in BL IOR MSS EUR F 140/36).

9 Amherst also noted the various Chinese 'Courts' or Boards of Government, and listed government titles including the 'Keun-Min-Too—Magistrate resident near Macao; Foo-yuen or Sun-foo 2nd in authority to Viceroy; Fsong-too—The Viceroy; Quang-tchoo-foo—Governor of City of Canton: another interpretation calls him the Magistrate of the district of Macao' (See Amherst, 'Notes on policy to be pursued by the British Embassy to China' in BL IOR MSS EUR F 140/36).

10 In contrast to the Amherst Embassy, where early discussion with the mandarins arose over the performance of the kowtow, initial talks at the time of Macartney Embassy concerned his insistence that the delicate and bulky presents of the planetarium, the globes, the great lustres, clocks and other articles remain in Peking and not travel to Jehol for fear of damage (Barrow, 1807, vol. 2, p. 191).

Amherst's readings of Macartney's journal contributed to his awareness of the importance of ceremony in Qing diplomatic encounters and special note was made of Macartney's conclusion:

[Ceremonial] is a very serious matter with [the Chinese] ... they pressed me most seriously to comply with it; said [the prostration] was a mere trifle, kneld down on the floor and practised it of their own accord to shew me the manner of it, and begged me to try whether I could perform it. (Barrow, 1807, vol. 2, p. 209, referred to by Amherst in his 'Notes on policy to be pursued by the British Embassy to China' in BL IOR MSS EUR F 140/36)

Amherst also possessed a dispatch written by Macartney after he had left the Qianlong court that emphasised the Qing mandarins' insistence that a foreign ambassador practice in their presence 'the adorations as the Chinese term expresses, or prostrations, which are constantly made before the throne by subjects and vassals of this Empire' (Amherst quoting Macartney's journal in 'Notes on policy to be pursued by the British Embassy to China' in BL IOR MSS EUR F 140/36).

[Macartney] was well aware of the tenaciousness of this Court to a ceremony of which the humiliation on the one part contributed perhaps to render most Embassies so grateful to the other. (Amherst quoting Macartney's journal in 'Notes on policy to be pursued by the British Embassy to China' in BL IOR MSS EUR F 140/36)

But Macartney admitted that he was unaware of the true meaning of the characters on the flags adorning the embassy boats that read 'The Ambassador bearing Tribute from the Kingdom of England'. Even if he had known, he would not have made a formal complaint in case this caused 'an abrupt as well as [an] unsuccessful termination to my Mission' (Amherst quoting Macartney's journal in 'Notes on policy to be pursued by the British Embassy to China' in BL IOR MSS EUR F 140/36).

Amherst noted Macartney's views on the mandarins, which were far from complimentary. The 'Tartar Chiefs' were suspicious of British designs 'as if we came to pry into the situation of the country' and intended under the 'specious and innocent pretext to trade, to insinuate ourselves gradually into some share with them of the domination over China' (Amherst quoting Macartney's journal in 'Notes on policy to be pursued by the British Embassy to China' in BL IOR MSS EUR F 140/36). He emphasised the difference in a proposed compromise in which he would kowtow if a mandarin of

equal rank performed the same ceremony before a portrait of George III. The emperor agreed to this proposal only if the mandarin performed the ceremony 'in a private room, without parade, and would scarcely be known or mentioned in the Empire' (Amherst quoting Macartney's journal in 'Notes on policy to be pursued by the British Embassy to China' in BL IOR MSS EUR F 140/36). Macartney, on the other hand, would be performing the ceremony in public on the occasion of a festival 'before all the tributary Princes, and great subjects of State, and would be described in the Gazette' (Amherst quoting Macartney's journal in 'Notes on policy to be pursued by the British Embassy to China' in BL IOR MSS EUR F 140/36). He refused not only on these grounds but also because of the risk that the news of a humiliating public kowtow was 'likely even to find their way to Europe' due to the presence of Western Jesuits at the Qianlong court (Amherst quoting Macartney's journal in 'Notes on policy to be pursued by the British Embassy to China' in BL IOR MSS EUR F 140/36). Macartney concluded his dispatch in the strongest terms that to kowtow was to 'give stronger testimonies of homage to a foreign Prince, however respectable and great, than to my own sovereign, who was not less so' (Amherst quoting Macartney's journal in 'Notes on policy to be pursued by the British Embassy to China' in BL IOR MSS EUR F 140/36). A compromise was at length agreed on when the Qianlong emperor agreed to Macartney performing the British ceremony of bending one knee to him 'with the profoundest reverence'. The emperor, Macartney concluded, was 'much less eager in his pretensions, than his Courtiers for him' (Amherst quoting Macartney's journal in 'Notes on policy to be pursued by the British Embassy to China' in BL IOR MSS EUR F 140/36). Macartney's successful compromise no doubt assured Amherst that a precedent had been established where a British ambassador was no longer required to perform the kowtow.

## **Missionary Views on Macartney's Failure**

The inclusion of China experts in the Amherst Embassy was thought to ensure its success where Macartney had failed. Jesuit interpreters at the Qing court would not be required and it is noteworthy that Amherst makes no reference to the 'mischievous' activities of the Jesuits blamed by Barrow (1807) for Macartney's failure. His indifference is explained by the fact, of course, that there were only five foreign missionaries still at the Qing court, namely, Father Lamiot and four Portuguese missionaries. The Company's Secret Court of Directors, no doubt reflecting the views of Staunton,

described Lamiot as 'a respectable French missionary attached to the English by a long course of kindness from our Supra-Cargoes at Canton' (Secret Commercial Committee to Lord Amherst, 17 January 1816, in BL IOR G/12/196 (Reel 1) F 86).

Amherst had in his possession a letter dated 1794 written by a French Jesuit, Father Louis de Poirot, with his views on the Macartney Embassy (A Jesuit at Peking to Mr Raper enclosing a letter written by the Missionary Louis de Poirot dated 18 May 1794 on the Ceremony at Macartney's Reception, in BL IOR MSS EUR F 140/36). De Poirot stressed that the missionaries at the Qianlong court had been disposed to do all in their power to assist the Macartney Embassy but that their intentions were thwarted by the Qing Government's sudden prohibition on all communication with the British (A Jesuit at Peking to Mr Raper enclosing a letter written by the Missionary Louis de Poirot dated 18 May 1794 on the Ceremony at Macartney's Reception, in BL IOR MSS EUR F 140/36). Nevertheless, he now presented his 'friendly remarks' on the outcome of Macartney's Embassy. He attributed the failure of the embassy to the British reliance on a young and inexperienced Chinese interpreter and their refusal to 'pay the customary obedience' to the court. Macartney's failure to consult the Jesuits was a mistake as he would have been informed that the kowtow represented a 'Homage [that] was only a mere ceremony' (A Jesuit at Peking to Mr Raper enclosing a letter written by the Missionary Louis de Poirot dated 18 May 1794 on the Ceremony at Macartney's Reception, in BL IOR MSS EUR F 140/36). He added, revealing a fundamental ignorance of the British, that Portuguese and Papal ambassadors had been only too happy to perform the prostration ceremony. Referring to the Ismailof Embassy, de Poirot continued:

[It was] true that a Muscovite Ambassador was proud and would not submit to it ... [but] Kanghi [showed] him that it was not meant as a submission from one Sovereign to another, [and] ordered one of his Nobles to make the same submission before the signet of the Czar of Muscovy. (A Jesuit at Peking to Mr Raper enclosing a letter written by the Missionary Louis de Poirot dated 18 May 1794 on the Ceremony at Macartney's Reception, in BL IOR MSS EUR F 140/36)

This was a confusing reference implying that the Kangxi emperor ordered a mandarin to kowtow before a representation of the Tsar instead of committing to the practices of the Russian court as suggested in Bell's (1763) account noted earlier. The British, de Poirot continued, 'might

have performed this ceremony' on these terms. Significantly, given Amherst's future thoughts on the kowtow at the time of his mission, Ismailof's precedent of 1721 was once more invoked as representing an expedient course of action at the Qing court.

De Poirot also stressed that the British choice of presents, consisting of 'expensive pieces of mechanism', were not suitable and a missionary should have been consulted over their selection. The 'plainness of dress' of the members of the Macartney Embassy drew specific criticism because it left a bad impression of the British. 'Plain clothes', while acceptable in Europe, were considered by the Chinese as a 'mark either of poverty or disrespect'. Heavily embroidered clothes, on the other hand, commanded respect and gave the Chinese a 'greater idea of the Europeans'. De Poirot advised that future European ambassadors to the Qing court must wear clothes richly laced with gold to impress and 'dazzle the Eye' (A Jesuit at Peking to Mr Raper enclosing a letter written by the Missionary Louis de Poirot dated 18 May 1794 on the Ceremony at Macartney's Reception, in BL IOR MSS EUR F 140/36).

## The Importance of the Golovkin Embassy of 1805–1806

The precedents of two other embassies to the Qing court after Macartney would have served to confuse Amherst. The Dutch mission to the Qianlong court in 1795 resulted only in humiliation and a failure to accomplish any of its goals despite the performance of an estimated 30 kowtows during its stay in China. Amherst makes no reference to this embassy in his notes, but Van Braam's (1798) account received substantial coverage in the British media and was well known to the British public.<sup>11</sup> Barrow showed particular interest in the embassy in his autobiography, stating that many of the details of its reception were 'too disgusting to repeat'. He adds, 'Van Braam, a jolly fat fellow, who, from the luxurious

---

11 Estimates of the number of kowtows performed vary, but a general figure places it at between 30 and 50. The Dutch travelled in miserable conditions, were lodged in dilapidated buildings and Van Braam, the second secretary in the embassy, was humiliated when his hat fell off while kowtowing to the Qianlong Emperor. The Dutch were even required to kowtow before a gift of a sturgeon sent from the palace. Rockhill (1905, p. 32) wrote, 'the envoys received the gift in the courtyard, kneeling and knocking their heads on the ground'. It needs to be noted that the Dutch mission was sent by the Dutch East India Company at Batavia, and not on behalf of the Netherlands Government, which, in any event, was a republic whose head of state was not a monarch.

life of Batavia, underwent a state of starvation in China, writes to his friend that he had returned as thin as a shotten herring' (Barrow, 1847, p. 98).<sup>12</sup> Certainly Staunton and Henry Ellis, the third commissioner in the Amherst Embassy, were well aware of this ill-fated embassy and both referred to it in later correspondence in connection with the kowtow.

The Russian embassy led by Count Golovkin in 1805–1806, as noted earlier, was important as the only European embassy sent to the court of the Jiaqing emperor, and was of great interest to Amherst who made several pages of mainly descriptive notes on its progress (Amherst, 'Notes on the Golovkin Embassy, 1805-06' in BL IOR MSS EUR F 140/36). The Golovkin Embassy was a grand and elaborate delegation consisting of over 300 people including Cossacks, dragoons, several young noblemen, scientists and an interpreter fluent in Mandarin. Presents for the emperor included furs of the highest quality and the finest products of Russian decorative arts. Arriving at the small village of Kiahta on the Chinese border, Golovkin, Amherst noted, set himself up in 'great magnificence' and commenced negotiations with the mandarins regarding his entrance into China (Amherst, 'Notes on the Golovkin Embassy, 1805-06' in BL IOR MSS EUR F 140/36). Inevitably, the question of the 'ko-teu' arose (Amherst, 'Notes on the Golovkin Embassy, 1805-06' in BL IOR MSS EUR F 140/36). Golovkin informed the mandarins that he intended to follow the precedent of former Russian ambassadors and would not be performing the ceremony. The embassy proceeded to enter Chinese territory while news of Golovkin's refusal was being transmitted to Peking. On arriving at Urga, 140 miles from the capital, Golovkin was met by the senior Qing commander, referred to as 'the Wan' by the Russians, who was also the Jiaqing emperor's brother-in-law. Delays were caused at Urga due to some confusion over the wording of the Tsar's letter to the emperor. While waiting for confirmation from Peking to proceed, Golovkin was invited to a 'solemn breakfast' where he noticed a table covered with yellow silk (Amherst, 'Notes on the Golovkin Embassy, 1805-06' in BL IOR MSS EUR F 140/36).<sup>13</sup> Informed that the table represented the presence of the emperor, Golovkin was instructed to kowtow before it. He refused. He insisted that previous Russian ambassadors had never performed the ceremony at the border but had been allowed to proceed directly to Peking where due respect was paid to the emperor. Further,

12 The *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* defines 'shotten' as 'In *herring*, applied to a person who is exhausted by sickness or destitute of strength or resources'.

13 The term 'solemn breakfast' is used by Amherst in his notes.

Golovkin informed 'the Wan' that Macartney had not kowtowed and the Russians would not perform a ceremony from which the British had been excused. 'The Wan' was astonished on learning this and called it a 'misrepresentation' (Amherst, 'Notes on the Golovkin Embassy, 1805–06' in BL IOR MSS EUR F 140/36).

Golovkin was expelled immediately by the Jiaqing emperor on learning of his refusal to kowtow. Presents were returned and Golovkin and his grand retinue departed on the long and arduous return journey to St Petersburg. Amherst noted the role played by the mandarins. Golovkin, he wrote, 'seems to throw a great deal of the blame on the Wan', thus heralding the need, in Amherst's mind, to placate obstreperous mandarins acting in their capacity as gatekeepers to the emperor (Amherst, 'Notes on the Golovkin Embassy, 1805–06' in BL IOR MSS EUR F 140/36).

## Lamiot's Letters

Amherst now had examples of two other failed European embassies to the Qing court: the Dutch embassy of 1795, which was dismissed with no reward after the ambassador performed numerous kowtows; and the Golovkin Embassy, expelled for refusing a single kowtow. Any confusion, however, was clarified with the receipt of informed comment in a letter written by the French Vincentian priest resident at the Qing court, Father Lamiot, which came to the attention of the British at Canton. The letter, dated 1 October 1807, was addressed to a 'Spanish agent' at Manila and commented on the failure of both Macartney and Golovkin.

The refusal of both ambassadors to kowtow before the respective emperors, Lamiot thought, was the fundamental cause for their failure, but he also blamed the actions of the mandarins who had blocked access to the emperor. This judgement, in the light of what Amherst had just read about the Golovkin Embassy, no doubt made perfect sense. The mandarins, Lamiot explained, were united against any foreign embassy and 'will readily use every means of intrigue, deception, and bribery to circumvent' them (Amherst, 'Notes on a letter written by Lamiot, dated 1 October 1807' in BL IOR MSS EUR F 140/36). Their actions were dictated specifically by concerns that any interference in dealings with foreigners would result in their having to pay compensation, leaving them open to accusations

'of plunderings which have brought no advantage to the government' (Amherst, 'Notes on a letter written by Lamiot, dated 1 October 1807' in BL IOR MSS EUR F 140/36).

Lamiot, understandably, shifted the blame for the failure of the Macartney Embassy away from the Jesuits, identified by Barrow as the primary cause for the failure of the embassy, to the devious and self-centred actions of the mandarins or gatekeepers. Their behaviour, Lamiot pointed out, was ruled by a fear and dread of incurring the emperor's displeasure. Accordingly, the emperor, who had absolute power to demote, punish or fine his officials, was never told the truth, but the mandarins dared not initiate any independent actions or shape agreements in their own right.<sup>14</sup> Amherst, it will be seen, was confronted with frustrating and inconclusive negotiations on his way to Peking, due to the mandarins' inability to make decisions independent of the emperor.

Lamiot recommended further that embassies be sent in the name of the sovereign and to proceed secretly and directly to the northern port of Tianjin. Amherst wrote next to this passage:

This appears to me to be hardly possible, as notice must be given to the Government of its arrival not only to obtain permission to proceed but to make all the necessary preparations and arrangements. (Amherst, 'Notes on a letter written by Lamiot, dated 1 October 1807' in BL IOR MSS EUR F 140/36)

Lamiot also included his thoughts on the Jiaqing emperor in a letter dated 10 October 1808. Amherst noted that Lamiot 'speaks of [the Jiaqing emperor] as anxious only to govern well, [as] indifferent to rare and curious objects and is an enemy to luxury and fetes' (Amherst, 'Notes on a letter written by Lamiot, dated 1 October 1807' in BL IOR MSS EUR F 140/36). This assessment of the Jiaqing emperor reminded Amherst of earlier Western impressions of the Kangxi court, described by Bell as one of 'order and decency, rather than grandeur and magnificence' (Bell, 1763, vol. 2, p. 12).

---

<sup>14</sup> The fact that the mandarins were not permitted to take any decisions without the emperor's permission is noted in Staunton's (1821) translation of the *Narrative of the Chinese embassy to the Khan of the Tourgouth Tartars*. In this account, the Chinese ambassador informed a Russian officer during his travels through Russia, 'In our empire of China, none of the great officers of state are empowered to transact state affairs upon their own authority ... They must, on all occasions, be regularly submitted to his Majesty' (p. 102).

The prospect of dealing with a responsible and pragmatic emperor encouraged British expectations of a fruitful diplomatic encounter at the Qing court where direct communication would result in negotiation and mediation. While Lamiot had reported that the Jiaqing emperor was adverse to ostentatious displays, it was thought that a splendid audience before the emperor displaying the civility and courtly demeanour of a British diplomatic mission would secure the Jiaqing emperor's 'good graces' and sanction the commencement of negotiations with Qing court officials.<sup>15</sup> Amherst was fully aware of the minefield of conventions that governed the site of diplomatic dialogue with the Qing court where misunderstandings had the power to disrupt or even sever negotiation. His main concern centred on the fact that once a written submission had been delivered to the Chinese authorities, it effectively closed off further opportunities for mediation. He made a note that 'there is no longer any opportunity to negotiate ... the determination is taken, and the business cannot be again reverted to' (Amherst, 'Notes on policy to be pursued by the British Embassy to China' in BL IOR MSS EUR F 140/36). Lamiot had given the same advice and Amherst wrote elsewhere:

Follow M. Lamiot's advice in delaying as long as possible to give in to demands in writing (which would be speedily and conclusively answered) and take every possible means to ensure their success before they are definitely proposed. (Amherst, pencil notes on 'The objects of the Embassy' in BL IOR MSS EUR F 140/36)

Amherst, no doubt drawing on his own diplomatic experience at the Court of Palermo, wrote the following, which although logical in British terms, displayed a naiveté about Chinese diplomacy and reveals that he thought his embassy would be received outside the traditional tribute system:

Negotiation should be conducted in the spirit of cordiality and with the feeling of equality. No offence taken at trifles nor intentional indignity overlooked. Act first and apologise afterwards. Firmness, dignity, and patience essential requisites. Resist any attempt of persons interested to terminate abruptly the Embassy. Any such attempt on the part of the Government to be represented as unjust and unfriendly. (Amherst, pencil notes on 'The objects of the Embassy' in BL IOR MSS EUR F 140/36)

---

15 Hampton (2009, p. 19) noted that Ermolao Barbaro wrote in the 1490s that the importance of an ambassador was to attain 'the good graces of those to whom he is sent'.

While such strategies might appear reasonable to pursue in a European diplomatic encounter, they were not realistic in the context of the Qing court. The emphasis on reasonableness revealed a major misunderstanding and lack of awareness of the practicalities of dealing with the Qing court where there was no scope for dialogue of any kind and no channel for diplomatic communication, and certainly not with one imbued with the feeling of equality. Further, while Macartney's visit happened to coincide with the unique event of the Qianlong emperor's 80th birthday celebrations, Amherst was visiting the Qing court uninvited and at a less auspicious time. The historian John Wills has pointed out that the emperor considered tribute audiences a routine formality in which ambassadors from tributary states were able to relax and engaged in cordial relations with the court once the ceremonial formalities had taken place (2009, p. 28). The British, on the other hand, saw an embassy to China as a singular opportunity to engage, persuade and exert diplomatic pressure on the Qing court where the real business of diplomacy was entered into after the ceremonials had concluded. Indeed, Amherst had gone as far as to prepare for a meeting with Qing officials along specific lines. He wrote, 'Would it be possible to announce to the Chinese rather than to ask from them, [for] the appointment of a Minister at Peking, or at least a Consul at Canton?' (emphasis in original). Amherst acknowledged that such diplomatic negotiations would be delicate:

By a precipitate enforcement of our demands the Embassy may be abruptly terminated. By a protraction of them, it may come to a conclusion before they are brought forward. It will be difficult to steer between these two courses. (Amherst, 'Notes on policy to be pursued by the British Embassy to China' in BL IOR MSS EUR F 140/36)

His aim, however, was 'to be cautious' and 'not to make demands which [might] rather produce new misunderstandings than remove old grievances' (Amherst, 'Notes on policy to be pursued by the British Embassy to China' in BL IOR MSS EUR F 140/36). Amherst understood that the Qing mandarins had no power to negotiate on their own initiative. At the end of the day, Amherst noted optimistically, 'all these obstacles are perhaps not insurmountable as the success depends upon the will of one Man' (Amherst quoting Letter by Lamiot, 1 October 1807, 'Notes on a letter written by Lamiot, dated 1 October 1807' in BL IOR MSS EUR F 140/36). But the will of the emperor was contingent on his willingness to compromise and recognise British exceptionalism. Amherst

hoped that a splendid display by a new British embassy—following in the footsteps of the earlier impressive Macartney Embassy that had done so much to instil a favourable notion of the British nation in China in contrast to the barbaric appearance of traditional vassal missions—would ensure an honourable reception at the Qing court.

Amherst was fully aware that his was a difficult mission requiring tact and caution (Amherst, 'Notes on policy to be pursued by the British Embassy to China' in BL IOR MSS EUR F 140/36). Nevertheless, he remained hopeful, especially as the Jesuits were no longer a problem and the inclusion of Mandarin speakers would assist him in a successful outcome where Macartney had failed. The British ability to now communicate directly with the mandarins would ensure access to the court and succeed in overcoming obstacles initially put in place by the gatekeepers. The ability to engage in direct communication, as well as Amherst's personal charm and past diplomatic experience, would succeed in impressing the emperor who would hopefully initiate a series of negotiations on the state of trade at Canton and open an official channel for direct communication between the court at Peking and the Company at Canton. Macartney's firm actions had dispensed with the need to kowtow and the embassy had left a favourable impression at the Qing court. Barrow's words summed up Macartney's legacy:

By this Embassy the British character became better known to the Chinese, and protection and respect were obtained for the British subjects resident at Canton. At the request of Lord Macartney they have since been permitted to address their complaints personally or by letter to the viceroy ... It opened an amicable correspondence between His Majesty and the Emperor of China. (1807, vol. 2, p. 354)

Amherst was reassured further by a letter from the Company's Secret Commercial Committee, dated 17 January 1816, on the expected outcome of the embassy. Citing the examples of Ismailof and Macartney, the letter stated:

It has been said that the Chinese government expects nothing more from an Embassy than some complementary proceedings, accompanied with presents; but it seems plain in the cases of more than one Russian Ambassador, and of Lord Macartney himself, that the Chinese Ministers did not decline all negotiations. And if that Government were given seriously to understand, that an attempt to avoid taking due cognizance of an affair so important to our

National interest and honour, would be viewed as a denial of justice and of a most unfriendly character, they would perhaps not persist in it. (Secret Commercial Committee to Lord Amherst, 17 January 1816, in BL IOR G/12/196 (Reel 1) F 86)

## Amherst's Conclusions

Amherst concluded that concern with ceremony was a very serious matter at the Qing court. He earmarked a passage in Macartney's journal on the 'First mention of mode of presentation to the Emperor' (Amherst quoting Macartney's journal, p. 200 in 'Notes on policy to be pursued by the British Embassy to China' in BL IOR MSS EUR F 140/36). This was the occasion where Macartney was first informed by the mandarins that the ceremony of kneeling down on 'both knees and making nine prostrations or inclinations of the head to the ground ... had never been and never could be dispensed with' (Amherst quoting Macartney's journal, p. 200 in 'Notes on policy to be pursued by the British Embassy to China' in BL IOR MSS EUR F 140/36). Macartney, following Westphalian principles, reiterated that his first duty was to perform the ceremony that was agreeable to his king.

Amherst's notes on 'Ceremonial' referred specifically to Barrow's views presented in his first volume of Macartney's biography (1807) and reveal that he was greatly influenced by them. Barrow emphasised Macartney's successful negotiation as the first European ambassador to appear before a Chinese emperor without performing the humiliating kowtow, thereby saving both personal and national honour.<sup>16</sup> Barrow, buoyed by Macartney's success, advocated specific instructions to future British ambassadors to China. These should be ambiguous and left open, leaving an ambassador free to make appropriate decisions based on the conditions found at the time. Ambassadors were further advised not to enter into discussions with the mandarins on the subject as it was important 'to keep the agents of the court in good humour' (Amherst, 'Notes on policy to be pursued by the British Embassy to China' in BL IOR MSS EUR F 140/36).

---

<sup>16</sup> This was not strictly accurate. An earlier Portuguese embassy and a Papal embassy had been admitted to the Qianlong emperor and the envoys did not kowtow. However, an important distinction is that these embassies did not come with requests for trade. Rather, they concerned religious matters and, therefore, arrived and were received in China outside of the tributary system (Peyrefitte, 1992, p. xxiv). Reference is made to the Papal envoy, the Cardinal of Tournon who arrived at the Qing court 80 years before Macartney and did not kowtow.

Amherst's notes reveal that he was not convinced by this advice. He marked a passage in Barrow's (1804) book, *Travels in China*, on the reactions at Peking to the news that Macartney had not kowtowed before the Qianlong emperor:

Nobody would speak to me [Barrow] ... I asked [our friend Deodato a Neapolitan missionary] what was the matter? His answer was, We are all lost, ruined, and undone! ... Macartney had refused to comply with the ceremony of prostrating himself, like the Embassadors of tributary princes ... [and had performed] the same ceremony of respect to the Emperor as to his own sovereign. That although little was thought of this affair at Gehol, the great officers of state [in the] department of ceremonies in Peking were mortified, and perplexed, and alarmed; and that ... it was impossible to say what might be the consequence of an event unprecedented in the annals of the empire. (p. 117)

Such 'embarrassment may be avoided', Amherst wrote, 'if the King makes a specific reference in the ambassador's instructions to approach the throne of China with the same ceremonial respect as appears before himself' (Amherst, 'Notes on policy to be pursued by the British Embassy to China' in BL IOR MSS EUR F 140/36). Amherst still persisted in viewing his upcoming mission within the terms of Westphalian diplomatic principles of equality between nations.

## The Importance of Appearances

Amherst's need to present himself in the most prestigious light befitting his status as a British ambassador claiming his authority from the Prince Regent, and as a member of the British aristocratic elite, is reflected in a letter he wrote to Lord Buckinghamshire concerning both the appearance of his table while in China as well as his official wardrobe. Submitting a bill for expenses incurred in ordering extra silverware, Amherst reminded Buckinghamshire that only the finest silver, crystal and linens were appropriate for ambassadorial appearances. Such were:

Absolutely necessary for the Table, which I shall have to keep for the Embassy when on show, and which, as the Chinese will probably be spectators of it, I have ordered more becoming to my station by a large addition of my own [silver] Plate, which will amount to about a thousand pounds. The cost of my state wardrobe and various incidental expenses ... which arise from the

circumstances of my appointment (I do not mean my outfit only) will amount to at least as much more: Thus leaving me charged at the very outset with an expense of upwards of £2000. (Amherst to Buckinghamshire, 28 December 1815, in BL IOR G/12/196 (Reel 1) F 66)

Amherst's early expectations of the manner in which he would be received by the Qing court and the opportunities this provided for a display of British taste and refinement are revealed in this letter. His reference to his dinner table being 'on show' suggests that he also anticipated playing the gracious host entertaining the mandarins in a formal European manner complete with silver and fine tableware, multiple courses and the best wines, served to create an atmosphere conducive to amiable conversation followed by frank and productive discussion. An impressive display of silver was essential as a visual representation of both Amherst's rank and Great Britain's prosperity.<sup>17</sup> The importance of appearances was not confined to the ambassador alone but was also a concern for at least one member of the British public who, knowing of the Chinese preference for etiquette, enquired if it:

might be judicious with reference to the success of the Embassy, that the King's ship, carrying Lord Amherst, should wear a Broad Pendant (like [Macartney's ship] the *Lion*). Is this compatible with the rules of the Admiralty? (Chairman and Deputy Chairman, EIC, to Viscount Melville, 1 February 1816, in BL IOR G/12/196 (Reel 1) F 127–128)

The writer was informed that the HMS *Lion* had not flown a pendant and in fact:

It is not probable at any rate that the Government or people of China would be sufficiently conversant in the details of the various degrees of rank in the British Navy to render it a matter of any consequence. (Chairman and Deputy Chairman, EIC, to Viscount Melville, 1 February 1816, in BL IOR G/12/196 (Reel 1) F 128)

---

17 'Nothing can be more superb than the silversmith's shops' reflecting the richness of the nation' (Brewer, 1997, p. 29).

## Choice of Presents for the Jiaqing Emperor

Barrow (1807, vol. 1, p. 348) commented that the British knew little of the customs and manners of the Qing court at the time of the Macartney Embassy and had been dependent on the 'voluminous writings of the French missionaries' for guidance in the choice of presents for the Qianlong emperor. The Qing court, according to these sources, was interested primarily in 'the sciences', specifically 'astronomy and experimental philosophy' (Pritchard, 1943, p. 163). Scientific gifts including a planetarium, glass lenses and air pumps were chosen to showcase British scientific progress to 'excite at Peking a taste for many articles of English workmanship' in the hope of generating markets for British goods.<sup>18</sup> These gifts, however, were famously dismissed by the Qianlong emperor who told George III that China did not 'value ingenious articles, nor do we have the slightest need of your country's manufactures' ('Edict from the Emperor Qianlong to King George the Third of England', 23 September 1793, as quoted in Cranmer-Byng, 1962, p. 340).<sup>19</sup> Barrow (1807, vol. 1, pp. 348–349) complained that the scientific gifts were 'all lost and thrown away by the ignorant Chinese' and that if Chinese interest in the sciences had ever existed this was 'now completely worn out'. The previous British perception of the Qing court as a site of scientific interest and progress had changed, following Macartney, to one of ignorance and stagnation whose members were adverse to 'the introduction of all novelties' and were ruled by ceremonial and 'idolatrous worship' (Barrow, 1807, vol. 1, p. 349).

Barrow believed he had learned from the Macartney experience and was confident that he understood that the nature of Chinese taste was founded on objects of 'intrinsic value' (Minute of a Conference between the Chairs and Mr Barrow Respecting the Presents for the Emperor, in BL IOR G/12/196 (Reel 1) F 45). This judgement appears to have been based

---

18 Macartney's prime objective was to secure a treaty of trade with the Chinese Government. His embassy was primarily 'a trade mission to popularize British inventions and manufacturers' (Cranmer-Byng & Levere, 1981, p. 505).

19 A similar declaration is found in Staunton's (1821) translation of *Narrative of the Chinese embassy to the Khan of the Tourgouth Tartars*. The Kangxi emperor instructed the Chinese ambassador that in the event of the 'vain and ostentatious' Russians displaying unusual items, he was not to 'express admiration nor contempt; and [is] merely to say, "whether our country possesses or not such things as these, it is quite out of our province to determine"' (p. 17).

on Macartney's discovery of 40 or 50 garden pavilions situated among the imperial gardens at Jehol that were furnished 'in the richest manner' of the best of European taste, including fine paintings, European sing-songs and toys, and Chinese porcelains and enamel ware (Cranmer-Byng, 1962, pp. 125–126). Macartney was astonished at the sight of objects 'of such exquisite workmanship, and in such profusion' and thought that the British presents 'must shrink from the comparison and hide their diminished heads' (Cranmer-Byng, 1962, p. 125). A major consideration in the choice of presents was that they not offend Chinese pride (Barrow, 1807, vol. 1, p. 350). Barrow cautioned that Chinese sensibilities had to be considered. Gifts of a high standard representative of 'the talent and ingenuity of foreigners' were likely to draw 'jealous comparisons' with their own manufacturers and Lamiot had stressed that the Jiaqing emperor was averse to luxury and curious objects.

Presents chosen by the Amherst Embassy for the emperor included gold items such as a cup with a cover and a salver of beautiful workmanship; several silver vessels; a 24-piece china dessert service decorated with a white and gold scroll border with paintings of British landscapes; several large floral decorated china vases; glassware, bottles and liqueurs including brandy and dried fruits valued at £400; engravings of the coast of England and Wales; a painting of the Doncaster races; and portraits of the Prince Regent and Princess Caroline. Other gifts included two superb, elegantly finished and richly ornamented sedan chairs; super fine furs; perfumes; two ornamental clocks for the Hall of Audience; and a selection of superfine cloths of soft Spanish wool. It was hoped that their inclusion would attract Chinese attention and open a market among the superior mandarins and the principal officers of the Chinese Government (Secret Court of Directors to Amherst, 26 January 1816, in BL IOR G/12/196 (Reel 1) F 116).

De Poyrot had thought that the Macartney Embassy's omission of presents for the mandarins at the Qianlong court had contributed to the embassy's failure. Accordingly, the Amherst Embassy carried an extra range of gifts including crystal chandeliers and glassware, porcelains, fine linens, clocks and watches, perfumes and snuffs. A selection of paintings, 'chiefly of Buildings, Flowers and Animals', as well as a map of London and prints showcasing prominent buildings and landmarks, such as St Paul's, the Greenwich Hospital and views of the Thames, were also chosen, as well as maps of the British Isles, a Chart of Navigation from Europe to China,

hand telescopes, a model of a ship-of-war, a fire engine, and pocket books containing razors, scissors and pen knives. The total cost of all the presents was £22,005.13.7 (equivalent to over £2 million in today's values).<sup>20</sup>

Barrow also drew up a list of presents that were unsuitable to send to the Qing court including a barouche or carriage. The splendid gilded carriage sent with Macartney had been found subsequently by the Dutch in 1795, evidently never used, and Barrow commented that it was impossible 'to make them to suit Chinese taste', referring to the fact that the driver sat in an elevated position to the emperor (Minute of Conference between the Chairs, & Mr Barrow respecting Presents for China, in BL IOR G/12/196 (Reel 1) F 47). Presents of a military character were also not appropriate.<sup>21</sup> Six small brass cannons brought by Macartney that fired several times a minute had 'excited the darkest suspicion in the mind of the legate' who observed them (Minute of Conference between the Chairs, & Mr Barrow respecting Presents for China, in BL IOR G/12/196 (Reel 1) F 47). Maps of China and India were thought to also incite 'jealousy' in China, given Britain's presence in India, while botanical drawings were excluded as it was thought that the Chinese excelled British skill in that branch of drawing.

## 'Kia-King's' Tea Pot

Historians have documented that British manufacturers were approached at the time of the Macartney Embassy for their suggestions and assistance in the selection of presents for the Qianlong emperor (see Berg, 2006). It appears that Barrow also wrote to selected British manufacturers in the context of the Amherst Embassy for their thoughts on how the mission might assist their businesses. One who replied was L. W. Dillwyn, Esq., of the Cambrian Company, porcelain manufacturers of Swansea, Wales. Dillwyn thanked Barrow for his letter and informed him that the intended embassy could certainly 'assist my endeavours to rival the Chinese Porcelain' (L. W. Dillwyn to John Barrow, 7 January 1816, in BL IOR MSS EUR F 140/38(a)). Complaining that his knowledge of the

20 A full list of the presents and their cost is provided in Appendix B.

21 The Kangxi emperor's instructions to the ambassador to the Tourgouth Tartars declared that all firearms and 'similar goods' were 'prohibited goods; their exportation beyond the frontier is never permitted'. Accordingly, these were not appropriate gifts to be carried by diplomatic envoys (Staunton, 1821, p. 17).

manufacture of Chinese porcelain was based solely on the Jesuit account found in Du Halde (1741) and from examples of the 'very inferior wares of Canton', he continued:

It is said that all the articles of the very finest quality are appropriated for the Emperor's Court, and of these I should greatly like to procure a piece. Any broken Article would answer my purpose as well as a perfect one; for my object would be to subject it to a course of experiments. (L. W. Dillwyn to John Barrow, 7 January 1816, in BL IOR MSS EUR F 140/38(a))<sup>22</sup>

Barrow, displaying a rare sense of humour, forwarded Dillwyn's letter to Amherst with the accompanying note:

My Dear Lord,

If you should happen to break one of Kia King's old Teapots or saucers, perhaps Your Lordship would have the goodness to recollect the wish of the ingenious writer of the enclosed and preserve the fragments. (Barrow to Amherst, n.d., in BL MSS EUR F 140/38 (a))

Dillwyn's expert admission that British china had yet to reach the technical perfection of imperial porcelain was dismissed by Barrow who appears to have assumed that a piece of Wedgwood china would suitably impress the Jiaqing emperor and be judged favourably next to the imperial wares that graced his table. The list of British presents reveals that their choice was decided on the basis of cultural assumptions reflecting and epitomising the values of aesthetic taste held by the British aristocracy and court society. Good taste, it was assumed, transcended cultural borders and the luxury goods prized and valued at St James's would similarly appeal to the high-ranking mandarins at the Qing court. The choice of tableware for the emperor's table appears incongruous given the cultural protocols of Chinese cuisine and serve to suggest that Barrow, despite his brief residence at the Qianlong court in his capacity as the comptroller of Macartney's presents, never witnessed the Chinese at table in the palace at Peking.

---

<sup>22</sup> Dillwyn's reference to the Jesuit account of porcelain manufacture refers to d'Étrecolles's letters from the kilns of Jingdezhen in Du Halde's *Encyclopaedia of China* first published in Paris in 1735, which revealed the secrets of Chinese porcelain manufacturing techniques to the West.

## Preparations of the HMS *Alceste*

Reference to the nature of the provisions and stores brought on board the *Alceste* for the long voyage to China indicate the lifestyle of privileged guests on board an early nineteenth-century British man-of-war. Included among the wine and spirits were 120 dozen bottles of first growth Chateau Margaux Claret at a cost of £444, 132 dozen Chateau Lafitte at a cost of £488 and 126 dozen bottles of Chateau Latour at a cost of £466. Aperitifs and liqueurs consisted of 240 dozen bottles of Superior Port at a cost of £528, 240 dozen bottles of East India Madeira and 108 dozen bottles of Superior Sherry. White wines included 78 dozen bottles of Old Hock, 30 dozen bottles of Sparkling Champagne and other white wines. The wine bill alone cost the Company £5,163.17.00. Other stores included '120 Packages' of cognac, Jamaica rum, brandy, Scotch whisky, cider and 'Taunton Ale' adding up to £5,710.6.8. Jams, jellies, preserved fruits, brandy fruits, raspberry vinegar and sundry confectionaries totalled £340.12.00. Dried fruits, chocolates, 'Jordan' almonds and 66 lbs of the 'finest Louchong and Hyson Teas' were included as well as '12 Canisters of Oatmeal, Groats & Pease' (BL IOR MSS EUR F 140/36). Spices and herbs were also loaded on board, as well as oils, sugar, vinegars, anchovies, caviar, pickles, cheeses, hams, pickled tongues, 'truffles and morsels' and crates of beef (BL IOR MSS EUR F 140/36).

Extra funds deposited in two chests amounting to £20,000 (equivalent to approximately £2 million in today's values) were added to the *Alceste's* inventory in case extra supplies had to be purchased at ports of call during the voyage, although the Company Directors did question whether there was a need to stop at Madeira to purchase more wine.<sup>23</sup> A major expense was the refitting of an apartment on board the *Alceste* commensurate with Amherst's status as ambassador, as well as extra furniture required during his stay in China. An inventory of the furnishings included '4 Trafalga chairs, carv'd and cane seats' costing £10; two large lounging chairs; two large handsome indulgent sofas at a cost of £74.10.00; two large knee hole wash stands and one handsome Grecian couch; one very large sofa table; one superb British carpet made up to fit the cabin, five allover cases

---

23 The directors pointed out that the expenses of the embassy already exceeded that of the Macartney Embassy. Over 1,665 dozen bottles of spirits, cider, beer and wines had been provided. The question, therefore, was asked, 'So is it really necessary to stop at Madeira for more wine?'

of Crimson Calico for sofas, couches and elbow chairs; an ornamented bronze inkstand; and '28 yards of the best Print, Lace, and calicoes' (BL IOR MSS EUR F 140/36).<sup>24</sup>

## The Embassy on the Eve of its Departure for China

Amherst had in his possession a letter dated 6 January 1816 from a member of the public that displayed an interest in the need for the British to acquire an understanding of China because a knowledge of Chinese 'desires, wants, likes, dislikes, prejudices etc.' was essential if the British were to learn 'how to manage them'. The author added:

I hope my Lord, you will be able to prevail upon the Emperor to permit 12 of the most competent Englishmen, who are well acquainted with the Chinese language, to travel over the whole Empire—and I hope you will prevail upon the Emperor to send 12 of his most competent Mandarins to England, so they might learn our language as they came over; who would bring the Emperor an account of our Real-State. (Anonymous letter in Amherst's possession, postmark 6 January 1816, in BL IOR MSS EUR F 140/35)

This letter reflects Porter's (2001, p. 205) insight of the British belief in the value of 'voyages of reciprocal discovery' where scientific and cultural knowledge was appreciated and transmitted between nations. The author's confidence in the ability of the embassy to 'increase wisdom and knowledge and understanding' between East and the West reflects an optimistic expectation of a fruitful outcome for the embassy that mirrored Amherst's faith. China and the mentality of its people, it was hoped, would be accessible to British investigation.

---

<sup>24</sup> It would appear that the colour yellow featured prominently in Amherst's furnishings. Reference is made to the colour during the salvaging of furniture from the wreck of the *Alceste* in February 1817. This was hardly a judicious choice considering the colour yellow was reserved in China for the sole use of the emperor.

George Rose, a diplomat and leading Treasury bureaucrat, had a more realistic assessment of the chances of the embassy.<sup>25</sup> He wrote to Charles Abbot, Speaker of the House of Commons, congratulating him on securing a passage for his son as a midshipman on the *Alceste*:

The voyage to China in the way it is made by an ambassador is beyond all comparison more interesting than to any other part of the world ... your mentioning his accompanying Lord Amherst leads me to mention a circumstance I should not otherwise have done. (Colchester, 1861, vol. 2, p. 562)<sup>26</sup>

Rose continued that he had met John Sullivan, Buckinghamshire's first choice as ambassador, who informed him that Amherst was 'instructed to act precisely as Lord Macartney' (Colchester, 1861, vol. 2, p. 562). Rose added that this 'led me to say his Lordship had then better stay at home'. Amherst's only chance for a successful mission, in Rose's opinion, was to adopt a more conciliatory attitude towards the Jiaqing emperor than Macartney had shown to the Qianlong emperor where his:

infinite ill-humour ... excited by [his] temper and unbending disposition ... certainly did not give fair play to the chance of effecting the objects of his mission; and I am quite clear that an opposite course should be adopted now. (Colchester, 1861, vol. 2, p. 563)

On 30 December 1815, Amherst was sworn in as a privy counsellor.<sup>27</sup> Lord Sidmouth congratulated him on his appointment and apologised for not attending the ceremony. He referred to the upcoming embassy and assured Amherst that he had no doubt of its success due to 'the judgment, temper and address of the Person, in whose hands this important entity is fortunately placed' (Lord Sidmouth to Amherst, 31 December 1815, in BL IOR MSS EUR F 140/35). Amherst thanked Sidmouth for his 'kind and flattering attention' and for:

25 Sir George Henry Rose (1771–1855), First Secretary, British Embassy, the Hague (1792–1793); Charge d'Affairs Berlin (1793); envoy extraordinary to the United States (1807–1808); British Minister in Munich (1813–1815) and Berlin (1815).

26 Charles Abbot, 1st Baron Colchester, was the speaker in the House of Commons (1802–1817) and a close personal friend of Amherst.

27 The Privy Council consisted of a board of high-ranking dignitaries who advised the British monarch on state affairs. Staunton was very bitter that he was never awarded the honour, especially after Ellis was appointed to the council in the 1830s. Staunton thought this was because he had no 'personal friend' in the Cabinet to further his cause. He added that such Royal favour would have been particularly pleasing had it been conferred on him after the Amherst Embassy while his mother was still alive and where he was still 'young enough to form and hope to realise fresh projects of ambition' (Staunton, 1856, pp. 176–183).

the good wishes which you do me the honour and favour to express for the successful termination of my Embassy and for my safe return to my family ... The best mode of repaying your Lordship's kindness will be to exert every faculty I possess in the honourable and faithful discharge of the duties entrusted to me; and my chief reward will be the approbation of those who, like your Lordship, deserve and acquire the applause and esteem of their Country. (Amherst to Sidmouth, n.d., in Devon Heritage Centre (South West Heritage Trust), 152M/C1816/OF1)

Rose, meanwhile, kept up his attack on the conduct of Macartney at the time of his embassy and told Lord Colchester:

I feel quite confident, if the ambassador is to act as Lord Macartney did (whose steps Mr. Sullivan told me he [Amherst] is to follow exactly), he will not have even a chance of obtaining anything; and much is to be obtained if the Chinese Ministers will open their eyes to the true interests of their country. I was present at long and repeated conversations between Mr. Pitt and Lord Macartney, after the return of the latter, and Mr. Pitt was entirely convinced that the unbending conduct of his Lordship rendered his success hopeless. (Colchester, 1861, vol. 2, p. 566)

## Final Instructions on the Performance of the Kowtow

Amherst received two 'enclosures' of instructions 'for your guidance in the discharge of Duties' at the Court of Peking from the Foreign Secretary, Lord Castlereagh, dated 1 January 1816. Amherst was reminded that there was a danger of commerce at Canton failing 'altogether' and that his mission was 'the only remedy that was likely to be effectual in order to place the [trade and] intercourse upon a satisfactory and stable footing' (Castlereagh to Amherst, Foreign Office, 1 January 1816, in BL IOR MSS EUR F 140/43 (a); also cited in Morse, 1926/1966, vol. 3, p. 279). His objects were to negotiate assurances of protection of the Company members at Canton from the violence and injustice of the local government; to more accurately define and detail their privileges; to guarantee freedom from intrusion of the Chinese provincial government at Canton into the British Factory; and to secure an open channel of communication, in the Chinese language, in all addresses and representations to the Chinese Government. A copy of the proceedings of the Macartney Embassy was

also enclosed from which 'a careful perusal of the correspondence of his Lordships, you will receive the most valuable suggestions' (Castlereagh to Amherst, Foreign Office, 1 January 1816, in BL IOR MSS EUR F 140/43 (a)). Amherst was instructed:

In the pursuit of these objects, you will regulate your conduct, by such information as you may receive from the Company Supercargoes, on the habits and customs of the Chinese government and people; and I am persuaded that in the knowledge and experience of the Supercargoes you will find the means, under the exercise of your own judgment and discretion, of adapting a course, the best calculated to affect the essential purposes of your Embassy. (Castlereagh to Amherst, Foreign Office, 1 January 1816, in BL IOR MSS EUR F 140/43 (a))

Castlereagh issued two important instructions. The first was identical to that given to Macartney revealing a lack of any further thought on the part of the Foreign Ministry. Thus, Amherst was informed to follow the 'punctilio' or procedures of ceremony at the emperor's court and conform 'to all the ceremonies of that Court, which may not commit the honour of your Sovereign or lessen your own dignity, so as to endanger the success of your mission' (Castlereagh to Amherst, Foreign Office, 1 January 1816, in BL IOR MSS EUR F 140/43 (a)). The historian Tuck (2000, p. xx) has pointed out the 'vagueness and ambiguity' of such instructions. Further 'ambiguity' followed with Castlereagh instructing Amherst to 'take the earliest opportunity to declare ... [that] the Prince Regent had entirely approved of the ceremonials performed by the Earl Macartney to the August Father of the present Emperor' and had especially commanded him to 'adopt that precedent upon' his mission 'to His Illustrious Son' (Castlereagh to Amherst, 1 January 1816, in BL MSS EUR F 140/43(a)). Castlereagh's second instruction regarded Amherst's rank in the embassy where he was to 'consider yourself at liberty to act upon your own responsibility, in case of any difference of Opinion between you and the other Commissioners' (Castlereagh to Amherst, 1 January 1816, in BL MSS EUR F 140/43(a)). The Secret Commercial Committee of the Company similarly stressed that the first commissioner, namely, Amherst, 'was to possess an extraordinary power of acting on his own responsibility in opposition to the sentiments of his Colleagues' (Secret Commercial Committee to Amherst, 17 January 1816, in Morse, 1926/1966, vol. 3, p. 294). These instructions endowed Amherst with

the flexibility to override Company interests if he deemed it expedient to do so. Ultimately, Amherst answered only to the Prince Regent who had appointed him.

Amherst's notes reveal his continued confusion over these instructions, especially regarding the performance of the kowtow. He wrote to Buckinghamshire for clarification on its performance, but Buckinghamshire's reply was not particularly helpful (Buckinghamshire to Amherst on the Ceremonies of Lord Macartney, 12 January 1816, in BL IOR MSS EUR F 140/35). After some deep thought on the issue, he had decided that:

due to the absurd prejudices and customs of the Chinese ... I can't define which ceremonial would be considered as committing the honour of the sovereign or lessening the dignity of the emperor. (Buckinghamshire to Amherst on the Ceremonies of Lord Macartney, 12 January 1816, in BL IOR MSS EUR F 140/35)

Amherst was informed that because it was impossible to anticipate the 'circumstances you [will] find yourself in' it was necessary that he 'exercise your own discretion' (Buckinghamshire to Amherst on the Ceremonies of Lord Macartney, 12 January 1816, in BL IOR MSS EUR F 140/35). Buckinghamshire was convinced, however, that it was unwise to include any official reference to Macartney's ceremonials in the Prince Regent's letter to the Jiaqing emperor as this would serve 'to embarrass [rather] than facilitate' (Buckinghamshire to Amherst on the Ceremonies of Lord Macartney, 12 January 1816, in BL IOR MSS EUR F 140/35). He added, reassuringly, that Macartney acted 'with full confidence in the support of his government' (Buckinghamshire to Amherst on the Ceremonies of Lord Macartney, 12 January 1816, in BL IOR MSS EUR F 140/35). Amherst thanked Buckinghamshire for his advice and 'for clearing up some doubts relative to the latitude afforded me under my ... instruction relating to the ceremonial of my presentation to the emperor of China' (Amherst to Buckinghamshire, 19 January 1816, in BL IOR MSS EUR F 140/35).

Buckinghamshire had sent Amherst a private letter two weeks earlier from Bath, writing:

My most anxious wishes for the success of your Mission, not only on account of the Public, but because I feel deeply interested on your account. I certainly am sanguine in my expecting, and not

the less so, from a conviction that by placing the business in your hands we take the best security against failure. (Buckinghamshire to Amherst, 5 January 1816, in BL IOR MSS EUR F 140/43 (a))

On 4 February 1816, Buckinghamshire suffered a fatal stroke while riding in Hyde Park. He had informed Amherst five days earlier of a 'most serious attack, but hope I am doing well' (Buckinghamshire to Amherst, 30 January 1816, in BL IOR MSS EUR F 140/35). Expectations of a successful mission were muted with little overt optimism, but Amherst had done all he could by way of background research and preparation to ensure that he had a flexible strategy in place should the opportunity present itself.

## **Amherst's Notes: 'The Course Which I Shall Have to Pursue Will Be as Follows'**

Amherst read his brief in the following terms. His 'great objective' was to 'open a direct communication with Pekin'. He wrote in his notes, 'I must not lose sight of this' (Amherst, 'Notes on policy to be pursued by the British Embassy to China' in BL IOR MSS EUR F 140/36). He noted further that although the Qianlong emperor had:

absolutely refused to permit an English Resident at his Court, I see nothing in the transactions of the former Embassy which would render hopeless an application for permission to open a direct communication between the members of the Factory and one of the tribunals or public departments at Pekin. No such demand appears to have been made by Lord Macartney & consequently there are no traces of any objection on the part of the Chinese government to such a measure. (Amherst, 'Notes on objects of the Embassy' in BL IOR MSS EUR F 140/36)

Amherst listed the course he was to pursue:

1. announce to the emperor that he was appointed by the Prince Regent and explain his desire to renew the amicable relations that existed between the respective fathers and that the Prince Regent had chosen this time to send an ambassador due to the restoration of tranquillity in Europe
2. 'solicit the emperor's protection to the subjects and commerce of England'

3. 'bring forward propositions for the future regulation of trade, and therein the prevention of former evils'. Amherst added in a pencilled note, '(introducing the subject perhaps by the disavowing of the proceedings of the *Doris*)'.

He added that to accomplish his last objective he would propose:

1. a British resident at Peking
2. open communication in the Chinese language between the Factory and a Tribunal at Peking or a Chinese minister in England
3. a consul at Canton.

Success in one or the other, Amherst continued, would be the best means of obtaining:

1. protection from violence or injustice and a more accurate definition of Company privileges
2. security for trade against the sudden and capricious interruptions and the privilege of dealing with such merchants as the Factory may think fit
3. free communication with a resident at Peking or by written representations in the Chinese language, and the right to use that language in all addresses to the local government.

Amherst's greatest wish, only to be promoted in the event of the above being achieved, was the opening of a 'port to the north-wards of Canton and a Resident Minister at Peking and a Chinese Minister to England in return', reflecting a British belief in the value of mutual self-interest in achieving British aims. A secret report prepared at Canton by Samuel Ball, Inspector of Teas, was prepared on this subject and handed to Amherst on arrival in China.<sup>28</sup> A further objective was the 'extension of British manufactures' into China. Above all else, Amherst reminded himself, was the need to 'avoid the language of complaint' in his negotiations with the Qing court (Amherst, 'Notes on policy to be pursued by the British Embassy to China' in BL IOR MSS EUR F 140/36). While the general objective of his embassy was stated in his instructions, Amherst's actions were to be left largely to his own discretion and judgement to be decided at the time.

---

<sup>28</sup> This report is reproduced in Appendix D.

As the time of departure for China drew near, Amherst became more and more concerned at the delays caused by the refitting and loading of the ships. Instead of leaving England by 1 December 1815 as initially planned, the date was pushed back to early February 1816, which left little time for the embassy to arrive in northern China before the onset of the typhoon season. Amherst told the Company chairs five days before sailing:

I do not recollect any former period of my life to have looked with so much anxiety to any event, as I now feel for our arrival at a proper season in the Bay of Pe-tchee-lee ... [as] we need to arrive at the mouth of the White River before the change of the Monsoon. (Amherst to the Chairman and Deputy Chairman, 3 February 1816, in BL IOR G/12/196 (Reel 1) F 131)

Refitting of the *Alceste* was completed on 3 February 1816 and Amherst and his suite came on board the following day (Journal of Sir William Fanshawe Martin, 1817, pp. 1–2, in BL ADD MSS 41346-41475). The embassy sailed on 8 February 1816. On the day of departure, Captain Maxwell sent a letter to the Company chairs pledging his utmost ‘zeal and energy’ to the task of providing for the comfort of Amherst and his entourage. He further reassured them that he would ‘endeavour to conform to that liberal motto of old English hospitality [of] “spare not, waste not” which you requested should be my guide’ (Maxwell to the Chairs, 8 February 1816, in BL IOR G/12/196 (Reel 1) F 135). Amherst wrote to his wife on the same day from Portsmouth:

My dearest love, Our bitterest parting is over. Let us support ourselves till we meet again by the consciousness of having done a duty now, which will sweeten the rest of our lives ... The sun was setting gloriously one side of me and the Moon rising in almost equal splendour on the other. I thought they seemed to shed a favourable influence of the journey I am undertaking, and in that belief I will bid you goodnight. (Amherst to Sarah Amherst, in BL Box 130 946c Ref 5562)

This text is taken from *Britain's Second Embassy to China: Lord Amherst's 'Special Mission' to the Jiaqing Emperor in 1816*, by Caroline Stevenson, published 2021 by ANU Press, The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.

[doi.org/10.22459/BSEC.2020.05](https://doi.org/10.22459/BSEC.2020.05)