



## Writing China: essays on the Amherst Embassy (1816) and Sino-British cultural relations

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sometimes seems simply to want a different, more explicitly ‘self-conscious’ McGahern: he speaks of the ‘coyness and latency of McGahern’s literary practice’ (p. 10), and says in the book’s final paragraph that his resistance to ‘the blander norms of realist practice’ is ‘perhaps overly quiet’ (p. 240).

The anxiety audible here is that McGahern may after all be ‘middlebrow’; and the invocation of literary modernism as middlebrow fiction’s ‘other’ seems to have heightened rather than dispelling it. A more confident assertion of McGahern’s literary distinction would reflect fully on something Robinson barely discusses: the fact that his deliberate refusal of modernist difficulty and self-reflexivity surely helped him find a large audience in Ireland. That *Amongst Women* came third in a 2003 *Irish Times* poll of readers’ favourite books<sup>2</sup> is, no doubt, evidence of ‘middlebrow’ tendencies – if you want to see it that way.

## Notes

1. Gabriel Josipovici, *What Ever Happened to Modernism?* (New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press, 2011).
2. See Eamon Maher, *John McGahern: From the Local to the Universal* (Dublin: Liffey Press, 2003), p. 117.

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**Writing China: essays on the Amherst Embassy (1816) and Sino-British cultural relations**, edited by Peter J. Kitson and Robert Markley, Cambridge, D.S. Brewer, 2016, 193 pp., £34 (hbk), ISBN 9781843844457

Recent research on British representations of China in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries demonstrates two prominent features. First, substantial attention is given to what has become a tradition in this area of research, the *chinoiserie*, or the taste for things Chinese (commercial goods such as tea and porcelain) and artistic visual representations of them, in theatre and in ornamental arts. Works from David Porter (2010), Chi-ming Yang (2010), Elizabeth Hope Chang (2013) and Eugenia Zuroski-Jenkins (2013) are excellent recent examples.<sup>1</sup> Second, in terms of periodisation, literature surrounding two landmark events, the opening of the Macartney Embassy in China in 1793 and the Opium Wars (1839–1842; 1856–1860), are often highlighted. In contrast, studies on literature between the two landmarks tend to be few and far between. It is in this context that we can situate Peter J. Kitson and Robert Markley’s new essay collection, *Writing China: essays on the Amherst Embassy (1816) and Sino-British cultural*

*relations*, and therefore appreciate the new possibilities for the remapping of Sino-British relations and cultural representations in this period that it offers.

Taken as a whole, this essay collection demonstrates three distinctive merits. Namely, it asserts the significance of the Amherst Embassy for Sino-British relations during this time, it pays close attention to the forms of imaginative literature that emerged from these relations, and it investigates the possibilities and limitations of British self-reflection in light of their encounters with the Chinese. The Amherst Embassy, in contrast to its predecessor, the Macartney Embassy, that is, has until now not been given its due importance. These informative essays aim to confirm that writings generated from the Amherst Embassy solidify the British understanding of China as a declining empire.

To begin with, Peter Kitson's 'The Dark Gift' explores the gift exchange between the Embassy and the Jiaqing emperor. Despite the fact that the British selected gifts according to their intrinsic value (as the Qianlong emperor had suggested to the Macartney Embassy), this diplomatic visit was put in a precarious position because of the violations of diplomatic etiquettes by the Chinese Duke Ho, the controversy surrounding the ceremonial Koutou (or Kowtow)<sup>2</sup> and, again, the failure to appreciate each other's gifts. All this was further complicated by the anxieties the two empires experienced outside the palaces, with Britain making rapid progress in smuggling to China contraband opium, and with China, already in a troubled state, conscious of Britain's looming threat suggested by its two attempted invasions of Macao. Kitson teases out the paradoxes of the gift exchange: under the symbolic gesture of gift exchange lies the unspoken 'dark gift', opium, soon to be consumed on a much larger scale. Kitson highlights writings reinforcing the British perception of China, John Francis Davis's and Thomas De Quincey's in particular, which ultimately helped to justify the Opium War that broke out 20 some years after this diplomatic visit.

The justification of the war was also aided by the 1815 volcanic eruption of Mt Tambora in Indonesia, an interesting link Markley unravels in 'The Amherst Embassy in the Shadow of Tambora'. Causing a year without summer in Europe, Tambora brought eastern China a prolonged dry summer, and the Yangtze River delta flooding that in turn resulted in poor harvests and grain shortages. These situations were recorded in Embassy members' accounts, along with other uneasy encounters on this mission. Markley's reading of George Thomas Staunton and Robert Morrison thus emphasises the dry weather in Beijing, the dirty apartments they were allocated, and the unpleasantness of being welcomed and watched by an audience like zoo animals or as part of a freak show. Despite that the Ambassador expressed his wish for the audience to withdraw, 'the crowd of Chinese and Tartar officers paid not the least attention, but continued to press forward to see the strangers' (p. 93). Clarke Abel's account is explicit in its prejudiced even racist comments, while Davis's is more sympathetic, attributing the poverty he saw to demographic and ecological pressures rather than the incapability of the Qing government. Yet, Davis's account was published nearly two decades later, and by then the British perception of China

as a backward country with poor living conditions and less advanced sciences had already been solidified under the help of other Embassy members' writings.

While much scholarly work has been done on how eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Sino-British cultural encounters are reflected in historical records and personal journals, relatively less study has concentrated specifically on literary texts. However, the essays in this collection read at length the relevant imaginative literature. In 'Urbanization, Generic Forms, and Early Modernity', Mingjun Lu establishes a multi-dimensional comparative model in order to avoid what Jonathan Culler has described as an effect of comparative studies, namely that they become simply sophisticated tracings of direct cultural contacts and influences.<sup>3</sup> In Lu's correlative comparative model, comparative counterparts are located in a three- or multi-dimensional coordinate system, revealing 'a relationship that could be parallel, reciprocal, complementary, or even causal' (p. 17). Lu illustrates this in practical terms by exploring the pre-modern rural-urban tensions alike in representatives of two similar literary traditions, Spenser's *The Shepherd's Calendar* in the English georgic and pastoral tradition, and the poetic debate between the fisherman and woodman as typical Chinese landscape-farmstead poetry in Wu Cheng'en's *Journey to the West* (from the sixteenth century). What is being compared are not Wu Cheng'en's and Spenser's texts or any direct link between them, but rather their separate relations with the pre-modern social contexts each text registers. The two sets of relations bear similarities yet retain distinct features of their own.

Eun Kyung Min's essay rediscovers Percy's neglected edition of six matron stories. Three of them, the Ephesian matron, the Chinese matron and the medieval English tale, Min infers, are probably Percy's original project, for which he signed a contract with Dodsley in 1761. The other three stories might have been added to the book on Dodsley's request to make it a reasonable size for publishing and to serve Dodsley's own political purpose of ridiculing people in high places. Such clarifications are necessary provided the controversy over the eastern source of the Ephesian matron story, participated in by Du Halde, Voltaire, Bob-Joseph Dacier and others. Following this clarification, Min argues that by compiling the three stories together, Percy places Chinese and European literatures in conversation, and opens up the possibility of the Roman tale as having Chinese sources. This demonstrates, perhaps, an 'Enlightenment Orientalism' (p. 41), even if Percy was himself unaware of it. Min complicates the misogynistic and moralistic tendency in Percy's collection by offering a reading of Master Zhuang's wife that emphasizes the unusual non-anonymity of the wife figure, her forceful character and the avant-garde message of men being replaced by women.

Zhang Longxi's 'Elective Affinities?' investigates Oscar Wilde's two 'oriental' encounters, the setting with a 'Japanese effect' at the beginning of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and Wilde's review on Giles's translation of Zhuangzi. What comes to light is a Wilde who appreciates an artistic imagining of Japan more than Japan as an actual country, and also the social critic Wilde looking for an ally in the Chinese ancient Taoist philosopher to benefit his own campaign for individualism. Zhang suggests that apart from his witty epigrammatic style,

Wilde also recognises in Zhuangzi's contentious concept of 'inaction' as a form of opposition to any form of government and institution. Wilde's use of Zhuangzi to serve his own political purpose seems to be straightforward; but often, cultural encounters and assimilations are marked by anxieties and agendas, as demonstrated by Eugenia Zuroski-Jenkins and Elizabeth Chang. Zuroski-Jenkins addresses the anxiety about national identity embedded in the hyperbolic Orientalism in De Quincey's *Confessions*. Contrary to what the title suggests, the 'invisible hand' in De Quincey's tale is tea, a product of foreign origin and yet a trope of the English domesticity. Its normality is what opium attempts to rupture. For De Quincey, there are risks involved in cultural assimilations done through material processes of repetitive habituation. A case in point is that English people, by seeking the habitual comfort of foreign tea, have enabled tea to be assimilated into and eventually to represent English culture. Zuroski-Jenkins deciphers De Quincey's worry that process like this could hollow out English subjectivity and render the English identity as merely a habit.

Not only tea drinking, but also the Chinese practice of binding feet became a trope in British prose narratives. As Elizabeth Chang suggests, it was not in the post-1870 period (normally deemed as the time when British representations of the Chinese bound foot were most prominent), but between 1830 and 1860, that these narratives had already taken shape in periodicals such as the *Saturday Magazine*. Chang describes British conceptions of the Chinese foot as a mixture of curiosity, moral judgement and self-criticism. She suggests that the Chinese bound foot served as a metaphor for the constraints on individual freedom that could be further explored as a source of British reformist rhetoric. Activists like Sarah Grand see bound feet as a 'reformable disability' (p. 150), because the physical mobility it deprives can be reinstated by removing bandages. This aspect of bound feet has a broad implications for the freedoms that might be achieved through reform and other efforts.


Cultural assimilations are rarely a one-way street. Q. S. Tong in 'Lost Horizon' reminds us of two versions of 'internal Orientalism' (p. 187): the current Tibetan government in exile pandering to the western historical Orientalism in mythologising Tibet, and the domestic racism against the Tibetans imposed by the Han Chinese. Tong traces how the western construction of Tibet as an utopia took shape through a number of works and events, including Immanuel Kant's claim that the learnings of India may have come from Tibet, Thomas Manning's idealisation of the ninth Dalai Lama in his journal recording their meeting, Bogle's diplomatic mission to Tibet, and James Hilton's 1933 novel *Lost Horizon* depicting Tibet as an asylum from the outside world of destruction. Whilst several previous essays paint a mixed image of China as an empire amidst its decline, Tong's article presents a Tibet that seems to be forever admirable. The western idealisation of Tibet not only attests to the complexities of British representations of China in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, but also provides historical explanations for the supports that the current Dalai Lama gains from the West in his strained relationship with the PRC government.

On the whole, the essays in this collection further our understanding of the often-overlooked Amherst Embassy and its role in solidifying British prejudices

against China. Yet, one could not help but wonder about the other side of the equation: how did the Chinese perceive the British around this time? Hao Gao informs us elsewhere in his article ‘Britain through Chinese Eyes’<sup>4</sup> that the early Chinese perceptions of the British were ever-changing, and that by the time the Amherst Embassy reached Beijing, the Chinese court, rather than treating the Embassy as tribute-paying barbarians, had already become suspicious of its ulterior motives. Nonetheless, investigations of Chinese perceptions of Britain remain inadequate, and more work needs to be done to close the gap. In doing so, we might have some final pieces of the puzzle to answer seemingly trivial but nonetheless influential questions, such as the one that had apparently deeply wounded Davis: what is the rationale behind the Jiaqing emperor offering a dozen used purses as gifts when he had received arts from Britain worth about £22,000?

## Notes

1. David Porter, *The Chinese Taste in Eighteenth-Century England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Chi-ming Yang, *Performing China, Virtue, Commerce and Orientalism in Eighteenth-Century England 1660–1760* (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 2010); Elizabeth Hope Chang, *Britain’s Chinese Eye: Literature, Empire, and Aesthetics in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013); Eugenia Zuroski-Jenkins, *A Taste for China: English Subjectivity and the Prehistory of Orientalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).
2. Koutou is today’s Mandarin Pinyin annotation, while Kowtow is transcribed from the Cantonese pronunciation. The first point of contact for the British would be the Cantonese people. This is also the case of the spelling difference between Beijing and Peking.
3. Jonathan Culler, ‘Comparative Literature, at Last’, in Haun Saussy (ed.), *Comparative Literature in the Age of Globalization* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006), p. 242.
4. See Hao Gao, ‘Britain Through Chinese Eyes: Early Perceptions of Britain in Pre-Opium War China’, *Journal of the British Association for Chinese Studies*, 3 (2013), pp. 67–92.

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