

NUANCED ECHOES: EXAMINING LORD GEORGE MACARTNEY'S WRITINGS ON CHINA THROUGH THE LENS OF THE LATE ENLIGHTENMENT

MATHEW LAZARE

“...for we carry our prejudices, and spirit of contention along with us, even to the extremities of the earth.” –François Arouet Voltaire¹

I. Introduction

On September 26, 1792, Lord Macartney and his host set sail for China. They were altogether eighty-four members, from as many different backgrounds; scientists, machinists, artists, musicians, and soldiers were all represented.² They traveled on three state-of-the-art ships and brought with them a veritable treasure trove of the most modern European devices, made with the finest craftsmanship, whose purpose was to dazzle and sway the Chinese court. Less prominent though no less momentous, they also brought with them their conceptions (and misconceptions) of the land to which they traveled – conceptions which had been forged in the waning years of Europe’s ‘Age of Enlightenment’.

Europe’s Changing China Discourse

The period that came to be known as the Enlightenment might loosely be dated from the latter half of the seventeenth century to the French Revolution at the end of the eighteenth. What distinguished this era from those that had come before was the emphasis the thinkers who lived during it placed upon reason and the rational mind. Locke, Leibniz, Rousseau and Montesquieu were just a few among the many who put forward ideas on matters scientific, political, and theological which had reason as their undergirding principle. For many of these thinkers, China was a source of intense interest and heated debate, both among those who hailed it as the rational society *par excellence*, and those who saw it as emblematic of all that was wrong with the Orient.

While the West’s fascination with China may have begun with Marco Polo’s 13th century journey to the then-Mongol controlled kingdom, it was the Jesuit missionaries, beginning in earnest with Matteo Ricci in 1582, who shaped the modern European discourse on China. The Jesuits’ goal being to convert the Chinese to Christianity, and friendly relations with the Chinese court being instrumental to that goal, it is unsurprising that the accounts sent back to Europe by the Jesuits spoke of China in glowing terms. The Jesuits extolled the virtues of China’s emperor and bureaucracy – paragons of order, they – and heaped praise upon its common people, who were eminently rational and ripe for conversion. As Alain Peyrefitte notes, the Jesuits “felt constrained not to publish anything about China that might offend the Chinese. To do otherwise might have brought their missionary venture to an abrupt end.”³

Biased as they were, it was precisely these accounts through which early Enlightenment thinkers viewed China. Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, a German polymath who lived from 1646 to 1716, was one such thinker who integrated the Jesuits’ reports on China into his writings and pronouncements. In Leibniz’ view,

¹ Jonathan D. Spence, *The Chan’s Great Continent* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1998), 98.

² Immanuel C.Y. Hsü, *The Rise of Modern China* (London: Oxford University Press, 2000), 56.

³ Alain Peyrefitte, *The Immobile Empire*. Trans. J. Rothschild (New York: Knopf, 1992), 27.

civilization had reached its highest point in the two extremes of Eurasia: Europe and China.⁴ Yet while Europe was preeminent with respect to the “theoretical disciplines” – that is, logic, metaphysics, and mathematics – and “military science,”⁵ he remarked of China, “...[C]ertainly they surpass us (though it is almost shameful to confess this) in practical philosophy, that is in the precepts of ethics and politics adapted to the present life and use of mortals.”⁶ Indeed, Leibniz went so far as to suggest that just as European missionaries travel to China to teach the Chinese of revealed theology, so should Chinese ‘missionaries’ be sent to Europe to teach the West of natural philosophy – of “political ethics, international honesty, and the maintenance of law and tradition.”⁷ With a flourish, Leibniz declared that if the West saw fit to confine its correspondence with China to the sending of missionaries, then, he feared, Europe may “soon become inferior to the Chinese in all branches of knowledge.”⁸

As the eighteenth century progressed, a burgeoning European trade with China worked to loosen the Jesuit stranglehold on information. New reports reached Europe that spoke of China and its people in much harsher terms. Britain’s Commodore George Anson, for instance, having come uninvited to China on a damaged war-ship (and with a captured Spanish galley in tow), was offered little by way of aid from skittish officials, and ended up penning a scathing account of his experiences in China.⁹ Reports such as this would influence a new generation of European thinkers who viewed China not as a society that the princes of Europe should strive to emulate, but rather as the worst kind of Oriental despotism – a kingdom marked by tyranny, servility, weakness, and stagnation.

Charles de Secondat, Baron de Montesquieu (hereafter Montesquieu), was one such thinker. Born in France in 1689, Montesquieu wrote on a wealth of subjects throughout his life, paramount among which was political theory. In his magnum opus, *The Spirit of the Laws*, first published in 1748, he laid out in voluminous detail his theory of the three types of government: republican, “in which the people as a body, or only a part of the people, have sovereign power”; monarchical, “in which one alone governs, but by fixed and established laws”; and despotic, in which “one alone, without law and without rule, draws everything along by his will and his caprices.”¹⁰ Montesquieu further delineated the three principles that, he held, corresponded to each type of government: a premium was placed upon virtue in republican governments; upon honor in monarchical governments; and upon fear in despotic governments.¹¹ Throughout his great work, Montesquieu saw fit to turn often to China in illustrating his theory of despotic states – those governed by fear – and his remarks represent a decisive turn from predecessors such as Leibniz, and contemporaries such as Voltaire, as he harshly criticizes China’s system of government.

Another late-Enlightenment thinker, even more vituperative in the way he wrote of China, was the Prussian philosopher Johann Gottfried von Herder. A linguist, classicist, and literary critic, Herder, in the most ambitious of his works – *Outlines of a Philosophy of the History of Man*, first published in 1784 – sets forth a vision of man’s place in the Universe before going on to adumbrate the histories of mankind’s many peoples. Among the civilizations discussed, Herder’s brief section on the Chinese stands out for the utter contempt in which Herder seems to hold virtually every aspect of their nation.

Taken together, Montesquieu and Herder are representative of the change that took place in Western minds with respect to China over the course of the eighteenth century. The vision of China as the embodiment of reason and order yielded to a vision of a kingdom marked by tyranny, fear, and decay. It was this new vision that would impact the thinking of so many of the late-eighteenth century’s great minds, among whom was Lord George Macartney.

Born in Ireland in 1737, George Macartney would go on to stunning success as a diplomat and statesman. He served as envoy-extraordinary to the court of Catherine the Great, Empress of Russia, and achieved renown in that capacity for obtaining a treaty of commerce between Great Britain and Russia; was named Captain-general and Governor of the British West Indies in the 1770s, and though he had the misfortune of being taken captive by the French, he eventually returned home with his reputation in tact; and, most famously, was chosen to be Britain’s first ambassador to China.¹²

⁴ Spence, *The Chan’s Great Continent*, 84.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 84.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 85.

⁷ Julia Ching and Willard G. Oxtoby, eds., *Discovering China: European Interpretations in the Enlightenment* (Rochester, New York: University of Rochester Press, 1992), 101-2.

⁸ Spence, *The Chan’s Great Continent*, 85.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 52-3.

¹⁰ Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, Trans. and Eds. A.M. Cohler, B.C. Miller, and H.S. Stone, (Avon, Great Britain: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 10.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 21-31.

¹² J.L. Cranmer-Byng, ed. *An Embassy to China: being the Journal Kept by Lord Marcartney during his Embassy to the Emperor Ch’ien-lung* (London: Longmans, Green and Co, 1962), 17-8.

Before turning to the embassy itself, it is worth detailing briefly what author James Hevia calls “the intellectual world of Lord Macartney”¹³ – the arena in which he developed the pattern and mode of thinking that he would bring with him to China. As a member of Britain’s aristocracy, Macartney was a participant in what has come to be called the ‘public sphere’, an amalgam of various institutions – clubs, assemblies, and magazines – that had as their goal the production of “a social order governed by enlightened human rationality, a rationality defined with reference to methods of scientific inquiry.”¹⁴ Macartney himself was a member of the Literary Club, among the most prestigious public sphere organizations, whose membership – including political theorist Edmund Burke, historian Edward Gibbon, and economist Adam Smith – comprised a who’s-who of Britain’s thinking elite.¹⁵ Macartney thus gained exposure to a vast array of knowledge, and as a member of the Club was expected to “[keep] himself informed of the events of the day, [take] a keen interest in the arts and scientific progress, [cultivate] an informed sense of taste,” and to be unbiased and impartial.¹⁶ And while much of the above can be seen in Macartney’s actions and writings as Britain’s ambassador to China, it was too much to ask that he remain unbiased and impartial given both what he read of China prior to his embassy, and what he experienced during his brief stay.

While the idea of a formal embassy to China had been toyed with for some time, and though a prior attempt had been made with Lieutenant-Colonel Charles Cathcart as Ambassador in 1787 (he died while en route to China), the Macartney Embassy of 1792-1794 marked the first ambassadorial embassy from Great Britain that reached fruition (if not necessarily success).¹⁷

It might be said that the embassy had two arms. The first, a diplomatic arm, had among its goals securing for Britain the extension of trade throughout China (whereas before it had been confined to Canton), the alleviating of abuses that had hitherto taken place at Canton, and the establishment of a permanent diplomatic presence at Peking.¹⁸ By any measure this arm of the embassy was a spectacular failure. It was not that Macartney entered into negotiations and met with no success; negotiations on the abovementioned matters, for all intents and purposes, never even took place. The story of the Macartney Embassy was the story of a collision of two vastly different world-views: that of Macartney and the West, for whom an embassy was a means by which to establish permanent relations on a level footing between two coequal nations, and to negotiate on shared concerns; and that of the Qing Court, which saw embassies as temporary affairs, the point of which was to pay homage – or tribute – to the Chinese emperor, and to acknowledge China’s place as the axis around which other countries revolved.¹⁹ Upon the embassy’s departure virtually none of Britain’s stated objectives had been discussed in earnest, let alone achieved.

However, there was a second arm of the embassy, an exploratory arm, whose objective was to learn of China – “to penetrate the subtleties of the Chinese character, to find out something of their method of government and the way their minds worked”²⁰ – which proved far more successful. The members of the embassy learned an incredible amount about virtually every aspect of Chinese society: its government, morals, religion, the state of its philosophy and science, its military technology and state of preparedness, and even its plant- and wild-life. Among the accounts brought back to Europe by members of the embassy, Macartney’s *Journal* proved invaluable in expanding European knowledge of China.

Macartney’s Reformulation of the Discourse

Taking the writings of Montesquieu and Herder as emblematic of the European discourse on China at the end of the eighteenth century, this paper explores the overlay between those views and what Macartney encountered during his embassy. In examining the various aspects of Chinese society – ranging from China’s government to its state of scientific advancement – which both these thinkers and Macartney speak to, we shall attempt to demonstrate that much as the negative appraisal of China marked a break with the more rosy, often unquestioning, views of past thinkers, so too does Macartney’s description of China mark a shift, albeit a less

¹³ James L. Hevia, *Cherishing Men from Afar* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1995), 62.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 63.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 64

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Cranmer-Byng, *An Embassy to China*, 16.

¹⁸ Hsü, *The Rise of Modern China*, 156.

¹⁹ Cranmer-Byng, *An Embassy to China*, 34.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 22.

radical one. While overlap remains on many issues, Macartney provides a far more nuanced view of Chinese society than do Montesquieu and Herder. In particular, we seek to show that where Macartney diverged most emphatically from the late-Enlightenment thinkers was in his treatment of the Manchus that had ruled China since the mid-17th century. Whereas Montesquieu and Herder speak of the Manchu-Chinese relationship as one in which the Manchus had assimilated to the Chinese way of doing things, Macartney finds that, on the contrary, it is the Chinese that have been forced to assimilate to their conquerors; that rather than being homogeneous and harmonious, China was instead comprised of two very distinct peoples living within one country, with the Chinese in a state of permanent exploitation and fear at the hands of the Manchus; and that many of China's ills should be blamed not on ordinary Chinese or the Chinese character, but on the Manchus that were China's overlords.

II. The Chinese State

China as Despotism: The Emperor and his Officials

Prominent among the topics touched upon by both Montesquieu and Herder is the nature of the Chinese state. As previously mentioned, Montesquieu minces no words in labeling China a despotism. Confuting the Jesuit missionaries, who he saw as having deceived themselves into thinking that China was an enlightened monarchy,²¹ Montesquieu attempts to set the record straight:

Some have wanted to have laws reign along with despotism, but whatever is joined to despotism no longer has force. This despotism, beset by its misfortunes, has wanted in vain to curb itself; it arms itself with its chains and becomes yet more terrible... Therefore, China is a despotic state whose principle is fear. In the first dynasties, when the empire was not so extensive, perhaps the government deviated a little from that spirit. But that is not so today.²²

Though he reserves occasional praise for the Chinese emperor (for instance, he approves of the emperor's practice of exempting disaster-stricken provinces from paying taxes), he maintains that Chinese people groan under the "tyrannical power of a despot."²³ In substantiating his claim he cites the case of a prince who inadvertently placed a note upon a book signed by the emperor's vermilion paintbrush – an act that betrayed "a lack of respect for the emperor," and which resulted in "one of the most terrible persecutions" in history being brought against the prince's family. "Vagueness in the crime of high treason," Montesquieu writes, "is enough to make a government degenerate into despotism."²⁴

Herder, too, pins the mark of 'despotism' upon the Chinese state. While he begins his essay on China by restating the Jesuits' rosy pronouncements – asking tongue-in-cheek, "If these principles [those expounded by the Jesuits] be carried into actual practice, and held inviolate, can we conceive a political constitution more perfect?" – he quickly betrays the contempt in which he holds that position.²⁵ His opinion of Chinese political organization he summarizes by declaring that it "shows what a mungal nation," – he uses 'mungal' as a term of derision – "unmixed with any other, can or cannot be rendered by political cultivation carried to the highest pitch."²⁶ And while even Herder lets slip apparent praise for the Qianlong emperor,²⁷ who sat the throne at the time of Herder's writing, he otherwise heaps scorn on China's political organization, noting its despotic qualities and the servility it inspires in the Chinese people.

How, then, do Macartney's experiences comport with the heated charges of Montesquieu and Herder? If one were to look purely at Macartney's early experiences – those of his first few weeks ashore in China – they would seem not to comport at all. Macartney describes some officials as "courteous, intelligent, and inquisitive,"²⁸ others as tending to the embassy's affairs with "politeness and dignity,"²⁹ and still others as treating Macartney's crew "with regularity, alertness, and dispatch that appeared perfectly wonderful."³⁰ Indeed, of the government as a whole,

²¹ Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, 127.

²² *Ibid.*, 128.

²³ *Ibid.*, 288.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 194.

²⁵ Johann Gottfried v. Herder, *Outlines of a Philosophy of the History of Man*. Trans. T. Churchill (New York: Bergman Publishers, 1966), 291.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 294.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 298.

²⁸ Cranmer-Byng, *An Embassy to China*, 67.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 76.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 77.

Macartney goes so far as to declare, “the machinery and authority of the Chinese government are so organized, and so powerful, as almost immediately to surmount every difficulty, and to produce every effect that human strength can accomplish.”³¹ That Macartney’s early experiences were unfailingly positive, and that the potential for success still lay ahead of him, undoubtedly contributed to such laudatory remarks.

But such praise was not to last. Macartney’s experiences with the court grew increasingly sour as the days passed. Despite continued remarks by the embassy’s Chinese handlers about how well things were going, Macartney came to perceive a conspiracy among the high court officials working against his success. Indeed, it is very early on that Macartney (correctly) has a premonition of the Court’s desire that the embassy’s duration should be curtailed.³² When this later becomes explicit, and Macartney comes to terms with the fact that the diplomatic arm of his embassy has failed, he muses on the reasons for its failure, listing as possible explanations, “the particular humor and jealousy of the Court,” and “the personal character of the Ministers.”³³ These experiences with various, particularly Manchu (more on this anon), members of the Qing Court lead him to revile it in his writings. He declared:

The court character is a singular mixture of ostentatious hospitality and in-bred suspicion, ceremonious civility and real rudeness, shadowy complaisance and substantial perverseness; and this prevails through all the departments connected with the Court...³⁴

And yet Macartney closed this description of the Court by mentioning that its failings were “somewhat modified by the personal disposition of those at their head,” that is, the Qianlong Emperor.³⁵

Indeed, like both Montesquieu and Herder, Macartney – whatever else he has to say about China’s government – has some kind words for its sovereign. In his first formal encounter with Qianlong, Macartney is positively awestruck, remarking, “thus, then, have I seen ‘King Solomon in all his glory.’”³⁶ When this sense of wonder fades, and Macartney is able to think more rationally on the nature of Qianlong, he arrives at a more nuanced picture: the emperor “is a man of great parts...affable and affectionate to his subjects, vindictive and relentless to his enemies; much elated with his greatness and prosperity,” and yet, Macartney continues, he is “impatient of the slightest reverse or mischance; jealous of his power, suspicious of his ministers, and when angry not easily appeased.”³⁷ So while, as we will soon see, Macartney agrees with the late Enlightenment view that holds China to be a tyrannical despotism, the despot himself is not without merit – in fact, he bears almost exclusive responsibility for the Chinese state being kept afloat as long as it has.

Punishments and Paranoia

The Enlightenment thinkers presented further evidence of Chinese despotism by pointing to the system of state-administered punishments that were viewed as both widespread and unduly harsh, and the paranoia that was believed to be a hallmark of the Chinese government.

Montesquieu famously remarked of the Chinese that they were a people “who can be made to do nothing without beatings.”³⁸ He viewed the resort to constant punishments as one of the telltale signs of despotic state, and even went so far as to suggest that – based on China’s history – an increase in the severity of punishments presaged a revolution.³⁹ This was because emperors who could not or would not rule according to customs and principles were left with little recourse but to rule by fear and punishment.⁴⁰ Such was the state of affairs he believed China to be operating under at the time of his writing.

Montesquieu and Herder also made special note of the paranoia of the Chinese court. Montesquieu writes of the emperor’s having to make use of a large personal guard in order to safeguard his person and position – a

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid., 76.

³³ Ibid, 151.

³⁴ Ibid., 223.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid., 122.

³⁷ Ibid., 201.

³⁸ Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, 127.

³⁹ Ibid., 82.

⁴⁰ Ibid, 318.

necessity in a land governed by fear.⁴¹ Herder sees this same paranoia manifest in Westerners being confined to trade at Canton; “hence the system of keeping foreigners separate,” he writes, “acting the spy over them, and throwing obstacles in their way.”⁴² The combination of tyrannical punishments and intense paranoia clearly indicated to these thinkers China’s despotic status.

With respect to punishments, Macartney’s experiences are for the most part in accord with Montesquieu’s observations. Of an incident early in the embassy in which food delivered to the crew was found to be tainted, Macartney wrote, “the superintending Mandarins were instantly deprived of their buttons [of rank], and all their servants bamboozed, before we knew anything of the matter.” He concludes: “So sudden and summary is the administration of justice here.”⁴³ Throughout the course of the embassy Macartney makes note of a great fear of erring on the part of the officials he encounters. He refers in his observations to the “inevitable severity of the law,”⁴⁴ and – echoing Montesquieu, whom he read – Macartney notes that though the highest ideals of justice may have marked ancient China, “so long a period has elapsed since that time that the marks are a good deal effaced, and seem to be wearing out every day.”⁴⁵ Macartney attributes this largely to the Manchu conquest of a century and a half past, and by extension China’s Manchu rulers (a subject soon to be taken up in earnest).

Macartney’s experiences also allow him to corroborate the claims of Montesquieu and Herder on the paranoia of the Qing Court. Well prior to his audience with Qianlong, Macartney sets down in his journal his belief that “we have indeed been narrowly watched, and all our customs, habits and proceedings, even of the most trivial nature, observed with an inquisitiveness and jealousy which surpassed all that we had read in the history of China.”⁴⁶ Macartney perceives the government to be intensely suspicious of any and all curiosity shown by the members of the British embassy; attempts, for instance, to learn of and acquire silk eggs are met with a jealous reluctance by the Chinese.⁴⁷ Of the police force in Peking, China’s capital, Macartney records, “[it] is singularly strict. It is indeed stretched to an extent unknown I believe in any other city, and strongly marks the jealousy of the Government, and their unceasing apprehension of danger.”⁴⁸ Macartney even takes pains to remark on the personal paranoia and protectiveness of Qianlong, noting his refusal to announce which of his sons will succeed him, and his refusal even to allow them to participate in his government. All this amounts to a fierce indictment of the Chinese state, and yet, as we shall see, this was a substantively different indictment than that offered by Montesquieu and Herder.

Master and Slave: The Manchu-Chinese Bifurcation

In declaring China a despotic state, the late-Enlightenment thinkers spend few words expounding on the distinction between Chinese and Manchu. In the view of both Montesquieu and Herder, whatever other problems China may have, internecine strife does not seem to be among them. Both writers hold the view that though they conquered China, the Manchus had become acculturated to Chinese ways and forms. Montesquieu writes, “as either the vanquisher or the vanquished must change, in China it has always had to be the vanquisher.”⁴⁹ He goes still further elsewhere, praising the harmony that exists in China between Chinese and Manchu, as both practice their respective ceremonies and laws peaceably.⁵⁰ Herder treats the matter in much the same way, noting that the “[Chinese] constitution held out against the mantchous [sic],” even as he criticizes that same constitution for being so conducive to its peoples’ enslavement, “as if it had been invented for the very purpose of this slavery.”⁵¹

It is on this topic that Macartney differs so strikingly from Montesquieu and Herder. By way of preface, it must be noted that Macartney’s most positive experiences with the Chinese court involved its ethnically Chinese members – in particular the embassy’s two primary handlers, Wang and Chou – while he attributes much of what went wrong to his dealings with the Court’s Manchus. While we will not be so presumptuous as to suggest that Macartney’s observations on the state of China are purely a function of personal animosities or grudges, it cannot but be wondered to what extent his experiences influenced him.

⁴¹ Ibid., 152.

⁴² Herder, *Outlines of a Philosophy of the History of Man*, 296.

⁴³ Cranmer-Byng, *An Embassy to China*, 83.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 226.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 240.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 86.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 177.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 156.

⁴⁹ Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, 319.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 617.

⁵¹ Herder, *Outlines of a Philosophy of the History of Man*, 296.

Macartney is nothing if not blunt in his assessment of China's political situation: "The government as it now stands is properly the tyranny of a handful of Tartars over more than three hundred millions of Chinese."⁵² The juxtaposition between the views of Montesquieu and Herder on the one hand, and Macartney on the other, is stark: while the former see China as a tyranny in a timeless and homogenous sense, Macartney is very careful to note the racial discrepancy that so crucially distinguishes the present Manchu tyranny. He expounds further on his point, and speaks directly to the late-Enlightenment view of China, as he remarks:

[There] has arisen a vulgar mistake that the Tartars had indiscriminately and sincerely adopted all the maxims, principles and customs of the Chinese, and that the two nations were now perfectly amalgamated and incorporated together. So far as respects the habits and head-dress they are certainly assimilated; but it is not the Tartar who has conformed to the Chinese costume, but the Chinese who has been obliged to imitate the Tartar. The nature and character of each continues unchanged, and their different situations and intrinsic sentiments cannot be concealed under any disguise. Superiority animates the one, depression is felt by the other. Most of our books confound them together, and talk of them as if they made only one nation under the general name of China; but whatever might be concluded from outward appearances, the real distinction is never forgotten by the sovereign who, though he pretends to be perfectly impartial, conducts himself at bottom by a systematic nationality, and never for a moment loses sight of the cradle of his power.⁵³

At several points in his travels, Macartney is privy to admissions made by ethnically Chinese officials that betray the favor with which the Qianlong Emperor treats his Manchu subjects.⁵⁴ Though the Emperor "affects and professes impartiality," neither Chinese nor Tartar believes such a fable.⁵⁵ All are aware – the Manchus proudly, the Chinese painfully – that it is a foreign occupier that lords over China. The Manchus, Macartney writes, "consider themselves as in some degree partakers of their sovereign's dominion over the [Chinese]," while "to the Chinese it is a foreign tyranny."⁵⁶ From these facts Macartney derives a host of implications, some of which we have already seen and some of which are yet to be revealed.

Weakness and Instability: China in Decay

In painting a negative portrait of China, the late-Enlightenment thinkers seize upon both the perceived military weakness of China and the fragility of the Chinese state. Montesquieu, in a trope common for the time, points to climate as an explanation for the particular flaw of weakness among the Chinese, averring that the "great heat [of China] enervates the strength and courage of men," and that even within China it is those in the North – we must surmise he refers, at least in part, to the Manchus – who are more courageous than those of the South, that is, the Han Chinese.⁵⁷ Herder too inveighs against China's failure to cultivate a martial spirit, remarking haughtily that "a nation, that sleeps on warm stoves" – that is the *kang*, which doubled as both stove and bed – "and drinks warm water from morning till night, must be equally destitute of a warlike spirit and profound reflection."⁵⁸ Whereas Leibniz a century earlier viewed China's indisposition toward warfare as commendable, the thinkers of the late Enlightenment clearly saw it as a character defect indicative of the bankruptcy of the Oriental mode of thought and action.

Throughout Macartney's Journal we find frequent – almost alarmingly so – references to the state of China's defenses and its military preparedness. Of Chinese military technology, Macartney notes on more than one occasion his doubts as to whether any firelocks – that is, the firearm technology that prevailed in Europe, which replaced the obsolescent matchlock – were to be found among China's soldiers,⁵⁹ and in a discussion with several Manchus he notes that they were surprised to learn the bow and arrow was defunct in Europe.⁶⁰ Of the Chinese troops he sees on his journey his descriptions hold them to "have a slovenly, unmilitary air," and he notes further, "their quilted boots and long petticoats make them look heavy, inactive and effeminate."⁶¹ In a moment of particular disgust with the empty

⁵² Cranmer-Byng, *An Embassy to China*, 236.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 237.

⁵⁴ See, for instance, in Macartney's Journal (Cranmer-Byng, *An Embassy to China*, 85; 112) the entries of Thursday, August 15th, where Macartney records Wang and Chou's divulging "the Emperor's partiality to the Tartars in preference to his Chinese subjects," and of Thursday, September 5, where Macartney bears witness to a low-ranking Tartar showing great impertinence to the much higher-ranking Wang and Chou.

⁵⁵ Cranmer-Byng, *An Embassy to China*, 227.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 222.

⁵⁷ Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, 278.

⁵⁸ Herder, *Outlines of a Philosophy of the History of Man*, 295.

⁵⁹ Cranmer-Byng, *An Embassy to China*, 124.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 129.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 174.

promises of the Chinese with respect to alleviating abuses at Canton, Macartney wryly asks, “can they be ignorant that a couple of English frigates would be an overmatch for the whole naval force of their empire, that in half a summer they could totally destroy all the navigation of their coasts and reduce the inhabitants of the maritime provinces...to absolute famine?”⁶² While Macartney presents these remarks in a dispassionate manner, they nevertheless evince the consonance of the opinions of Montesquieu, Herder, and Macartney with respect to Chinese weakness.

One of the most serious charges leveled against China by the thinkers of the late-Enlightenment was that it was in a state of rapid decay and was ripe for revolution. Montesquieu outlines for his readers the ever-repeating dynastic cycle of the Chinese, in which dynasties are in their early years marked by “virtue, care, and vigilance,” – all of which are missing by the end of those dynasties. Montesquieu speaks at length:

Indeed, it was natural for emperors raised on the hardship of war and successful in forcing a family inundated by delights from the throne, to preserve the virtue they had found so useful and to fear the voluptuousness they had seen to be so fatal. But, after these first three or four princes, corruption, luxury, laziness, and delights master their successors; they shut themselves in the palace, their spirits grow weak, their lives are short, the family declines...⁶³

In this formulation, Montesquieu sees the Qing Dynasty as precisely at the tipping point, with Qianlong as possibly the last of the great Qing emperors. Herder shares this view of China at the precipice. He remarks that while China may have been as great or greater than other nations in centuries past, “these [nations] have advanced farther, or have been destroyed and mingled with others; while ancient China stands as an old ruin on the verge of the World, in it’s [sic] semi-mungalian form.”⁶⁴

This view of a decaying China on the brink of collapse was one that Macartney’s experiences led him to echo, and one which dovetailed with his particular indictment of China’s Manchu rulers. Macartney notes that despite the Qing Court’s “serene atmosphere,” in which “everything wears the face of happiness and applause,” in the years preceding his embassy there had been numerous attempts at rebellion and insurrection.⁶⁵ Macartney attributes this to a simmering Chinese desire to rid themselves of their foreign tyrants: “I am indeed very much mistaken if all the authority and address of the Tartar Government will be able much longer to stifle the energies of their Chinese subjects,” an opinion, again, that runs contra to the picture painted by Montesquieu of a harmonious tyranny. Macartney continues by noting that, while the insurrections launched against the government had hitherto been “suppressed...their frequency is a strong symptom of the fever within. The paroxysm is repelled, but the disease is not cured.”⁶⁶ We close this section with a passage from Macartney’s Journal, which, with the benefit of hindsight, we must declare to have been eerily prescient. Macartney writes:

The Empire of China is an old, crazy, First rate man-of-war, which a fortunate succession of able and vigilant officers have contrived to keep afloat for these one hundred and fifty years past, and to overawe their neighbors merely by her bulk and appearance, but whenever an insufficient man happens to have the command upon deck, adieu to the discipline and safety of the ship. She may perhaps not sink outright; she may drift some time as a wreck, and will then be dashed to pieces on the shore; but she can never be rebuilt on the old bottom.⁶⁷

III. Chinese Society and Character

On the Rites of the Chinese

From the earliest Jesuit writings on China, Europe learned of a kingdom governed by ‘rites’. While the virtues of this system were extolled in the early-Enlightenment, later thinkers questioned both the rites themselves, and the accuracy of accounts concerning them.

Montesquieu described the rites of China as centering on respect for fathers, which necessitated a respect for “everything that represented fathers” including teachers, magistrates, and the emperor. Those who were respected could be expected to love those who respected them – children, citizens, and subjects. Summing up, Montesquieu wrote, “this empire is formed on the idea of family government. If you diminish paternal authority or if you even

⁶² Ibid., 170.

⁶³ Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, 103.

⁶⁴ Herder, *Outlines of a Philosophy of the History of Man*, 297.

⁶⁵ Cranmer-Byng, *An Embassy to China*, 238.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 190.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 212-213.

withdraw the ceremonies that express one's respect for it...you shake the state."⁶⁸ While Montesquieu seemed not to diverge much from earlier thinkers in his praise for the rites *qua* abstract principles, his lament stemmed from a foreboding that the present, despotic Chinese government was like "those princes who, instead of governing by the rites, governed by the force of punishments" – a manner of ruling which leads inexorably to "anarchy and... revolutions."⁶⁹

Yet while Montesquieu praised the rites and mourned the disuse he perceived they had fallen into by the state, Herder declared the entire edifice of the Chinese rites, whether followed to the letter or not, to be a sham. His thoughts on the emphasis the Chinese place upon filial piety he sums up as follows:

If the full grown man be compelled to yield the obedience of a child; he must give up all that freedom of action which nature has made the duty of his years; empty ceremony will step into the place of heartfelt truth; and the son, whose conduct overflowed with childish submission to his mother during his father's life, will neglect her after his death if the law but term her a concubine.⁷⁰

In other words, Chinese displays of filial piety and reverence for ancestors were merely affectations, not motivated by any true feeling, but simply the result of a lifetime of inculcation and fear of the repercussions that disobedience entailed. The notion that the average Chinese looks upon the official as a father to be revered Herder sees as still more preposterous. This is the result merely of fear and authority, not nature. History, in Herder's view, provides ineluctable evidence of this: "How often," he thunders, "have the children of the state deposed their father from the throne! How often has the father treated his children with barbarity!"⁷¹

Macartney's experiences offer a mixed picture of the role of rites in China. One of the defining incidents of his embassy, in his view, were negotiations that took place prior to his audience with Qianlong over the *koutou*, an act of supplication to be performed before the Emperor that involved kneeling thrice and, with each kneel, bringing your forehead to the ground three times (for a total of three kneelings and nine prostrations). Feverish discussions were entered into between Macartney and various court officials as Macartney refused to perform the *koutou* unless an official of equal rank performed the same ceremony before a portrait of the British king. Eventually a compromise was reached by which Macartney offered to perform for Qianlong the same ceremony he performed for his own king (that is, to kneel on one knee and kiss the hand of the Emperor – though the kiss was to be omitted at Qianlong's request). Following the conclusion of what Macartney called "this curious negotiation,"⁷² and after he comes to grips with the fact that the discussions over the *koutou* were (to his dismay) the most meaningful he engaged in during his embassy, Macartney concludes of Chinese rituals broadly considered, "society chiefly consists of certain stated forms and expressions, a calm, equal, apathetical deportment, studied hypocritical attentions and hyperbolic professions."⁷³ Not quite so scorching as Herder's salvo against Chinese rites, but nevertheless an indictment against their inutility.

With respect to the filial piety of the Chinese, however, Macartney does not, following Herder, question its sincerity. Indeed, he remarks at length on the absolute and incredible devotion of the child to his parent, recording, "the fondness of the father is constantly felt and always increasing; the dependence of the son is perfectly understood by him; he never wishes it to be lessened," and declaring, "an undutiful child is a monster that China does not produce."⁷⁴ In response to European charges of hypocrisy against the Chinese for their practice of selling and exposing children, Macartney notes that this only occurs under the most desperate of circumstances, when the children "must inevitably perish if kept at home," and adds quickly that, "where the thread of attachment is not thus snapped asunder by the anguish of the parent, it every day grows stronger and becomes indissoluble for life."⁷⁵ As Macartney sees it, there is nothing fictitious or disingenuous about filial piety in the Chinese family.

Nevertheless, Macartney does not seem to place much stock in the rites of the Chinese. Categorizing in broad strokes the various officials with whom he dealt, Macartney says of those who he deemed to be "superior characters," that "the merit is entirely their own and to themselves, not to education or example."⁷⁶ It is in spite of, not because of, their rites-oriented upbringing that these men were exemplary figures. On the other hand, with respect to those who were "less perfect than might be wished," Macartney, in keeping with his theme, attributes their flaws to the Manchus running China. He posits, "the Tartars perhaps imagine that their own selfish government derives a good deal of its

⁶⁸ Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, 320.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 318.

⁷⁰ Herder, *Outlines of a Philosophy of the History of Man*, 295.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 295.

⁷² Cranmer-Byng, *An Embassy to China*, 119.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 223.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 224.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 223-224.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 227.

vigour even from the unwholesome state of the juices in the body of the nation,” and that, therefore, “the fault... is less in the people [themselves] than in those who have the care of them.”⁷⁷ We are left with a mixed indictment of Chinese rites, one which must fall somewhere between the positions of Montesquieu and Herder, and yet which complicates those views by adding to the mix the pernicious influence of the Manchus and their tyranny.

Corruption and Dishonesty: Hallmarks of the Chinese Character

The more ‘realist’ accounts of China that reached Europe during the course of the eighteenth century made frequent mention of the corruption that was rife in that land, and this was a charge that the late-Enlightenment thinkers took up in their works. Montesquieu makes reference to the “banditry of the mandarins”⁷⁸ with respect to trade, and writes that Chinese merchants are “so prodigiously active and so excessively desirous of gain that no commercial nation can trust them.”⁷⁹ He declares the Chinese to be the most unscrupulous people alive, and admonishes a European merchant going to China to bring his own scale, “as each [Chinese] merchant has three of them, a heavy one for buying, a light one for selling, and an accurate one for those who are on their guard.”⁸⁰

As to manners, dishonesty is the defining characteristic of the Chinese, in the late-Enlightenment view of China. Herder writes of “that apparent modesty, that anticipatory courtesy,” which make evident the disingenuousness of the Chinese.⁸¹ Montesquieu writes of what he believes to be the effect of China’s climate on the disposition of its people. He holds that it causes their lives to be precarious, leading to a situation in which, while the pursuit of ends by means of violence is prohibited, “everything [else] has been permitted if it is a matter of obtaining by artifice or by industry.” Thus, he concludes, “in Lacedaemonia, stealing was permitted; in China, deceit is permitted.”⁸²

On these two issues, Macartney’s experiences confirm as accurate the descriptions of Montesquieu and Herder. He notes having witnessed wealthy merchants procure buttons intended to indicate rank through the giving of extravagant gifts to officials at Canton,⁸³ and makes further mention of the giving of gifts as a means to sway court proceedings in one’s favor.⁸⁴ These discoveries led him to remark, rather self-righteously, “so we find that the boasted moral institutes of China are not much better observed than those of some other countries, and that the disciples of Confucius are composed of the same fragile materials as the children of Mammon in the western world.”⁸⁵

Chinese ‘dishonesty’, too, is something Macartney comes into frequent contact with during his travels. On his dealings with various officials, he often makes mention of the “profession, artifice, and compliment” that invariably accompany the refusal of some request or the skirting of some topic of contention.⁸⁶ In speaking with one official on the subject of the confiscatory duties then in place at Canton, Macartney writes, “through all his discourse there is such an air of candour, frankness and amity that if I am deceived in him, he must be the most consummate cheat in the world.”⁸⁷ And yet deceived he often was. Interestingly, in his explanation of this Chinese propensity to resort to deceit, Macartney reserves blame not for the Chinese who deceive, but for the political environment in which they operate (that is, one in which they are the servants and dependents of Manchus):

As the nature of dependence is to grow false, it cannot be wondered at if these Chinese are not strict observers of truth. They have indeed so little idea of its moral obligation, that they promise you everything you desire, without the slightest intention of performance, and then violate their promises without scruple, having had no motive for making them that I could perceive, unless it were that they imagined what they said might be agreeable to you just at the moment.⁸⁸

China in Stagnation

Even thinkers such as Leibniz, who otherwise so readily praised the Chinese, made mention of China’s having fallen behind Europe in matters of both intellectual and technological innovation. So it comes as no surprise that the late-Enlightenment thinkers also cited China’s backwardness in their critiques.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, 127.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 313-314.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 321.

⁸¹ Herder, *Outlines of a Philosophy of the History of Man*, 294.

⁸² Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, 321.

⁸³ Cranmer-Byng, *An Embassy to China*, 207.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 241.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 159.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 86.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 162.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 223.

Herder points to the emphasis Chinese place upon their ancestors and upon the past as at least partially responsible for their stagnation. He writes of a Chinese, that “he not only sacrifices in the hall of his predecessors on festivals, but in every occupation, in every moment of his life, he sacrifices to them, and all the praise and all the blame bestowed upon him are perhaps equally undeserved.”⁸⁹ Herder clearly sees an undue emphasis on the past as an inextricable part of the Chinese character. He drives his point home with the following passage:

I honour the Kings like a Chinese for their excellent principles: and Confucius is to me a great man, though I perceive the fetters, which he too wore, and which, with the best intentions, he riveted eternally on the superstitious populace, and the general system of the state, by his political morality. By means of it this nation...has stood still in it's [sic] education, as in the age of infancy; this mechanical engine of morals forever checking the progress of the mind, and no second Confucius arising in the despotic realm.⁹⁰

Macartney notices this same deference to the past among the Chinese he encounters. In one of his journal's more interesting passages, he asks Chou, a Chinese official, what the reason behind the Chinese practice of foot binding is.⁹¹ Chou noted that the only reason he could give was that it was an ancient custom, “and he confessed that a religious adherence to ancient customs, without much investigation of their origin, was a principal feature in the Chinese character.”⁹² This strict adherence to past customs and notions dovetails with China's general aversion to innovation, and its stagnation in matters of science and technology.

Herder makes several mentions of the sorry state of China's modern scientific accomplishments during the course of his writing. Though it was in China that such important items as silk, porcelain, powder and shot, and the mariner's compass were first discovered or made use of, in the recent past China had fallen behind, so that “in almost all arts it wants the spirit of improvement.”⁹³ After belittling Chinese society, he asks, “is it to be wondered, that a nation of this kind should have invented little in the sciences according to the European standard? Or that it has remained for some thousands of years at the same point?”⁹⁴ Hyperbolic though these questions may be, it was difficult to deny that in these matters China had indeed stagnated vis-à-vis Europe.

Macartney devotes a considerable amount of space to discussion of this topic in his journal. Related to the state of its science and technology, Macartney speaks of China's insularity and of an aversion to innovation that exists among Chinese, though he again takes the opportunity to set forth a major distinction between the Manchu-run Court, and the ordinary people of China. Macartney records that the purpose of China's political system “seems to be to endeavor to persuade the people that they are themselves already perfect and can therefore learn nothing from others.”⁹⁵ He notes further that the officials with whom he engaged, upon perceiving the many advantages of the British over the Chinese, feigned apathy, and acted “as if they considered themselves the superiors, and that nothing in their manners or appearance could be found defective or inaccurate.”⁹⁶

At the same time, however, Macartney records various interactions that militate against notions of a strict Chinese insularity. He uses the examples of the violin and punctuation, which the Chinese adapted from Europeans, to demonstrate that “there are some things at least which, notwithstanding their vanity and conceit, they are not above being taught.”⁹⁷ But he notes an even greater curiosity among many Chinese he meets. One official, in paying a farewell visit to Macartney, says, “that as all distant countries must necessarily have different laws and customs, we should not be surprised that theirs varied from ours, [and] that we owed each other mutual indulgences.” He added further that he hoped Macartney would not carry back to Europe an unfavorable impression of China.⁹⁸ Such a plea belied the notion of a people completely insulated and secure in their superiority.

On matters of technology, Macartney notes at various points throughout his journal disciplines in which the Chinese had fallen behind. He writes, “in respect to science the Chinese are certainly far behind the European world,” and goes on to point to the antiquated state of their mathematical and astronomical knowledge.⁹⁹ On matters

⁸⁹ Herder, *Outlines of a Philosophy of the History of Man*, 295-296.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 298.

⁹¹ Foot binding being the breaking and wrapping of a girl's feet at a young age so that, though it impairs the girl's movement, her feet remain dainty – and, therefore, desirable – as she matures.

⁹² Cranmer-Byng, *An Embassy to China*, 228.

⁹³ Herder, *Outlines of a Philosophy of the History of Man*, 298.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 296.

⁹⁵ Cranmer-Byng, *An Embassy to China*, 226.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 222.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 104.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 178.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 264.

of experimental philosophy, he notes the Court's complete disinterest, declaring, "neither Ch'ien-lung himself nor those about him appeared to have any curiosity in these matters."¹⁰⁰ It is, besides, the policy of the present government to discourage all novelties. And to prevent their subjects as much as possible from entertaining a higher opinion of foreigners than of themselves."¹⁰¹

Nevertheless, perhaps the single most striking recollection from Macartney's journal makes the case against a broader Chinese insularity and haughtiness, and instead paints the Qing Court as the principal agent behind China's inward-looking stagnation. A Chinese official with whom Macartney is sitting desires his pipe lit, at which point Macartney takes a small phosphoric bottle out of his pocket and instantly lights the pipe. "The singularity of a man's carrying fire in his fob," Macartney records, "startled him a good deal." The two men then enter into a discussion about the various advances Europeans had made in medicine, philosophy, and the sciences. It became evident to both just how far behind China had fallen, and when Macartney informed the official that he had brought men to instruct the Qing Court in various matters, but that the Qing Court had been uninterested, "he...seemed as if awakened out of a dream and could not conceal [his] regret for the Court's coldness and indifference to our discoveries." Macartney closes this passage by placing this encounter within the framework of a China that is simmering beneath this surface, noting that the Manchus will not for long be able to "stifle the energies of their Chinese subjects."¹⁰²

IV. Conclusion

Lord Macartney begins the 'Observations on China' section of his journal by noting that the information contained therein "will be chiefly the result of what I saw and heard upon the spot, however imperfectly, not of what I had read in books or been told in Europe."¹⁰³ While Macartney was without doubt a product of the time in which he lived and the ideas that were then in circulation, Macartney did not cleave slavishly to those writings on China he was exposed to prior to his embassy. Rather, he echoes the sentiments of thinkers like Montesquieu and Herder when his experiences comport with their writings, and blazes new trails – and we have noted in particular his divergence from these thinkers on the matter of the Manchus – when he cannot or will not follow them.

Macartney's journal closes with the counsel, "nothing could be more fallacious than to judge of China by any European standard."¹⁰⁴ Though Macartney did not write it to be so, the sentence comes across as highly ironic, as nary a page goes by without Macartney doing just that: judging China by a European standard. Nevertheless, Macartney must be commended for advancing the European discourse on China, propelling it forward from a simplistic dialogue of black and white to one suffused with shades of gray.

¹⁰⁰ See, however, Joanna Waley-Cohen, *The Sextants of Beijing* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1999), in which it is shown that despite public pronouncements to the contrary, the actions of the Qianlong Emperor reveal him to be intensely interested in the advances of the West.

¹⁰¹ Cranmer-Byng, *An Embassy to China*, 266.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 190.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 221.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 219.

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