

find redressal in a more heightened embrace of religion as a tool for resistance and salvation. Although being Malay-Muslims in Singapore coincide, to an extent, with a particular socio-economic status, this marginal status is not comparable to Muslim experiences in Europe or North America. There, the correlation between extremist religious ideologies and socio-economic dispossession can be quantitatively demonstrated. Some attempts are made to compare Singapore's social activism with that of Malaysia's, though I do not find the Malaysian examples discussed in the book to be comparable. The Singapore state controls the discourse and narrative of inclusivity and equality of faiths tightly. The Malaysian state endorses the policy of exclusivity (of Muslims and Islam) and inequality (of religious, political and cultural rights). Yet, intra-Islamic contestations are a pervasive feature of the Malaysian state.

What seems to be the main finding of Abdullah's study is that each Muslim group in Singapore falls into a common line of strategizing vis-à-vis the state – “just like the *ulama*, and the liberals, conservative activists typically work within the system, even when they disagree with state pronouncements” (207). The author provides the reason for this – “If one challenges the state too much, one would suffer serious consequences; but if one does not, one makes gains but ultimately reinforces the system. Most activists choose the latter, either by overtly cooperating with the state, or just operating in uncontroversial spheres. As a result, the PAP's hegemony is as secure as before...” (Abdullah 2021, p. 271). It is concluded that Muslim activists depend on optimum or safe political opportunities rather than going against the grain to fight for their cause. Is there then any activism among Muslims in Singapore? And what of the state's secularism?

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Britain's Second Embassy to China: Lord Amherst's “*Special Mission*” to the Jiaqing Emperor in 1816

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This new study aspires to be the first “comprehensive and detailed” full-length account of the second British Royal embassy to the Qing imperial court at Beijing, led by William Pitt, Lord Amherst, in 1816. Whereas the more famous first embassy of 1793–1795, led by Lord Macartney, has received at least three full-length accounts and a wealth of additional scholarship, that of its successor has

been somewhat under-researched until the recent pioneering work of Patrick Tuck, Eun Kyung Min, Henrietta Harrison, John M. Carroll, Robert Markley and Gao Hao. In addition, the period of the early nineteenth century, prior to the conflicts of the First and Second “Opium” Wars (of 1840–1842 and 1856–1860, respectively) is also receiving sustained critical reappraisal, notably in works by Stephen Platt, Song-Chuan Chen, as well as by Carroll and Gao. More specifically, China-centred historical scholarship by Wensheng Wang and Matthew Mosca has substantially contributed to a re-evaluation of the reign of the Jiaqing emperor (1796–1820) and Qing diplomacy. We have been waiting for a modern, definitive reassessment of the encounter between Amherst’s embassy and that of the Jiaqing court. Sadly, while it may serve as a very useful supplement to this scholarly project in a variety of ways, Carol Stevenson’s *Britain’s Second Embassy to China: Lord Amherst’s “Special Mission” to the Jiaqing Emperor in 1816*, is not the history we might have anticipated.

In many ways, this study falls between two stools. It aims to be both a comprehensive history, as well as a vibrant narrative account of the progress of the embassy, ambitiously claiming to present the “first comprehensive and detailed account of the Amherst embassy from its conception to its conclusion, and to reassess its historical importance for Anglo-Chinese relations and British perceptions of China in the period leading to the First Opium War”. It also intends to redress a perceived historical “imbalance” by arguing that “Amherst was conscientious in discharging his duties and ably led the mission in difficult circumstances. His conduct reflected his upbringings conditioned by deeply imbued aristocratic values of allegiance to the British crown and, by extension, the nation”. The study is certainly detailed with a wealth of factual material and quotation from primary sources which will be helpful to scholars, but ultimately it tells us little of which we do not already know about the embassy, and its conclusions do not problematise our established understandings. Although some comparatively minor issues are authoritatively cleared up over the course of this large study, such as the confirmation that Amherst, while he did not have his diplomatic credentials with him when summoned to his audience before the emperor, was in possession of his ambassadorial robes (p. 229, and again p. 234), there are no major revelations or significant insights or discoveries which we might have hoped for from such a study. Overall, the narrative is somewhat familiar to those aware of the history of the embassy. The most significant contribution made by Stevenson is in her extensive use of Amherst’s papers in the British Library, combined with those in the archive of George Thomas Staunton, housed at Duke University. These sources have largely remained underexplored and Stevenson’s larger dissemination of their contents will be very valuable to scholars and the careful detailing of the embassy’s day-to-day progress is much to be welcomed. Amherst and Staunton are, however, the only two figures involved to receive extensive biographical introductions. As a result, the study somewhat over-privileges their biographies, writings, presence and opinions at the expense of the many other perspectives from the embassy.

Problematically for an ambitious “comprehensive history”. Stevenson’s account is almost entirely dependent on anglophone (and Anglo-centric) historical records from the British perspective. Stevenson admits that her “lack of Chinese linguistic ability has resulted in this study being based on English language sources only, and needing to rely on English translations of Chinese documents and edicts”. Attempting to compose a historically meaningful narrative of this encounter by analysing only the British side and its sources must inevitably produce a one-sided version of this complex political, diplomatic and cultural series of events. Stevenson emphasizes the importance of noting “that the assessments and value judgments about China are those of British observers and commentators writing at the time” which perforce must limit the value of this study. Yet, having said this, Stevenson does not subject the British accounts to any sustained historical or cultural analysis but, instead, tends to reproduce, even at times to ventriloquize, the perspective of a largely Georgian British elite, as well as to overly privilege their version of events and their judgments of the Chinese. The statements of British agents are often reproduced without an awareness of their characteristic defensiveness and the interested self-fashioning they inevitably demonstrate. This bias is revealed on numerous occasions. This embassy is thus “a genuine British endeavour”, Amherst is an heroic and chivalrous diplomat, “above all a courtier of St James’s” whose “paramount loyalty

was to his sovereign [the Prince Regent] whose honour he defended at all costs". Throughout Amherst remains "calm and dignified". His conduct is displaying the core British values of "civility, reasonableness, and sense of humour". He is possessed of personal qualities of "honesty and integrity", and always a "very steady hand on the tiller". Stevenson judges that "in modern management parlance, Amherst would be regarded as an inclusive leader and a team player who extensively consulted his commissioners and other members of his retinue", rather than the competent but largely unremarkable agent of nineteenth-century British imperialism that others have viewed him to be. In contrast, the Chinese officials appear devious, untrustworthy and manipulative. The conduct of certain senior mandarins is described as "duplicitous" and is shocking to the British as it fails to meet their higher "notions of civility and politeness". Stevenson's outrage at the arrangements for the reception of the British by the Jiaqing emperor on 3 September is palpable: "Predictably the British were astonished ... the sheer audacity of the intended program was breath-taking and ... marked as the most humiliating and degrading". There is no serious attempt here to explain exactly what was at stake for the Qing court or why they took such ceremonial matters so seriously. Though Stevenson relies heavily on the crucial work of historians such as Nicholas Rowe, Matthew Mosca and Wensheng Wang for her understanding of the Chinese dimensions of the encounter, she fails to integrate this scholarship into an appreciation of the Qing world view.

The British are generally in Stevenson's account loyal, reliable and good humoured in the face of adversity, and remarkably open and transparent about their motivations and honest and reasonable in their diplomatic dealings. Their accounts are thus largely free from fabrication and misdirection. George Thomas Staunton, in many ways a rather prickly, insecure, frequently pompous and problematic figure is also praised for the general soundness of his judgment and defended against charges of petulance and oversensitivity. He thus shows "no signs of jealousy or resentment" that Amherst was appointed ambassador instead of him and his "firm stand against Qing officialdom" is seen to have "won the day". At times, for example, when describing Sir Thomas Roe's "firm and resolute refusal to compromise English honour in the face of the degrading ceremonial demands made of him" in 1615 at the Mughal court, it might as well be Sir John Barrow speaking. Stevenson frequently writes of the Qing court ceremonies in terms of Anglo-centric language and discourse such as "prostration", "humiliation" and "degradation" without examining or historicizing such culturally specific concepts. At times she appears to assimilate this British register into her narrative, such as when we are told "harmonious and jovial relations between the mandarins and the British were improved further with the arrival of a couple of bottles of cherry brandy" and Captain Maxwell's request "with a wink and a nudge, that Morrison give a mandarin 'a hint'" to hasten the flow of alcohol.

Some preliminary historical spadework on the Qing records of this embassy was undertaken by James L. Hevia in his major, if controversial, revisionist study of the earlier Macartney embassy *Cherishing men from Afar* (1995). Hevia provided an influential discussion of the ways that the Chinese court deployed Qing guest ritual as a diplomatic framework within which to manage the British successfully on their terms. He laid much stress on the British misunderstanding of the symbolism of gift exchange. Even though there was no full and formal exchange of presents after the dismissal of Amherst's embassy without an audience, this issue remains crucial in its planning and conduct. Stevenson characterises the encounter between British and Chinese imperial formations in an overtly Eurocentric (perhaps Orientalist?) way, as underlining "the political and cultural differences between an increasingly powerful British nation state whose diplomatic practice was based on notions of equality, free advocacy, negotiation and international law, and those of an ancient civilisation based on empire, Confucian values and despotic rule" without excavating the specific legal, historical and cultural assumptions upon which both systems were based. One thinks in particular of Li Chen exemplary analysis in his study, *Chinese Law in Imperial Eyes* (2016). Stevenson judges that Chinese attempts "to bully the British into complying with the ceremony reinforced a fundamental difference between Western and Chinese diplomacy where negotiation over disputes was not an option", which is a rather generous characterization of early nineteenth-century British colonial history to say the very least. One thinks of the British incursions into the Chinese territory of Macao of 1802 and 1808,

Captain Maxwell's shelling of Chinese coastal forts to resolve a petty dispute during the embassy itself, and the constant British demand for the extraterritoriality of Chinese territory. Additionally, the Jiaqing emperor's well-documented anxiety over British Indian exports of opium, an illegal trade, and shortly to become the world's largest trade in any single commodity, is barely mentioned and regarded as a largely irrelevant context for the embassy.

As with existing studies, much of this history is taken up with the vexed but familiar issue of the Chinese imperial ceremony of the *koutou* (anglicised by the British as "kowitz"). Stevenson's account follows closely the British understanding of the ceremony. She does refer to this issue at one stage as a "mystery", but largely accepts the British accounts that Macartney refused to kowitz to the Qianlong emperor in 1793 and for the importance of this precedent for Amherst. She writes that "Macartney's dispensation not to perform the kowitz before the Qianlong emperor resulted in the Jiaqing emperor being resolute in insisting on its performance" and comments that "Macartney's success in negotiating and alternative ceremony and avoiding the kowitz in front of the Qianlong emperor led to the mistaken assumption that this would be acceptable to his son". In the dispute between the emperor and Staunton (both of whom witnessed the second imperial audience at Jehol), Stevenson infers that the British recollection must be correct and that Macartney did not kowitz but performed again his "successful compromise", arguing that "Macartney's firm actions had dispensed with the need to kowitz and the embassy had left a favourable impression on the court". The possibility that Macartney formally kowitzed at Jehol and that the Jiaqing emperor's memory was correct, is relegated to a footnote on page 195. In the light of the recent extensive historical research of Henrietta Harrison, most scholars (myself included) have now come round to the conclusion that Macartney probably performed the full ceremony of the kowitz at Jehol in 1793. If this is indeed the case, then Staunton's later statements to the contrary are wholly disingenuous, a possibility Stevenson does not seem to countenance seriously.

The limitations of this study are likely explained by the fact that it appears to derive from what would appear to be an extremely creditable doctoral thesis which would have certainly benefitted from a more extensive and robust reading process by specialist historians, along with subsequent editing and pruning (it runs to c.400 pages). It contains much explication of familiar historical contexts and the unnecessary inclusion of very interesting but often peripheral material. Extensive biographical readings are deployed concerning Staunton and Amherst, notably Amherst's rather dull romantic history, but there is a little broader analysis of the cultural and intellectual mind set of Georgian Britain. The study refers to diplomatic history (Hampton 2009), "sensory historians" (Sennett 1994) and sociology (Erving Goffman), but the study does not situate the study in the wealth of scholarship and argument concerning eighteenth- and nineteenth-century travel writing and the cultural encounter between Georgian Britain and Qing China (which is essential for the analysis of the embassy's return overland voyage). The aim of the history is to "depict as vividly as possible what the ambassadorial party looked like on its progress through China and how its members reacted to the daily challenges facing them" (p. 13). Yet we hear very little of some of the more unusual and colourful characters, such as Thomas Manning and William Havell. Overall, however, despite such limitations, this book will function as a useful reference work which makes a significant contribution to the study of early nineteenth-century understandings of the encounter between Georgian Britain and Qing China.

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