

Extended Essay in History

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**The Burden of Legacy: Influence of the Tributary System on
Qing-British relations during the Reception of the Macartney
Embassy**

*How far was Qianlong Emperor's rejection of the Macartney embassy's
requests in 1793 a result of the tributary system?*

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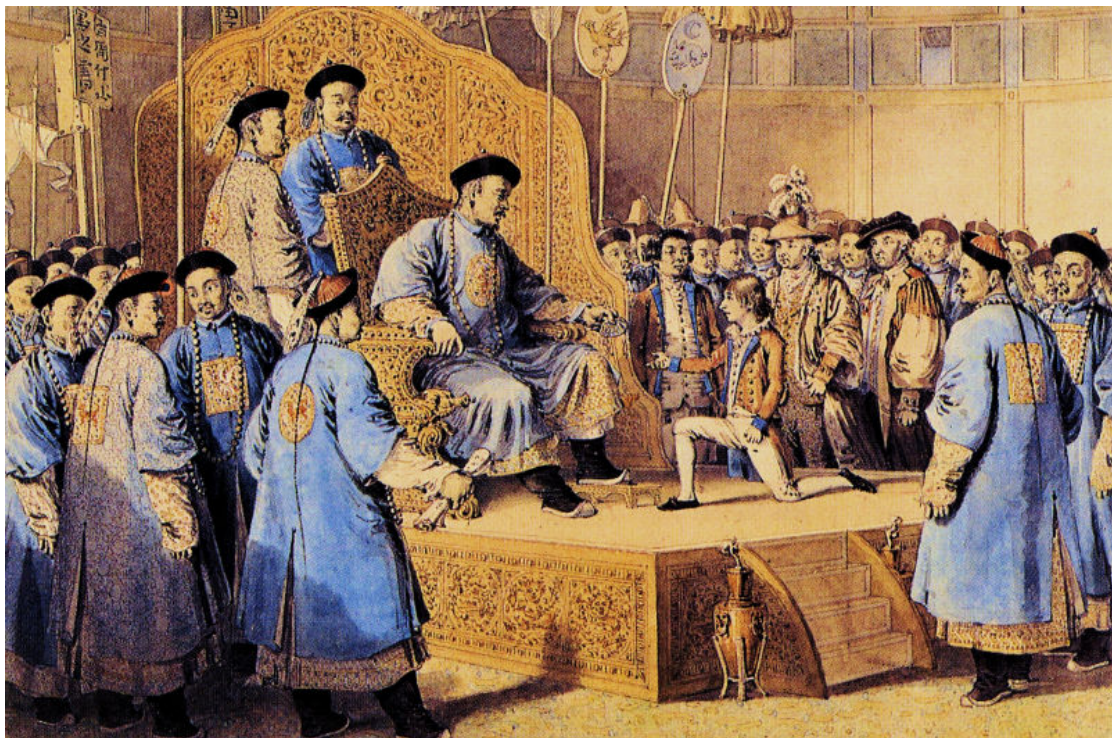


Figure: Contemporary Painting by William Alexander, a Member of the Macartney Embassy, depicting Qianlong Emperor's Reception of Lord Macartney¹

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Introduction

The British embassy sent to China in 1793, led by Lord Macartney, was the first official British embassy to reach China. Their objective was to elicit commercial privileges, including the cession of a commercial base, establishment of a British residence in Beijing, and the creation of new markets for British goods.² Claiming to be late arrivals to celebrate the emperor's 80th birthday, embassy members obtained permission to travel to the emperor's residence at Rehe near Peking, during which they received generous provisions and warm welcomes. However, when the British arrived at Rehe, they became engaged in a quarrel with the emperor's officials over the appropriate manners when facing the emperor. Unlike European embassies before who submitted themselves to Qing protocols, the British decided against following them, which they considered a dishonor. Telling his officials that he was deeply appalled by the British behavior, Qianlong emperor of China rejected all British requests in his letter to King George III, stating that China was self-sufficient and that it did not need British goods.³

This essay argues that Qianlong Emperor's decision to reject the Macartney embassy's requests was primarily, and predictably, the result of the tributary system. Combining secondary sources from different historic schools and drawing on both Chinese and British primary sources to provide details of the encounter, I attempt to explain Qianlong's decision chiefly in terms of the Qing tributary system that constituted the basic guidelines in Qing diplomacy. The Qing tributary system was a comprehensive ideology that the Qing had adopted from previous Chinese dynasties to serve realistic political goals, and its key requirement is for foreign rulers to subjugate to Qing emperors in an unequal relationship, which made any attempts at equal negotiation impossible.

Qianlong's dismissive attitude towards the Macartney embassy is worth

investigating further because the extent of his historic responsibility for China's later defeat by European powers is still subject to hot debates. Because of China's painful historical memories under Western colonization that occurred not long after Qianlong's reign, many Chinese historians tend to stress his responsibility for China's failure of modernization on the eve of Western colonial expansion.⁴ Yet, some of the criticisms made against him seem to overlook the structural restrictions placed by China's entrenched approach to conducting foreign policy at the time—commonly referred to as the tributary system. To fairly analyze his decision to reject the British requests, one must leave out the prejudice of hindsight and examine Qianlong's available options in 1793. This essay begins by examining the two major schools of explanations on the subject: China-centered and postmodernist. Then, by justifying that the tributary system is the dominant form of diplomacy of the Qing, it rebuts Hevia's postmodernist argument and confirms the tributary system's far-flung significance for Qianlong Emperor. Qianlong's other potential considerations are examined near the end.

Historiography

After World War II and up until the 1990s, historians practicing a "China-centered" approach to Qing history, including American Chinese history pioneer John K. Fairbank, John E. Wills, and Alain Peyrefitte, portrayed the Macartney embassy's reception as a cultural conflict. Britain, accustomed to European diplomacy, approached China through the lens of an international order where negotiations happened between equal sovereign states. The Qing Empire followed the traditional tribute system whereby foreign rulers must confirm their submission to the Emperor of China by performing the Kowtow, a ritual that involves kneeling and bowing one's head to the ground. The British refusal to Kowtow prompted Emperor Qianlong to deem the British as defiant barbarians unworthy of contact. The emperor

refused to listen to British proposals out of contempt. Cultural differences, therefore, lies at the heart of this conflict.

The cultural conflict theory began to be gradually challenged in the 1970s, as sweeping antiwar, feminist, and civil rights movements prompted many historians to examine and criticize Eurocentric constructions of other cultures that were heavily influenced by colonial experiences. The publication of James L. Hevia's *Cherishing Men from Afar: Qing Quest Ritual and the Macartney Embassy of 1793* in 1995 provided a whole new post-modernist interpretation of the event. To achieve a more intelligent portrayal of the Qing Empire, he described it as an ever-expanding empire that adopted rituals flexibly to construct new power relations. The failure of the Macartney Embassy to achieve its diplomatic goals, therefore, was not a result of cultural misunderstanding, but a result of British stubbornness to refuse to participate in ritualistic negotiations, originating from an inherent sense of European superiority.

Other historians, such as Joanna Waley-Cohen and Henrietta Harrison, explained Qianlong's motives from a broader social context. They argued that internal political stability and threats of a potential British invasion are the predominant concerns of Qianlong.

The Qing Tributary System

Unequal Status under the Tributary System

The China-centered approach explains the conflict in terms of an incompatibility in worldviews presented by China's unique tributary system. They believed that the Qing's relationship with all European powers must be understood in the context of the Qing tributary system, a term for the traditional Chinese world-order based on a

suzerain-vassal model that was directly inherited from the Ming dynasty (1368-1644) and modified to suit the needs of the Manchus.⁵ Qing emperors employed the model as a means of political self-defense. This system largely maintained peace and security in Asia by accepting the submission of foreign rulers to Chinese superiority.⁶ In this system, the emperor of China was the Son of Heaven, the epitome of virtue, exercising the mandate of heaven to all mankind. “The envoys of foreign countries all are barbarians” who came to see the emperor once every few years to offer tribute and accept his benevolence, securing the blessings and protection from the emperor and their place in the all-embracing Sinocentric cosmos.⁷

Qing records indicated that it was Lord Macartney’s uncompromising attitude towards tributary rituals that tarnished British reputation in the eyes of Qianlong and convinced him to turn down British requests. Qing emperors regarded most European embassies sent to China as tributary voyages who were attracted by the virtue of Qing emperors to offer their tributes of gratitude. Like China’s other tributaries, Europeans had to present gifts and perform the kowtow (prostration). However, Lord Macartney refused to do so, citing it as an infringement on his king’s dignity.⁸ Instead, he proposed to go down on one knee, as he would do in front of the British king. Macartney also insisted on handing the gifts to the emperor directly, although Qing laws forbade any court guests from approaching the throne.⁹ After several arguments with Chinese officials, he eventually got his way. However, Qianlong was deeply annoyed after his meeting with Macartney, stating that his “heart is deeply unjoyful” as the “English envoy who came to Rehe was largely unfamiliar with rituals.”¹⁰ When Macartney was on his way to Beijing, Qianlong ordered officials to “take care of [the English barbarians] meticulously” so that China was not “belittled by men from afar”. Now, he warned officials to reduce provisions for the British embassy because “offering too many provisions” makes the envoy “so arrogant and sure of himself.”¹¹ In his official letter to King George III presented to Macartney, Qianlong emphasized the importance of maintaining the tributary system’s integrity, stating that

Macartney's proposal is "not consistent with our dynastic usage and cannot be entertained."¹² Before Macartney's arrival, Qianlong regarded the British as barbarians from afar, whom he had to impress to demonstrate the superiority of China over Britain. But he was disappointed by Macartney's unwillingness to conform to tributary rituals and decided to give the disobedient barbarians a lesson, thereby refusing the British requests. Since Qianlong Emperor assumed opposite attitudes before and after Macartney refused to Kowtow, conformity to tributary rituals appears to be his strongest concern. This is to say, if foreign envoys are to meet the emperor, they need to appear submissive.

Beyond the Tributary System

The view that tributary rituals play a primary role in Sino-British interactions during the Macartney embassy was challenged by James L Hevia, whose *Cherishing Men from Afar* offers post-modernist adjustment by attempting to eliminate Eurocentric prejudice. Hevia argued that Peyrefitte and other's idea of the tributary system was too rigid because they interpreted it as either a symbol of identification with superior Chinese culture, or a tangible representation of the Qing emperor's authority over foreign rulers to strengthen his claim to legitimacy among the Chinese people.¹³ Since the whole system was devised for defensive purposes, it did not foresee the possibility of innovation. Therefore, Qing emperors responded to foreign challenges inside the tributary framework. If foreigners are unwilling to accept their inferior status, Qing officials could only respond defensively, such as by driving them out, or stick to the standard procedures. Even the most open-minded officials in the Qing imperial court probably did not realize that this may cause conflicts with the West.¹⁴ The implication of this argument is that China's conventional tributary system was unable to recognize and cope with European powers. China's failed adaptation to more suitable forms of diplomacy, or Lord Macartney's failure to persuade Qianlong to do so, should largely be responsible for its rejection of British requests.¹⁵ However, evidence of skillful Qing diplomatic maneuvers led Hevia to question the validity of

portraying the Qing empire as conservative and defensive. Since, firstly, the Qing empire continuously engaged in successful diplomacy with Mongol and Turkish tribes ever since its establishment, and secondly, because it had treated Holland and Russian embassies with far more practicality, there seemed to be no reason to suspect that it had become less practical in dealing with the British.¹⁶

Hevia's conception of the Qing Dynasty came from a recent trend among American historians known as "New Qing history." New Qing historians emphasized that the Qing empire consisted of several cultural groups, which it sought to control by adopting flexible political measures. For instance, Qing emperors portrayed themselves as Bodhisatva in Tibetan Buddhism to control the Mongol tribes.¹⁷ Drawing from this emphasis on empire-building, Hevia stated that the Qing empire was a unique period in Chinese history. Just as European imperialist expansions, it had much territorial ambition outside the traditional territory of China Proper and practiced a sort of "Manchu imperialism" in Central Asia.¹⁸ The Qing empire, therefore, was likely not only aiming for defense in foreign relations, but also seeking political influence over foreign groups, including in interactions with Europeans. Qing tributary rituals were not dead, unchanging rules, but flexible tools of political maneuver. To emphasize Qing capacity for innovations, he tries to broaden the concept by replacing the tributary system framework with "Qing guest rituals" Thus, Qianlong's rejection of the Macartney Embassy's requests was the result of Qing officials failing to adopt appropriate guest rituals to suit the British.

Reverting to Fairbank: Tributary System as a Fundamental Guideline

Enlightening as Hevia's perspective is, he seemed to have interpreted primary sources and existing studies in a way that deviates from the authors' intentions to fit his post-modernist analysis framework, which partially discredited his analysis. Influenced by post-modernist philosophy, Hevia believed that the production of

knowledge, in this case, the interpretation of Chinese primary sources, is influenced by Eurocentrism. Thus, he wanted to “destabilize the taken-for-granted relationship between sources and interpretation” to restore agency to Qianlong.¹⁹ However, his preference for open interpretations may have given him too much agency to develop unsubstantiated interpretations that often fail to reflect the original Chinese characters. An example is his interpretation of “tizhi”, a term appearing frequently in Chinese documents, which means “fundamental rules” or “institutions” in Chinese.²⁰ Hevia interpreted it as “our imperial order”, adding the connotation that it could be altered at the emperor’s will. In fact, when used rhetorically, “tizhi” always refers to long-standing institutions and practices that mustn’t be changed.²¹ A further example of misinterpretation is the title of the book, “Cherishing Men from Afar” that Hevia translated from “huai rou” in Chinese.²² In its original context, “huai rou” refers to “pacify”;²³ it signified a strong unequal status between the Qianlong and foreign rulers as its goal was to elicit proper submission from foreigners. That is to say, although the emperor may show benevolence to foreigners at times, the fundamental principle is that foreigners should come and subjugate themselves as tributaries of the Qing. There was no room for equal communication between the two sides. Since “cherish” carries a connotation of treating something as dear and loved, it wrongly assumes Qing willingness to compromise existing protocols to appease foreigners that didn’t exist in practice.

Indeed, although the tributary system was not always fixed, the Qing empire preferred to maintain a suzerain-vassal relationship whenever possible. John E. Wills, a follower of Fairbank, conceded that the tributary system was not all there is to traditional Chinese foreign relations, as the Canton system and treatment received by some Portuguese and Dutch embassies deviated from standard tributary procedures. Yet, attitudes and practices associated with it was a determining influence on the experience of westerners in China at least since the late 17th century.²⁴ Following precedents from the Ming dynasty, Qing emperors and officials consciously attempted

to contain foreign relations within the established tributary framework, sometimes doing so by sacrificing commercial interests, as exemplified by Qianlong's order to restrict all foreign trade from four ports to only one port in Canton in 1757. Out of the seventeen European missions that had an audience with the Qing emperor, all but the Macartney embassy performed the Kowtow according to tributary rituals.²⁵ Therefore, Hevia was too eager to overthrow perceived stereotypes that he overlooked the fact that, although the tributary system did not guide all Qing diplomatic moves, it served as the main Chinese instrument of diplomacy up until the 1860s, serving wide-ranging political purposes from maintaining internal stability to acting as a defensive measure against aggressive foreign powers.

A second way that Hevia's analysis becomes inaccurate is by attributing false dichotomies to previous studies that oversimplify their arguments. He states that "all of Fairbank's followers" insisted on the dichotomy of the tributary system, including "tribute and trade, rituals and diplomacy, idealism and practicality, cultural factors and actual factors, and representation and political reality."²⁶ In constructing these dichotomies, Hevia has built a straw man that is far narrower than the original concept of the tributary system as used by Fairbank and his followers. After the establishment of the Ming dynasty during the late 14th century, it became an elaborate institution that reflected much internal political thoughts and philosophy.²⁷ The tributary system was originally not only about rituals, but also represented a particular approach to diplomacy. Therefore, it would be misleading to think of the tributary system as only referring to the rituals. If we consider a broader definition of the tributary system, then Hevia's suggestion of the "Qing guest ritual" would be nearly identical to the tributary system. Hevia's creation of another term seemed redundant because the original concept of the tributary system is already big enough to embody the complex power relations and a degree of flexibility in Chinese diplomatic protocols.

To conclude, as articulated by Fairbank and other historians who built their work

upon the tributary system model, the existence of the tributary system was the most important consideration for Qianlong when he decided to reject British requests, as the Qing's need to maintain a nominal suzerain-vessel relationship fundamentally contradicted British intentions to establish an equal partnership between the two powers. On the one hand, although the research of early historians like John K. Fairbank was Eurocentric and overgeneralizing in assuming that Qing foreign policy was mostly inflexible, they created the concept of the tributary system, which provided a helpful framework of analysis in Qing-European relations. On the other hand, although the research of New Qing historians and James L. Hevia have shown that the Qing empire was willing to adjust existing tributary protocols to suit different political ends, they have downplayed the importance of the tributary system to illustrate a break from previous Eurocentric studies. In the end, it is perhaps best to accept a cautious approval of the China-centered perspective. While Qing emperors were willing to make institutional and ceremonial concessions when doing so served practical political ends, they would also defend the tributary protocols whenever possible to assert supremacy relative to foreign rulers. The tributary system was certainly not all-embracing, but it was a deep-rooted diplomatic tradition that resulted in irreconcilable inequality between Qianlong and Macartney.

Other Factors

Internal Political Agendas

New Qing historian Joanna Waley-Cohen, whose research focuses on China's cultural, political, and commercial interactions with other peoples, offers a novel perspective. She argued that concern for internal political agendas were Qianlong emperor's primary reason for turning down the Macartney embassy's requests. From the beginning of its establishment, the Qing empire faced criticisms of legitimacy from the ethnic Han people because it was based on a minority's military conquest of

a much larger Han population. The strenuous Manchu-Han relationship in the Qing empire, an increase in population that caused bureaucratic unease, and increased factionalism in the Qing court toward the end of Qianlong's reign contributed to a sense of political insecurity for Qianlong emperor.²⁸ Although Qianlong likely grasped the great utility of European military technology in combat from Jesuits residing in the Beijing court, he was unwilling to show any reliance on foreigners for trade that might compromise the Qing empire's image of self-sufficiency. Qianlong then could use self-sufficiency as propaganda for Chinese subjects to show that Manchu rulers were faithful to the traditional Confucian attitude of superiority towards foreigners, which has a dual objective of intimidating potential domestic opponents and morale boosting for Qing officials.²⁹

Although it makes sense to argue for internal political insecurity in the context of a Manchu dynasty, Waley-Cohen's argument was insufficiently supported by primary sources. The evidences supporting her argument are all from secondary sources written by contemporary Western historians about Qianlong's view of his reign.³⁰ Concern for internal political agendas is never mentioned in Chinese and British primary sources at the time, including Qianlong's letter to king George III. Even though such concern might be valid, it would be too precarious to assume that it was that significant without being mentioned in primary sources.

Moreover, Qianlong likely had a very positive image for himself and his empire, which made it unlikely for him to be insecure at the time of the Macartney's embassy's arrival. During Qianlong's reign, the Qing empire was at the zenith of its prosperity. The official British account of the embassy also highly praised Qianlong's reign, noting that the Qing empire's prosperity was "unmatched in the past or present", and that Qianlong's achievements were "enormous".³¹ The more likely scenario was that the prosperity of the Qing empire helped to consolidate Qianlong's faith in the superior status of the Qing, helping to consolidate his belief in the tributary system.

Security Threats

Social historian Henrietta Harrison proposes that the perceived security repercussions of British requests, which were the focus of official Qing correspondence, were the main reason why Qianlong rejected the Macartney embassy. She argued that the common perception among historians that tributary protocols were at the heart of this event is misleading because Qianlong Emperor, in his correspondence to king George III, was more focused on addressing the potential political and military concerns relating to the British requests. She claimed evidence from the fact that the Qianlong Emperor did not mention “Kowtow or other protocol issues” and was more intent on “a detailed rejection of the substantive British demands”.³² Simultaneously, Qianlong ordered forts along the coast to “not only organize a show of military force but also make defensive preparations” because the British might “stir up trouble” along China’s coastline after the embassy departed from Beijing.³³ The newly published documents show that a large portion of them was devoted to the discussion of security threats posed by the British. Therefore, the potential risk of British intrusions could be Qianlong’s biggest concern.

Harrison’s focus on the broader repercussions of the British requests should not be confused with Qianlong’s motives. As Harrison had conceded herself, Qianlong only began ordering for defense preparations after the British embassy left Beijing and began their journey back. At this point, Qianlong had already written the letter to George III that rejected all British requests,³⁴ leaving no room for further negotiations. Since correspondence on military affairs only began after Qianlong’s decision of rejection, it is perhaps more temporally accurate to understand the defense preparations as a response against the potential consequences of the rejection—British intrusions—rather than the motivation behind the earlier decision of rejection.

In addition, even if security threats were to be Qianlong's valid concern, such a response was an innate part of the Qing tributary system, and so need not be reviewed in isolation. In John E. Wills's monograph about Qing's relationship with the Dutch, Portuguese, and British embassies during the early Qing dynasty, he discovered that Qing writers had stressed the importance of the tributary system as a defense mechanism.³⁵ It is a set of complex regulations and institutions that provided solutions for national defense.³⁶ Central to the concept of the tributary system was a sense of imperial suzerainty of all foreign rulers that acknowledged the superiority of the Qing empire, which the Qing court always applied to Dutch and Portuguese embassies, as well as the Macartney embassy.³⁷ When faced with security threats, Qianlong's response was also shaped by mechanisms within the tributary system, indicating that it was a more fundamental concern for Qianlong.

Conclusion

Several explanations existed as to which factors were most important in Qianlong's decision to reject the Macartney embassy's requests in 1793. The "China-centered" explanation first proposed by John K. Fairbank in the 1940s and most recently endorsed by French historian Alain Peyrefitte in 1989, argued that fundamental values of the Qing diplomatic system, the tributary system, account most for Qianlong's anticipated rejection. Fairbank's emphasis on the tributary system was criticized by James L. Hevia, who built upon the works of New Qing historians to argue that the tributary system was not an important consideration for the Qianlong Emperor because it was a Eurocentric construct that limited relevance to Qianlong's foreign policies in practice. Yet, evidence shows that both during the Qianlong period and afterwards, the Qing emperors did place priority on maintaining the integrity of the tributary system.

While there are lots of studies done on the Qing tributary system, few investigate the actual international and domestic circumstances facing China and Britain at the time. Other factors, including concerns for internal stability and national security, perhaps also existed, but these arguments lack conclusive evidence to demonstrate their significance. To better validate arguments for factors other than the tributary system, future studies on the topic could dig deeper into the military balance between the Qing and British empires at the time to understand about the influence of geopolitical factors on the Sino-British encounter. It is also worthwhile to examine the links between domestic and foreign policies for Britain and China to better contextualize their respective diplomatic approaches. Hopefully, these new approaches will allow for a more comprehensive evaluation of alternative factors.

In the end, this essay believes that it is unreasonable to condemn Qianlong Emperor for China's slow modernization process because his decision seemed rational at the time. The most probable picture of the event was one in which both sides held stubbornly their own diplomatic traditions. As the head of an empire whose stability largely relied on following existing diplomatic practices, Qianlong was not prepared to risk sacrificing his legitimacy to appease "barbarians" whom he could not possibly know would so soundly defeat China four decades later. His rejection of British presence in China was mainly due to conventional ideologies that was embodied by the tributary system.

Endnotes

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- ² Mark C. Elliott, *Emperor Qianlong: Son of Heaven, Man of the World*, The Library of World Biography (New York: Pearson Longman, 2009). p. 135
- ³ Zhichun Wang and Chunchen Zhao, *Qing Chao Rou Yuan Ji [Record of the Qing Dynasty’s Diplomatic History]*, Di 1 ban, Zhong Wai Jiao Tong Shi Ji Cong Kan [Collected Works on the History of Sino-Foreign Relations] (Beijing: Zhonghua shu ju, 1989). p. 141
- ⁴ Wang and Zhao, *Qing Chao Rou Yuan Ji [Record of the Qing Dynasty’s Diplomatic History]*.
- ⁵ J. K. Fairbank and S. Y. Têng, “On The Ch’ing Tributary System,” *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 6, no. 2 (1941): 135–246, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2718006>. p. 135
- ⁶ Fairbank and Têng. p. 140
- ⁷ Fairbank and Têng. p. 138
- ⁸ Elliott, *Emperor Qianlong*. p. 136
- ⁹ Elliott. p. 137
- ¹⁰ Zhong guo di yi li shi dang an guan, *Yingshi Magaerni Fang Hua Dang’an Shiliao Huibian [Collected Archival Materials on the English Envoy Macartney’s Visit to China]*, 1st ed. (Beijing: Guo ji wen hua chu ban gong si, n.d.). p. 28
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- ¹² E Backhouse and J O P Bland, *Annals & Memoirs Of The Court Of Peking* (Houghton Mifflin Company, 1914), <http://archive.org/details/annalsmemoirsoft002081mbp>. p. 326
- ¹³ Hevia and Deng, *Cherishing Men from Afar*. p. 20
- ¹⁴ James L. Hevia and Deng. p. 17
- ¹⁵ James L. Hevia and Deng. p. 13
- ¹⁶ James L. Hevia and Deng. p. 18
- ¹⁷ James L. Hevia and Deng. p. 47
- ¹⁸ James L. Hevia and Deng. p. 37
- ¹⁹ Joseph W. Esherick, “Cherishing Sources from Afar,” *Modern China* 24, no. 2

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²⁰ Esherick. p. 141

²¹ Esherick. p. 141

²² Esherick. p. 143

²³ Esherick. p. 143

²⁴ John E. Wills, *Embassies and Illusions: Dutch and Portuguese Envoys to K'ang-Hsi, 1666-1687*, Harvard East Asian Monographs 113 (Cambridge, Mass: Council on East Asian Studies, Harvard University, 1984). p. 13, 171

²⁵ J. K. Fairbank, "Tributary Trade and China's Relations with the West," *The Far Eastern Quarterly* 1, no. 2 (February 1942): 129, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2049617>. p. 148

²⁶ James L. Hevia and Deng, *Huai rou yuan ren*. p. 17

²⁷ Wills, *Embassies and Illusions*. p. 4

²⁸ Joanna Waley-Cohen, "China and Western Technology in the Late Eighteenth Century," 2022, 21. p.3, 17

²⁹ Waley-Cohen. p. 3

³⁰ Waley-Cohen. p. 3

³¹ George Thomas Staunton and Duyi Ye, *Ying shi ye jian Qian long ji shi [an Authentic Account of an Embassy from the King of Great Britain to the Emperor of China]*, Di 1 ban, Min meng zhi ku (Beijing: Qun yan chu ban she, 2014). p. 430

³² Henrietta Harrison, "The Qianlong Emperor's Letter to George III and the Early-Twentieth-Century Origins of Ideas about Traditional China's Foreign Relations," *The American Historical Review* 122, no. 3 (June 1, 2017): 680–701, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ahr/122.3.680>. p. 5

³³ Harrison. p. 5, 6

³⁴ Harrison. p. 5

³⁵ Wills, *Embassies and Illusions*. p. 188

³⁶ Wills. p. 173

³⁷ Wills. p. 177

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