

Book Review

Tonio Andrade, *The Last Embassy: The Dutch Mission of 1795 and the Forgotten History of Western Encounters with China*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2021, Pp. xi + 408 Notes and Index. \$35.00 (hardcover).

Tonio Andrade's new book begins with instructions to skip the *Prologue* unless "you feel like a thesis statement and some historiography," indicating right from the start that this will be a different kind of history book, one that "is designed to provide both an immersive narrative and a historical argument" (xi). Andrade succeeds admirably at both, with a surface travelogue of a journey through China at the end of the Qing golden age, in the dying years of the Qianlong Emperor, while also providing enough criticism and context to understand the larger tapestry of scholarship and memory surrounding the much better-known Macartney embassy of 1793—but more on that later.

History remains an interesting and engaging field for practitioners and lay readers alike due to its mutability and readiness to embrace change, critical approaches, and its relevance. Andrade's work embraces recent debates on Chinese exclusion and integration into the world (see Timothy Brook's *Great State*, 2020, for one stellar example), as well as using a tried and tested approach to storytelling, the travelogue. Andrade also chooses to use the present-tense throughout the work, "to provide a sense of immediacy and intimacy but also, oddly, of distance...The present tense makes more apparent the historian's act of imagining, of conjuring a past world from historical sources" (7). From the beginning, Andrade has already played with the expectations of his readers, by giving them an excuse for avoiding a dense, scholarly opening, and then by deliberately using a different tense for telling the story in order to bring the reader into some of his own ambiguity and vulnerability as a writer.

Once we get through a brief, fifteen page *Prologue*, which provides a readable look inside the mind and approach of our author, the story begins with a cracking line: "The emperor is the pivot around which everything turns" (16). Just imagine opening a lecture or course on imperial China with that concept, and having students begin to pick apart what it might mean! The opening line comes from *Chapter One: The Center*, wherein we begin our journey at the end. Andrade is doing fascinating things with us,

his readers, and he opens by taking us to where we are headed: the Forbidden City at the end of the eighteenth century, the most exclusive place on the planet. Andrade shows us why these worldly Dutchmen wanted to embrace the opportunity of a lifetime: to “pass through walls” to see the pivot itself, the legendary emperor Qianlong, who had ruled China for sixty years and overseen an expansion of its territory beyond the current borders of the People’s Republic of China (16). Andrade uses this image of walls throughout the first chapter and the reader gets a sense of how the emperor, while at the center, is kept behind walls of meaning, interpretation, and ritual, keeping him sacrosanct and away from the vulgar and vital world outside. While a whole chapter on walls and the journey from outside the city of Beijing into the cloistered world of the Forbidden City might sound like drudgery, Andrade always provides a fun style: “After an hour—and perhaps a dumpling or two—you reach the next set of walls, equally massive” (16). The description of the hallowed home of the emperor ends with an edict on how Qianlong will step down in a year, and with a stunning description of the imperial realm: “the Great Qing is unimaginably vast, stretching from the far Western oases of Turkmenistan to the Yellow Sea, from the tundra of northern Mongolia to the tropical beaches of Hainan Island, from the highest mountains of Tibet to the river ports of the Lower Yangtze,” (20). By situating our story within this vast canvas, the reader appreciates the diversity of this land, which we will soon be viewing through the eyes of our travelers.

The narrative follows the trip of Isaac Titsingh, a senior Dutch administrator of the Dutch East India Company with experience in Japan, and Andreas Everardus van Braam Houckgeest (referred to throughout the book as Van Braam), a Dutch businessman with deep connections in the Canton mercantile world and a fascination with Chinese art and culture. These two men, along with the French translator Chrétien-Louis-Joseph de Guignes, spend much of the winter of 1794-5 traveling from Canton to Beijing via the quicker, yet more strenuous, river and overland route, as the Grand Canal and other rivers froze during the bitterly cold winter. Our narrative shows us the discomfort, freezing conditions, and poor upkeep of roads and inns along the way, with many comments about getting up in the dark and traveling all day only to arrive at another squalid inn, with little to eat, in order to make it to the capital for the New Year’s celebrations with the emperor. Readers can appreciate the contrast of this with the typical views of Chinese prosperity and beauty that the ambassadors will experience on their much more leisurely return to the south in spring, when they are feted and conveyed via canal and river back to Canton.

While the trip to the capital takes up chapters six through eight, Andrade throughout emphasizes how holding together this vast and diverse empire works: ritual. The walls of the capital may help visitors to understand the sanctity of the man and the system at the center, but it functions through a management class that has been practicing its work for nearly a thousand years: “the empire is held together not just by

armies, officials, and legal codes, but by ritual” (20). The word of the emperor is sacred and demands similar treatment to the emperor himself: processions, kowtows, and public readings to ensure that “the emperor’s sacred authority is felt even in the farthest reaches” (21). For many contemporary readers, this emphasis on ritual can seem antiquated, but our own rituals have immense meaning in our lives; one of the major disruptions of the COVID-19 crisis has been the interruption of rituals like weddings and funerals, graduations, holidays and family trips. Rituals help us to define and mark time, to acknowledge accomplishments, and to renew the bonds of community. In China, ritual also has a clearly stated purpose from Confucian ideology, that it helps teach us how to act and behave in society.

The British Macartney Mission of 1793 failed because of an inability to comply with ritual, in particular with the kowtow. In order to ensure that the Dutch embassy of 1795 would not fail in this particularly crucial step, the Dutch ambassadors, Titsingh and Van Braam, were invited to a ceremony in Canton for the reading of the invitation for them to visit the emperor in Beijing for the New Year festivities, where they kowtowed to the emperor’s tablet. By demonstrating a willingness to perform the ritual, the emperor’s administrators were confident that these foreigners would contribute positively to the emperor’s celebrations in ways that the Macartney mission failed to. The final chapter, *Conclusions: A Contested Embassy and the History of Sino-Western Relations*, returns to the motivation for writing this book: to question the previous status quo of China as a closed civilizational system. While scholarly understandings of Ming/Qing China have become more willing to embrace ideas of global connections, the Macartney Mission still stands as a major piece of contrary evidence arguing for China’s cultural chauvinism.

Andrade shows how a series of coincidences and mistakes have buried this Dutch mission in the shadows. China remained a topic of enthusiastic interest among scholars of the time, and a large publishing industry also served the burgeoning audience of potential sailors and merchants trading with the Pacific as the nineteenth century dawned. John Barrow, an Englishman whose 1804 book *Travels in China*, exerted a major influence on how European audiences viewed the Qing Empire, and painted the Dutch mission as “humiliating...the Chinese...treated them in the most contemptuous and indignant manner” (293). In short, Barrow saw the Dutch readiness to kowtow as encouraging the Chinese to look for Westerners to embarrass themselves by following local customs instead of insisting on more dignified treatment. Barrow’s work has been read by scholars as the definitive treatment of the mission, while ignoring an account published by Guignes, one of the principal translators of the Dutch mission, as well as the account of Van Braam (296). Many scholars “attributed to Titsingh an anonymous diary actually composed by Guignes,” who was far more critical of the Chinese than the leader of the embassy (297). Finally, Andrade points out that the critics of the Dutch

failed to “understand the true aims of the mission...[while] the goal of the mission was...to congratulate the emperor on his sixtieth year on the throne” (297).

Once readers accept that the goals of the Dutch mission were clearly different from the Macartney mission, Andrade then enters an interesting comparison of scholarly understandings of the tribute system. For Andrade, “Deliberate ambiguity was one of the keys to the tribute system framework and the stability of the East Asian diplomatic order” (302). Andrade is delicately and subtly weaving together the strands of ritual and power that are evident throughout the book, from the levels of access to meet with the emperor, to the separate spheres within the walls of the capital, or to the reverence for imperial edicts, where even the words of the emperor deserve a quasi-religious devotion: “Diplomacy was an expression of Confucian ritual propriety on the international level. All are bound together in communion, one great family under heaven” (306). Ritual and religion were key to power dynamics and relationships in all early modern empires, and neither China nor the European states were exceptions to this rule.

The Last Embassy could be used as a stand-alone read in an East Asian history course, where students could be expected to read the book over a week or two. Its lively writing, quick chapters, and the descriptions of the various parts of the empire that the embassy travels through, give readers a panoramic view of the empire at its height. Additionally, this book provides us with a peripheral view of the empire: one written by students of East Asia (Van Braam as a major collector of Chinese art, and Titsingh as a successful ambassador to Tokugawa Japan) who are coming to appreciate and understand the Middle Kingdom, unlike merchants who may focus on the complexities of the *hong* system, for example. Andrade’s writing shows the love he has both for his source material, and for the history of China. He ends with a lovely sentence that sums up his own view of history and travel: “one of the beauties of life is how differently it’s lived, here and there,” an understanding that all of our students could learn to appreciate (307).

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