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“A Style of Chinese Respect”: Lord Macartney’s Reply to the Imperial Edicts of Emperor Qianlong in 1793

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Abstract: In 1793, King George III of Great Britain sent an official embassy led by Lord George Macartney to China in the hope of getting more favourable trading terms. However, all the requests made by Lord Macartney were rejected flatly in two imperial edicts issued by the Chinese Emperor Qianlong when the embassy was about to leave China. The present paper focuses on Lord Macartney’s response to the two imperial edicts, in particular the official reply Macartney made to the Qing court in the form of a “note” to Heshen before the embassy left China. In the note, Macartney touched upon several important issues, including the sensitive one about the relative status of the two countries. To Macartney, these issues were so crucial that he felt obliged to make a response promptly. The tactful way adopted by Macartney to handle them deserves our special attention.

Keywords: Macartney Mission, Emperor Qianlong, Heshen, Sino-British relations, Translation studies

1 Background

In 1793, King George III (George William Frederick, 1738–1820; r.1760–1820) of Great Britain sent an official embassy led by Lord George Macartney (1737–1806) to China in the hope of getting more favourable trading terms. Although the British planned the mission carefully and brought along expensive presents, under the pretext of offering belated congratulations on the 80th birthday of Emperor Qianlong 乾隆 (1711–1799; r.1735–1796), the embassy has generally been considered a failure because all of the requests made by Lord Macartney were rejected

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flatly by the Chinese Emperor. After delivering the letter from King George and after a couple of brief meetings with Qianlong, Macartney had to leave the Chinese capital hastily. One member of the embassy complained that “we entered Peking [Beijing] like paupers; we remained in it like prisoners; and we quitted it like vagrants” (Anderson, 1795, p.181).

It is not the purpose of the present paper to determine if the embassy was a failure, and if so, what the causes were. Rather, it focuses on Lord Macartney’s response to the two imperial edicts from Qianlong to King George—in particular the official reply Macartney made to the Qing court in the form of a “note” to Heshen 和珅 (1750–1799), the Grand Councillor in charge of the reception of the British embassy. This particular aspect of the mission, to my knowledge, has never been dealt with critically in any studies of the embassy. But to Macartney, the issues involved were so crucial to the embassy that he felt obliged to make a response before he left China, and the tactful way he handled the sensitive issues involved deserves our special attention.

It had been a long-standing practice, in the so-called tributary system, for the Chinese emperors to send an imperial edict to the foreign envoys at the time the embassies left the country.¹ In most cases, the edicts were ceremonial in nature, with a relatively standard format and content. They were all written in friendly though condescending tones, acknowledging the good will of the tributary sovereigns for sending the embassies to pay tribute to the Celestial Empire. But the Macartney mission was unusual, in two ways. First, two edicts, instead of one, were announced within a relatively short time. Second, important messages were contained in the edicts, which were delivered in a very serious and solemn manner (The First Historical Archives of China, 1996, pp.165–166; p.172).

It should be pointed out that even before the embassy arrived in Beijing, an imperial edict addressed to the British had already been prepared. On 3 August 1793, a draft was submitted to the Emperor for approval; (The First Historical Archives of China, 1996, p.177) and on 1 September, its translation was ready (The First Historical Archives of China, 1996, p.145). However, this edict, which was very much the usual ceremonial kind, was eventually abandoned. Another edict was

¹ On the Chinese tributary system, one work that must be consulted is John K. Fairbank (1968). However, influential as it has been, there have been works critical of Fairbank’s model since the book was published almost half a century ago. For a clear and objective presentation of the scholarly debates on the topic, see Richard J. Smith (2013b, pp.1–18). See also Richard J. Smith (2013a); Zhijun Ren (2012). Recent works in Chinese include Li Yunquan 李雲泉 (2014); He Xinhua 何新華 (2012).

issued on 23 September 1793 and reached the hands of Macartney on 3 October. It was mainly a direct answer to the request made in King George's Letter of Credence to station a representative of the British government at the Chinese capital. Predictably, it was rejected, on the ground that this was against the rules and practices of the Celestial dynasty. The compilers of the Qing documents at the Palace Museum in the late 1920s made a mistake in stating that the 23 September edict was drafted and submitted on 3 August (Department of Historical Documents of the Palace Museum, 1964, p.58). This led to other scholars to assert that the rejection of the British request had been decided six weeks before Macartney presented the King's letter on 14 September, and that "[t]he embassy's failure was therefore not merely the result of the refusal to kowtow, but was inevitable from the outset" (Peyrefitte, 1993, p.288).² However a careful reading of their texts will confirm that they were two totally different edicts. After all, the earlier one was drafted before Qianlong received King George's letter, and it was therefore not possible to include in its content a British request of which the Emperor had no knowledge.

On the very same day that Macartney received the edict of 3 October, he sent a note to Heshen making additional requests. He did this because he saw no progress in getting concessions from the Chinese when the embassy would be leaving soon (Macartney, 1962, pp.145–150). This note invited the second edict from the court, which was completed on 4 October and sent to the embassy just as they were leaving Beijing on 7 October. Once again, the requests, six altogether, were refused (The First Historical Archives of China, 1996, p.172). These two edicts were of extreme importance to early Sino-British relations, especially the first one. It was described by one scholar as "perhaps the most important single Chinese document for the study of Sino-Western relations between 1700 and 1860" (Macartney, 1962, p.341).³ A much quoted remark made by Bertrand Russell (1872–1970) reads: "What I want to suggest is that no one understands China until this document has ceased to seem absurd" (Russell, 1922, p.51). It is easy to understand why the protagonist, Lord Macartney, had to respond immediately. Unfortunately his reply, buried in the thick heap of East India Company archival material, has not received any attention from researchers, probably with the exception of Henrietta Harrison who gives a brief discussion in her recent article on Jacobus Li (Li Zibiao 李自標, 1760–1828), the interpreter of the Mission (Harrison, 2018, p.1088).

² Similar views can be found in J. L. Cranmer-Byng (1957–1958, p.138).

³ Peyrefitte even went further to put it as "the single most remarkable and important document in Chinese-Western relations from Marco Polo to Deng Xiaoping" (1993, p.292).

2 Qianlong taking up the challenge

No doubt, the chief objective of the British for sending an embassy was to gain better trading conditions in China. But as James Hevia observes, both Henry Dundas (1742–1811), the Home Secretary who engineered the mission, and Lord Macartney, insisted that “the interests of the British crown came before those of a commercial company” (Hevia, 1994, p.58). In his instruction to Macartney, Dundas displayed not the slightest intention of showing “dutiful submission”; rather, he emphasized that the embassy should achieve its commercial goal “in the greatest dignity” (IOR/G/12/20, p.43).⁴ It was his conviction, and Macartney’s, that a more effective means to secure the Chinese “acceptance of a treaty of friendship and alliance” was to impress the Chinese with “the wisdom and justice of the King of Great Britain,” “the wealth and power of this country,” and “the genius and knowledge of its people” (IOR/G/12/20, p.50). Hence, apart from distinguished diplomats like his deputy George Leonard Staunton (1737–1801) and able executives like his comptroller John Barrow (1764–1848), Macartney included in his suite botanists, a philologist, a physician, mechanists, artists, and musicians, all “highly educated products of the Age of Reason” (Singer, 1992, p.6). He also painstakingly picked the presents, comprising largely sophisticated scientific instruments and costing altogether 15,610 pounds (Pritchard, 1936, p.306), to “denote the progress of Science and of the Arts in Europe,” “which may convey some kind of information to the exalted mind of his Imperial Majesty” (Pritchard, 1936, p.306).

More significantly, the letter from King George conveyed a most distinct message that Great Britain was a world power as great as China. The sending of the embassy was intended to establish friendship between “Brethren in Sovereignty” on an equal footing, while the request for stationing a representative in Beijing was to protect British subjects from being ill-treated as much as to regulate their conduct. As H. B. Morse puts it, the letter was “lofty in tone, with arrogant assertion and persuasive conciliation deftly blended” (Morse, 1926, p.219). In short, “Macartney consciously confronted the Chinese empire, then apparently at the zenith of its power and prosperity, with the increasing power and achievements of the British empire” (Cranmer-Byng & Levere, 1981, p.504).

Obviously Qianlong was eager to take up the challenge, as the two edicts, representing his open response, came very quickly. The first edict was finished nine days after King George’s letter was received, while the second one was ready on the following day after Macartney sent in the new requests. Phrased in the so-called “Celestial discourse,” the two edicts not only turned down the requests of

4 India Office Records and Private Papers (abbreviated IOR), held in the British Library, London.

the British categorically, but more significantly, they officially designated Great Britain as one of the vassals of China under the tributary system. Qianlong even told the British in very clear terms that he was not impressed by the presents. One often quoted paragraph from the first edict reads:

Swaying the wide world, I have but one aim in view, namely, to maintain a perfect governance and to fulfil the duties of the State: strange and costly objects do not interest me. If I have commanded that the tribute offerings sent by you, O King, are to be accepted, this was solely in consideration for the spirit which prompted you to dispatch them from afar. Our dynasty's majestic virtue has penetrated unto every country under Heaven, and Kings of all nations have offered their costly tribute by land and sea. As your Ambassador can see for himself, we possess all things. I set no value on objects strange or ingenious, and have no use for your country's manufactures (Backhouse & Bland, 1914, pp.324–325).⁵

For a long time, many people have taken this paragraph from the edict, which has, as Harrison has noted, even entered *The Oxford Dictionary of Quotations* (Harrison, 2017, p.680, n.1), as evidence of Qianlong's ignorance and/or complacency. To these people, the aged and hidebound Emperor, handicapped by his world view, erroneously took Great Britain, a rapidly growing imperialistic power, as a tributary vassal. He had little knowledge about the world outside China, without realizing the menace posed by the British. His rejection of the British requests was an opportunity lost for the Chinese to get connected to the modern West and initiate an early modernization programme. Some go further to say that should Macartney's requests be granted, China might be able to avoid the humiliating defeat of the Opium War in 1840–1842, as these requests were ultimately realized by the Treaty of Nanking.

But the publication of a large volume of Qing archival records of the Macartney mission in 1996 by The First Historical Archives of China provided the opportunity to examine Qianlong's attitude and reactions more comprehensively and from a different angle.⁶ We have come to know that rather than being insensitive, Qianlong was quick to realize and respond to the threats posted by the British. The first sign of alertness came immediately after Qianlong read the gift list, which was sent in even before the embassy landed on Chinese soil. Qianlong gave an inflexible

⁵ While Backhouse has little credibility as a historian, his translation is adopted here because it was the one most widely read by early 20th century readers in Britain, arousing public attention to Qianlong's letter.

⁶ To quote Henrietta Harrison: "A careful examination of the two sets of documents of the Macartney embassy not only transforms the story from one about ceremony and ritual to one about a military response to a perceived threat, but also shows the power of selection and exclusion in the presentation of archives to shape the stories we tell ourselves and others about the past" (Harrison, 2017, p.683).

order to forbid the use of *qinchai* 欽差 for Macartney (The First Historical Archives of China, 1996, p.120). To Qianlong, *qinchai* could only be used for envoys of the imperial empire, not those dispatched by a tributary vassal. This, however, should not be taken as proof of Qianlong's self-importance, because he explained that if Macartney was labelled *qinchai*, Britain would have a status equal to that of China (The First Historical Archives of China, 1996, p.62). This, in fact, was the strongest message that the British wanted to convey to the Chinese during this mission.

In other words, Qianlong was quick to take the message and determined to prevent Britain from asserting a status equal to China at the very beginning of the mission. Further, after receiving and rejecting British requests, Qianlong repeatedly issued orders to central ministers as well as local officials along the coast and the route that Macartney took southbound to Guangzhou to stay vigilant of the British threats. Warnings were given that the British were the most ambitious and ferocious among the Western barbarians (The First Historical Archives of China, 1996, p.176). It would have broken Macartney's heart had he known that Songyun 松筠 (1752–1835), the Grand Councillor who spent almost two months accompanying him from Beijing all the way to Hangzhou, and with whom Macartney felt he had developed an intimate personal friendship (Macartney, 1962, p.178), actually received instructions from Qianlong that Songyun might deploy regional forces to overpower the British if necessary (The First Historical Archives of China, 1996, p.175).

With this background, we can see that Qianlong's edicts, although packaged in the form of traditional imperial edicts, were deliberate moves to turn the British away from China. The "majestic, thunderous, damning and final" tone, especially in the second edict, was purposeful and calculated (Coates, 1966, p.89).

3 The several renditions of Qianlong's edicts

Qianlong's two edicts did not attract public attention until the early 20th century when a new translation by Edmund Backhouse (1873–1944) and John Otway Percy Bland (1863–1945) in 1914 circulated widely in the West (Backhouse & Bland, 1914, pp.322–325). Before this, Edward Harper Parker (1849–1926), who had translated Wei Yuan's 魏源 (1794–1857) *Shengwu ji* 聖武記 into *Chinese Account of the Opium War* (Parker, 1888), published the edicts as "From the Emperor of China to King George the Third" in the London magazine *The 19th Century: A Monthly Review in 1896* (Parker, 1896, pp.45–55). But this version did not get much notice. However, not even Parker's version was the first English rendition of Qianlong's edicts.

When the edicts reached the hands of Macartney, they were presented in three languages: Manchu, Chinese and Latin. On 9 November 1793, Macartney, on his way to Guangzhou, sent a lengthy report on the mission to Henry Dundas. The

Latin and English versions of the two edicts were attached.⁷ Thus the first English translations of the edicts were made by a member of the mission when it was still in China. There is no record of the identity of the translator, although translation tasks of the mission involving the Latin language were generally handled by John Christian Hüttner (1766–1847), who was formerly the family teacher of George Thomas Staunton (1781–1859), George Leonard Staunton's son, who went along as a page of Lord Macartney in the mission.⁸ For many years, the English versions of the two edicts made by the embassy people escaped the notice of researchers, especially that of the first edict. H. B. Morse, digging into the East India Office archives, included in his influential *The Chronicles of the East India Company Trading to China, 1635–1834* the mission's English translation of the second edict as "Answer of the Emperor of China to the King of England," without mentioning the first edict (Morse, 1926, pp.247–252).

It has been suggested by Peyrefitte that the "leaders of the embassy" "drafted an English summary of the Latin" version of Qianlong's first edict (Peyrefitte, 1993, p.288). This is inaccurate. The English version of the first edict submitted by Macartney to Dundas, as the official translation, has a total of 1510 words, much longer than the other English translations. For instance, the one done by Parker consists of about 1200 words, while that of Backhouse and Bland is only around 950 words in length. The embassy's translation of the edict is no doubt a complete one, but there are substantial changes in the wording, which give quite different messages. The most important feature is that the original condescending tone is very much softened. The keyword *tianchao*, translated by Parker as "Celestial Court" (Parker, 1896, p.46)⁹ and Backhouse and Bland as "Celestial dynasty," is gone, but rendered simply and neutrally as "this country." With Great Britain translated as "your country," the two nations are placed on equal footings. Qianlong is certainly not in any superior position, and there is no sense of submission, humility or obedience on the part of the British. Instead, the translation exhibits an atmosphere of "friendliness"—"friendliness" and "friendly" together appear three times in the translation, plus "affection" and "affectionate," which also appear three times. This is to accord with the embassy's stated objectives of

7 "Emperor's Answer to Requests Dated the 3 October 1793 but not received till the day of departure, 7 October 1793," IOR/G/12/92, pp.271–281; Latin version, pp.281–298. "The Emperor's Letter to the King," pp.233–242; Latin version, pp.243–258. Macartney to Dundas, Chekian [Zhejiang], near Han-chou-fu [Hangzhou fu], 9 November 1793, IOR/G/12/92, pp.31–116.

8 Hüttner's recollection of the embassy (1797) came out in 1797, and was translated into Dutch and French in 1799.

9 Parker even made a note to remark that "the Emperor had directed that China be invariably described as the 'Celestial Court' in correspondence with barbarians, in order duly to impress them." (Parker, 1896, n.3).

“cultivating the friendship of the Emperor of China,” and “establish[ing] a harmony and alliance” between the two nations (IOR/G/12/91, pp.333–335).

With these changes, the edicts of Qianlong, in their English garb, did not appear provocative or threatening.¹⁰ It is probably for this reason that when they arrived in the hands of Dundas, he did not seem to be alarmed. In all the available material of the East India Company, there is no record of Dundas’s or anybody’s response to these edicts. No one in the English speaking world talked about them for at least a century, with the exception of Lord Macartney.

4 Macartney requested the right to preach their religion?

In his journal, Macartney recorded that on 3 October 1793 he was summoned to the Palace and shown the imperial edict in the imperial hall. But he was not to receive it at the spot; rather, the edict was delivered to his residence in the same afternoon (Macartney, 1962, pp.149–150). Although, as we have seen, many people remain convinced that the first edict from Qianlong was extremely important in shaping 18–19th century Sino-Western relations, Macartney made only a very brief comment on it in both his journal and in his memo to Dundas on 9 November 1793. Macartney reported that he had a discussion with Songyun about the two edicts on 21 October, only after he had felt encouraged upon being told of the “expressions of kindness and attendance” in the Emperor’s daily letters to Songyun (Macartney, 1962, pp.99–100). This was already 18 days after Macartney received the first edict and two weeks after Macartney received the second (Macartney, 1962, pp.99–100). In the conversation, he remarked to Songyun that in the first letter, the Emperor only replied to and rejected one request made in King George’s letter, the one for stationing a representative in Beijing; but for others on trading conditions, “not the least notice was taken of.” Songyun then replied that “His Imperial Majesty... [thought] is sufficient generally to promise that he would treat our [the British] Merchants kindly” (IOR/G/12/92, p.101; Macartney, 1962, p.167). This certainly would not have been satisfactory for Macartney, and as we shall see shortly, he soon pressed for some more concrete answers. But there was not much discussion on the topic between the two at the time, probably because both Macartney and Songyun agreed that the first letter did not say much about the issue and there was

¹⁰ For a detailed textual comparison of the originals and translations of the two edicts, see Wong (2021).

thus no need for further elaboration. The conversation focused more on the second edict.

Macartney was unhappy about the second letter because it indicated that “the requests made in the Ambassador’s note of 3 October were supposed to have come rather from him [Macartney] than from the King.” In his journal, Macartney described this as a “complaint” to Songyun. In response, he was given the following explanation: it was “a sort of political conundrum, a Court artifice to elude an ungrantable demand” (Macartney, 1962, p.166). In another place, Macartney called this face-saving rhetorical strategy “a style of Chinese respect”: to hold the ambassador responsible for raising requests rather than the King himself (IOR/G/12/93, vol.2, p.188). Macartney admitted that this form of politeness reflected respect for the King, although it was “not very flattering for his representative.” In any case, he was willing to accept this approach as the Chinese way of diplomatic practice (Macartney, 1962, p.166).

Macartney seemed to be more concerned about another issue in the second edict, which he discussed at length with Songyun. In the second edict, Qianlong refused all six of the British requests regarding trade that were made by Macartney in his note to Heshen on 3 October. But there seemed to be one more request. Qianlong told King George that Macartney’s petition for permission to allow Westerners to preach their religion most certainly could not be granted. Macartney told Songyun that he was much surprised upon learning this, because he had not made such a request. Checking against the English original of the note in the East India Company archive, it is clear there were only six requests and none touched up religious matters (IOR/G/12/92, pp.259–262).¹¹

Why, then, would Qianlong reject a demand that Macartney did not actually make? This mystery was first solved by Michele Fatica of Università degli Studi di Napoli “L’Orientale” in 1996. His paper, “Gli Alunni Del Collegium Sinicum di Napoli, La Missione Macartney Presso L’Imperatore Qianlong e La Richiesta di Liberta di Culto per I Cristiani Cinesi [1792–1793],” which makes use of archival materials from Archivium Propaganda Fide and others in Italy, confirms that the request for religious preaching was actually made by the embassy’s Chinese interpreter, Li Zibiao (see Fatica, 1996; Wong, 2020b). Li was a Catholic priest trained at the Collegio dei Cinesi set up in Naples by Matteo Ripa (1682–1746) in

¹¹ But the Chinese version of the note that Macartney sent to Heshen is not available in the collection of archival material on the mission (The First Historical Archives of China, 1996). Since its editor claims that they have included all the archival material they have collected from the Qing court, it looks that this note is missing (The First Historical Archives of China, 1996, p.8).

1732.¹² In a letter written by Li to his masters in Naples at the conclusion of the Macartney mission, he stated that it was out of “religious motive” (*motivo religionis*) that he joined the mission (APF SOCP, b.68, f.609r).¹³ According to Staunton, Li was persuaded to accompany the embassy to Beijing “on condition that we would use all our credits to improve the fate of the persecuted Christians” (APF, vol.17, f.380). However, neither Macartney nor Staunton had done anything to help achieve this religious goal during the visit. Seeing that the embassy was about to leave Beijing soon, Jacobus Li took the opportunity of delivering Macartney’s note to Heshen on 3 October to make a verbal request for allowing the Chinese Christians “to live in safety and profess their religion” (APF SOCP, b.68, f.614v; see also APF SOCP, b.68, f.611). It was taken by Qianlong and Heshen as a request from Macartney. Hence, the rejection in the second imperial edict.

Macartney had no prior knowledge of Li’s action, and worried that such religious issues might jeopardize the mission as well as their commerce in China. He thus emphatically explained to Songyun that he did not have any intention of making a request for the right of Westerners to preach in China. He stressed that unlike other Europeans who were eager to evangelize, the British “never attempted to dispute or disturb the worship or tenets of others” (Macartney, 1962, p.167). To support his assertion, he pointed out that the British merchants at Canton and Macao had no priest or chaplain belonging to them, adding “I had not in my whole train any person of the clerical character.” But he had forgotten about Jacobus Li. Although Li was employed as an interpreter, he was unquestionably a missionary with a “zeal for making proselytes” (Macartney, 1962, p.167).

A related issue concerns the kind of religion that the British were supposedly eager to preach. In his journal, Macartney said he was accused of being “desirous of introducing the English religion into China.” This would mean Protestantism, which was logical, but only if Macartney was the one who made the religious request. However, as I have just pointed out, the request was made by a Chinese

12 On Li Zibiao, see Wong (2020a) and Harrison (2018). On Matteo Ripa and the Chinese College, see Ripa (1844), Emanuel (1981), and D’Arelli (2008).

13 Archivio Storico della Sacra Congregazione de Propaganda Fide, Scritture originali riferite nei confessi particolari di India e Cina (abbreviated as APF SOCP), Università degli Studi di Napoli l’Orientale. Giovanni Battista Marchini (1757–1823), Procurator in China of the Sacred Congregation de Propaganda Fide, also wrote in a letter from Macao to Propaganda Fide that “*Egli ha intrapreso il viaggio di Pekino per solo motivo di Religione* [he had embarked on the trip to Beijing only for religious reasons]” (APF SOCP, b.68, f.635). The letters and other archival materials from Archivium Propaganda Fide and Archivio Storico dell’Università degli Studi di Napoli l’Orientale were mostly written in Latin. I thank Jacopo Dellapasqu and Silvia Nico for the English translation.

Catholic missionary. Surely Jacobus Li would not have had any desire to promote Protestantism in China. Macartney also brought up another interesting issue: the Qing court was aware that the British “had been anciently of the same religion as the Portuguese and other missionaries, and had adopted another” (Macartney, 1962, p.167). This was surprising to Macartney, and would be surprising to those who read the second edict in its original too, because the Chinese version does not carry this message. It mentions *Tianzhujiao* 天主教 as the faith adopted by the British; and, as Parker explains, “the term is now usually confined to the Roman Catholic faith” (Parker, 1896, p.52, n.9). When it comes to the request, the edict says, “now your ambassador wishes that we would allow the foreigners to preach freely” (The First Historical Archives of China, 1996, p.174). No specific religion is mentioned. Why, then, did Macartney believe that the request referred to “the English religion”? It was because of the Latin translation. The translators of the second edict, Louis de Poirot (1735–1814) and Nicholas Joseph Raux (1754–1801), rendered *Tianzhujiao* as “the true religion” (*verae religionis*) and specified that Macartney wanted to have freedom in preaching the English religion (*Nunc vestri legati intentio esset propagare Anglicanam Vestram Religionem*). Obviously, they—without any knowledge that the request was made by a Catholic priest like themselves—assumed that the British ambassador would hope to secure the right to preach his own religion, “the English religion.” Thus Macartney was correct in speculating that the source of the confusion was the missionaries (Macartney, 1962, p.167). He must have been much relieved to be confirmed by Songyun that there was not such a message in the Chinese and Manchu versions of the edict. According to Macartney, Songyun told him that “if it was to be found in the Latin it must arise from the blunder or malice of the translator” (Macartney, 1962, p.167). But this needs qualifications: it was certainly a mistake in translation, but the mistake was not made out of malicious intent, because Poirot and Raux were close to the embassy and had provided much help and advice during Macartney’s stay in Beijing. Moreover, it is doubtful if Songyun had actually made such a direct and blunt accusation, because Li Zibiao gave quite a different picture:

Sun Ta Gin [Songyun], as a gentle man, did not accuse the European interpreter of that epistle of disloyalty, but apologized for the lack of competence in a foreign language, adding at the same time that this translation was not absolutely authentic (APF SOCP, b.68, f.615v).

In addition to offering an explanation, which apparently pacified Macartney to a certain extent, Songyun also reported their exchange to the court in a memorial submitted on 24 October 1793, three days after his discussion with Macartney. According to Songyun’s report, which identified certain exaggerations and even

false statements, Macartney realized his indiscretion in making the requests and was deeply grateful for the kindness of the Emperor in forgiving him. On the issue of religion, Songyun reported a question from Macartney:

We do not quite understand the clause in the Imperial edict rejecting the practice of religion. Earlier our request was to seek on behalf of the Westerners living in China the kind permission of the Great Emperor to allow them to practise their religion. We do not dare to ask for permission for the British to practise religion in your Capital (The First Historical Archives of China, 1996, p.438).

勅書內指駁行教一條，我等尚不甚明白，從前我等所請係西洋人在中國居住的求大皇帝恩待仍准他們行教，並不敢說要英吉利國的人在京行教。

This question could not have come from Macartney because he had not brought up any religious issue at all, much less a specific request that Western missionaries be allowed to preach in Beijing. Obviously, the culprit was again Jacobus Li. As the only one responsible for interpreting the conversations between Macartney and Songyun, and in order to cover up his request in the embassy's name without the approval or even the knowledge of Macartney, Li had to make up a convincing story that would not arouse the suspicion of either Macartney or Songyun. So he told Songyun that Macartney admitted making the religious request, and at the same time he shifted the focus by saying that the request was not about the British but for the Catholic missionaries in Beijing. It would definitely be easier for the court to accept a request related to the Catholic missionaries than one involving newcomers like the British. After all, the Catholic missionaries had been serving the Qing court in Beijing for a very long time and there was no serious issue. Thus, for Li, this was probably the safest way to solve the problem, while offering a chance to help out the missionaries. Apparently Jacobus Li's plan worked out well. From what information is available now, the court did not make any further queries or comments on this matter.

5 To right the mistakes made in the Imperial edict

But this was not the end of the story, because Macartney was not going to give up easily.

Upon receiving the two edicts and after discussing matters with Songyun, Macartney pushed for some concrete promises or arrangements that would improve the trading situation in Guangzhou. His own account gives us the impression that he put up strong arguments and that Songyun tried very hard to conciliate him with various explanations. Songyun told Macartney that the edicts “were not meant to

convey anything unfavourable or unpleasant.” But because the laws and usages of China were invariable, the Emperor would not consider infringing on them or allowing anything innovative. Songyun also informed Macartney that a new Viceroy [Governor-general] of Guangdong had been appointed, “a man of remarkable benignity to strangers, and whose justice and integrity displayed in his late government of Chekiang [Zhejiang].” Moreover, the new viceroy had been given orders “to make the most minute inquiries at Canton into such vexation and grievances as may exist there” (Macartney, 1962, p.168). Macartney seemed to be happy with these words, describing them as “agreeable declarations.” But he asked for more: a third letter from Qianlong to King George that would clarify doubts and announce decisions. Macartney’s main argument was that expressions in private conversations, no matter how satisfactory the intentions might seem, would not be serviceable, because the public in England could only judge the Emperor’s attitudes from his open letters (IOR/G/12/92, pp.107–108).

Macartney also pointed out the problem of possible mistakes in the Latin translations. With one particular instance confirmed, “it was not unreasonable to imagine some other mistake or insertion might be found there,” he asserted. But he did not say if there were actually any other mistakes, and if so, what these mistakes might be. Although Macartney’s arguments made good sense in general, they could not be applied to Qianlong and his court. His request was easily dismissed by Songyun, who announced that it was “incompatible with the etiquette of the Court” for the Emperor to send another letter after the embassy had left the capital (Macartney, 1962, pp.168–169). Seeing that it was not possible to achieve this goal through Songyun, Macartney then submitted another note to Heshen, making a similar request. Interestingly, the error in translation was emphasized as the chief justification for his fresh appeal.

On 12 November 1793, Songyun tendered a memorial to the court reporting that Macartney had brought him a petition (*bing* 稟) in Chinese. It was immediately sent to the Qing court together with its “original,” which in fact was a Latin translation from the English original. Unfortunately, the Chinese version cannot be found in the 1996 volume of Qing archival material relating to the Macartney mission. This suggests that most likely it had been lost, because the editor of the volume, as we have earlier pointed out, claimed that his team had included all available archival material in China. Not even a new Chinese translation from the Latin made by the Portuguese missionary Joseph-Bernard d’Almeida (1728–1805) at the order of the court can be found (The First Historical Archives of China, 1996, p.198).

According to Songyun’s memorial, the petition was a note from Macartney to express his heartfelt gratitude for the kindness of the Emperor, who offered lavish hospitality and valuable gifts to the embassy (The First Historical Archives of China, 1996, pp.478–479). But Songyun’s memorial provides only a small part of the content

of the so-called “petition.” We can now see in the East India Company’s archives the original note in English recorded as “Note for Cho-chan-tong First Minister [Heshen], Hang-tchou-fou [Hangzhou fu], November 9th 1793” (IOR/G/12/93, vol.2, pp.187–189). Although for the sake of protocol, Macartney addressed his “note” to Heshen instead of Qianlong, it should be seen as one of the most important documents related to the Macartney mission, because it was the first and only official response from the British mission to the two imperial edicts from Qianlong. It is a pity that it escapes the attention of researchers, probably because Macartney did not mention it at all in his journal. But he put down at the end of his 9 November entry, “this night finished my dispatch to Mr. Dundas” (Macartney, 1962, p.177). In the dispatch, Macartney reported sending the note to Heshen, which was included as one of the enclosures.

The note, as Songyun reported, started with “expressions of satisfaction and gratitude” for the way the embassy had been treated since its departure from Beijing. Macartney mentioned in particular the assistance of Songyun, saying that it was the greatest honour to be put under the care of “a Person of a rank so high and qualities so benevolent” during the first leg of the return trip. He also thanked Qianlong for the presents, including the most “valuable and decisive signals of regard” for King George and his representative “in the Characters of happiness under his [Qianlong’s] own hand.” This brought an end to the courteous portion of the note. Macartney then moved quickly to serious business, because the chief reason for writing his note to Heshen was not to express gratitude. In Macartney’s report to Dundas, he explicitly stated that the note “repeats and is, a record in some degree of the Emperor’s late promises to me, and it also sets to right mistakes committed concerning us in the Emperor’s Letter” (IOR/G/12/92, p.109).¹⁴ In other words, Macartney’s note to Heshen enabled the British to remind the Qing authorities that by virtue of Qianlong’s “gracious declaration,” “the grievances or real hardships under which the British Subjects may have labored, at any time in Canton [...would be] for the future be abolished.”

Macartney, however, did not stop at the Guangzhou issue but proceeded immediately to the other requests made to Heshen on 3 October. He reiterated that the requests had “the laudable motive of a desire to increase the communication between the two Nations so fit to esteem each other as Great Britain and China.” The opening of new trading ports in the northern parts of China might bring a mutual advantage because commodities could then be traded at a lower price, Macartney maintained. This served more as a justification for equal footing interaction than actually an explanation for the benefits of trading.

¹⁴ In the following discussions on the note from Macartney to Heshen, quotations are, unless otherwise stated, taken from “Note for Cho-chan-tong First Minister, Hang-tchou-fou, November 9th 1793.” (IOR/G/12/93, vol.2, pp.187–189)

But the most important and serious part of Macartney's note to Heshen was where he attempted "to right mistakes committed concerning us in the Emperor's Letter" (IOR/G/12/92, p.109). In his journal as well as his report to Dundas, Macartney very specifically talked about two errors in Qianlong's edict. First, the Chinese Emperor misunderstood that the earlier requests for better trading conditions were from Macartney personally and did not represent the wishes of the British King. Second, the embassy wanted free propagation of the Anglican religion in China. Both issues were brought up in the note to Heshen, dated 9 November.

As for the former issue, Macartney claimed that he understood it reflected "a style of Chinese respect." This might be a message to the Qing authorities that Macartney accepted the way the Chinese handled unwelcome requests. On the other hand, it was in a way a strong suggestion that the British handled matters in a different "style." For the latter, he reassured that the British were not eager to make proselytes, repeating his point that neither the British merchants in Guangzhou nor Macartney himself had brought along any priests or chaplains. Because these ideas had already been conveyed to Songyun in clear terms, the repetition suggests that Macartney was not confident that Songyun would accurately relay his ideas to the Emperor. It was necessary for him to write directly to Qianlong via Heshen.

At this point, Macartney raised the question of whether the British had deserted "the true faith." He wrote in a particularly serious manner that he thought it was "his duty to announce to the Colao [閣老, i.e., Heshen] for his Imperial Majesty's knowledge" that this piece of information had been inappropriately inserted into the Latin translation of the second edict, as it could not be found in the Chinese and Manchu versions. As we have seen, it was Songyun who told Macartney about this. Macartney then proposed a remedy. He told Heshen that when the embassy got to Guangzhou, he would return the Emperor's letters to Heshen for examination.

Given the indifferent attitude of Macartney towards religious matters, it is clear that the English church was not Macartney's prime concern. After all, what was the point of arguing with Heshen or any other Chinese official if the question was whether the British were believers of the Roman Church or Protestantism? The following sentence in the note reveals the real focus:

[Upon examining the Latin translation, Heshen] may find other expressions also altered in such a manner as to diminish the sentiments of the friendship intended to be conveyed by His Imperial Majesty to the King of Great Britain in which case the Colao would not doubt be pleased to change them for others more genuine and affectionate.

The error over religions in the translation was an excuse. It was to bring up a more serious issue. For the first time, Macartney revealed his discontent over the edict's expressions of China's relationship with Britain. From the above quotation, we can

tell that Macartney found the edict neither genuine nor affectionate enough. He was obviously referring to the condescending tone, the so-called Celestial discourse, in Qianlong's letter. As we have pointed out earlier, this was related to the most sensitive and central issue of the embassy: whether China and England were equal in status.

Obviously, Macartney was referencing the Latin translation of the edict. But the problem was: how could he be sure that the unfriendly expressions were only found in the Latin translation and not in the Chinese and Manchu versions? On the question of the English religion, it was Songyun who told him that there was a mistake in the Latin translation, but Songyun did not say anything about the edict's representations of China's relations with the British. The only person who could read Chinese and Latin was Li Zibiao, the interpreter, but he could not be the one who told Macartney that the Latin translation presented a wrong picture from the original. In the first place, Macartney did not say so, not even in his report to Dundas. Secondly, there was no reason why Li Zibiao should misinform Macartney that the unfriendly expressions came from the Latin translators. It would not do him any good to sabotage the mission. Furthermore, we can be certain that the Chinese original of the edict was more explicit in its condescending tone and attitude than the Latin translation. We shall soon see, the translators of the edict confessed that they had deliberately made some changes in their translation—modifications that were aimed at softening the tone and removing some undesirable expressions of the original edict.

In short, Macartney used the Latin translation of the edict as an pretext to articulate his discontent with the edicts, and wanted to have them changed. But, as we have seen, his request for a third letter from Qianlong had been rejected by Songyun on the quite reasonable grounds that it was not possible to ask the Emperor to do things against his will. Taking the pretext of correcting some mistakes in translation, Macartney renewed the request in a more indirect way. Instead of criticizing the edict itself, he censured the translation. Interestingly, he was applying the same “trick” of Qianlong: adopting “a style of Chinese respect” to put the blame on the subordinates for some unwelcome deeds of the master? This is a clever tactic. After all, rulers always need scapegoats.

6 The innocent translators

So the Latin translators of the edict were made the scapegoats. At that point, Macartney had no idea that the translation had been made by some friendly missionaries. He must have thought that it was done by Joseph-Bernard d'Almeida, a Portuguese missionary appointed by the court as the chief interpreter for

Macartney's visit. Macartney had been warned even before the first meeting with d'Almeida on 23 August 1793 that he was a negative factor (Macartney, 1962, p.103). After the meeting, Macartney developed a strong aversion to d'Almeida, fully convinced that he was "a man of a malignant disposition, jealous of all Europeans, except those of his own nation, and particularly unfriendly to the English" (Macartney, 1962, p.93). One incident that deeply upset Macartney was that d'Almeida advised against Macartney's desire to take residence in Beijing instead of staying on the outskirts of the city when the embassy first arrived (Staunton et al., 1799, pp.29–30). Certainly, Macartney would not mind blaming d'Almeida for the misleading translation.

Unfortunately Macartney was wrong. D'Almeida was not involved in the translation of Qianlong's second edict, which was actually rendered by Louis de Poirot and Nicholas Joseph Raux. These two French priests were, as we have noted, friends of the embassy. On 29 September 1794, almost a year after Macartney had left Beijing, Poirot wrote a letter to Macartney, giving him a detailed account of the process of translating the second edict (An Important Collection of...a, doc. 308). He told Macartney how he and Raux were summoned hastily to translate the Emperor's letter one day when they were having supper. The letter was a rough draft in Chinese, which was so badly written that only the official who brought the letter could understand it. The official read it out sentence by sentence, and the two missionaries translated each sentence into Latin. They soon spotted a red flag: the edict mentioned that the British requested free preaching right in China. They felt this was unlikely because they knew the British were only interested in commerce, and religious matters were not on the agenda of the mission. But the official did not listen to them and insisted that they should translate the edict accurately. They had to oblige and could not make a substantial change in the translation because, according to Poirot, the court might send someone to check their work. This was not an evasive excuse because we see in Qing documents that during the mission d'Almeida was asked to examine the translations several times (The First Historical Archives of China, 1996, p.145).

In the letter, Poirot also talked about the question of the British adopting a new religion. He affirmed that it had been "more than a century that it has been known in China." This was because some English merchants had carried watches "with very indecent miniatures" to Guangzhou, and Christians of China, who were reproached for this, reported that it was the English, the Swedes and the Dutch who had abandoned their ancient religion.

The most important issue addressed by Poirot had to do with changes in the edict. Acknowledging that the translators had "modified the [Emperor's] expressions in one part and another," the question became: what did they actually change? Poirot said:

What we have been able to do is to insert in the Imperial Reply all the terms of respect for his Britannic Majesty: for they treat our Kings like their petty Chiefs who were but Slaves of the Emperor (An Important Collection of...a, doc. 308).

This is important, because it sent a clear message that the translation had already softened the condescending tone of the original letter and enhanced the status of the British King. There was thus no reason for Macartney to put the blame on the translation of the edict for being unfriendly and not genuine or affectionate enough. The original was even more denigrating to the British.

Poirot's letter was first brought to the attention of academics by Earl H. Pritchard (1907–1995), an expert in early Sino-British relations. In 1934, he compiled from the Charles W. Wason Collection at Cornell University some letters written by the missionaries in Beijing to Macartney (Pritchard, 1934). Poirot's letter of 29 September 1794 was among them. For this reason, its contents are not unfamiliar to scholars working on the Macartney Mission. But why did Poirot write this letter a year after the departure of the mission? We can now see that it was a response to Macartney's note to Heshen dated 9 November 1793: Poirot was in fact attempting to answer the queries, if not attacks, on the Latin translation of the second edict. Obviously, Poirot and Raux were given access to Macartney's note, probably by d'Almeida, who was responsible for translating.

One interesting point to note is that Poirot in his letter to Macartney urged the latter “not to ponder too deeply” the negative comments made by others, mainly Jean-Joseph de Grammont (1736–1812), another French Jesuit in the Qing court. De Grammont actually wrote to Macartney several times, before and during the Mission, volunteering to serve as an interpreter for Macartney. In the letters, he tipped Macartney off that d'Almeida, eager to safeguard Portuguese trade and other interests in Macao, was going to jeopardize the Mission. But Poirot criticized de Grammont as being too imaginative and often bringing dangers to the fellow missionaries. It was for this reason that d'Almeida did not want to include de Grammont in the team of interpreters for the mission. On the other hand, Poirot said that he had witnessed d'Almeida praising the embassy at Jehol. He even said that d'Almeida would like to see the embassy succeed in getting trading posts and factories in other parts of China.

7 Conclusion

Despite accepting the notion of “a style of Chinese respect” and making the translators scapegoats, Macartney failed to convince Qianlong to make changes either to the original or the translation of his edicts. From the available archival

materials, we can be sure that Macartney's note to Heshen did reach the court through the memorial of Songyun, and another Chinese translation was provided by d'Almeida from the Latin version (The First Historical Archives of China, 1996, p.198). But nowhere can we find any response, reply, or follow-up action from the Chinese. The third letter from Qianlong to King George III did not come until the last couple of days before Qianlong abdicated the throne to his son Jiaqing 嘉慶 (1760–1820; r.1796–1820). It had nothing to do with Macartney's note, and was merely a courtesy reply to King George's letter dated 20 June 1795 after the embassy had returned home (Department of Historical Documents of the Palace Museum, 1964, pp.158–159).¹⁵

Likewise, we do not see any response from the British side. It might be possible that a response was overlooked by Dundas because the note was sent along with a 30-page report and 20 enclosures totalling more than 100 pages. In his report, Macartney stated very gently that he wanted to correct some mistakes in the edict with the note, without specifying that these mistakes were related to the status of Britain. In other words, he did not emphasize to Dundas the point that the Qing government considered Britain to be its vassal. Macartney's action does not seem justifiable, given the seriousness of the issue. It tells us that Macartney, for good reasons, did not want the mission to be seen as a failure, and in particular, he did not want to give the impression that the pride of the British had been wounded.

In any case, Macartney's note is of great importance to our understanding of early Sino-British relations. By emphasizing "a style of Chinese respect," it unambiguously informed Qianlong that the ambassador was not happy with the way the edicts depicted the relationship and status of the two nations. This however would not harm the feeling of Qianlong as Macartney was only censuring the Latin translation. On the other hand, this discontent was not brought home; and even if someone in Great Britain was anxious about the edicts, Macartney had at least made a protest and even requested to revise the edict, at least its translation. This demonstrates how skilful a diplomat Macartney was.

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¹⁵ For King George's letter, see "English Copy of His Majesty's Letter to the Emperor of China dated 20th June 1795," (IOR/G/12/93, vol.2, pp.327–330); "Latin Copy of Ditto," (pp.337–341). Its Chinese version was translated by George Thomas Staunton (The First Historical Archives of China, 1996, pp.230–232).

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