CONFUCIANISM AND THE MACARTNEY MISSION: DISPELLING THE MYTH OF CHINESE ARROGANCE

Sana Shakir

“Every circumstance concerning us and every word that falls from our lips is minutely reported and remembered…We have indeed been very narrowly watched, and all our customs, habits and proceeding, even of the most trivial nature, observed with an inquisitiveness and jealousy which surpassed all that we had read of in the history of China. But we endeavored to always put the best face upon everything, and to preserve a perfect serenity of countenance upon all occasions.”

-Lord Macartney

“There is nothing we lack, as your principal envoy and others have themselves observed. We have never set much store on strange or indigenous objects, nor do we need any more of your country’s manufactures.”

-Qianlong

INTRODUCTION

The West has long regarded China as a self-isolated entity—an entity, nonetheless, that has been generally categorized as arrogant and unreceptive to foreign ideas and diplomatic relations. Yet while the West has been quick to accuse China of this self-conceit, it has, in turn, embraced the very rhetoric of arrogance that it so enthusiastically accuses China of. The self-restraint and frequent indifference that the Chinese have shown can not merely be simplified into expressions of conceit and superiority. To do so, as most of the West has indeed already accomplished, would do a great injustice to a civilization whose inter-workings are intricate and complex, to say the least.

In order to dispel this oversimplified theory of arrogance that has been attributed to the Chinese, it is necessary to understand the context under which China regarded foreign powers and relations, as well as how it regarded its relative position in the international sphere. Westerners frequently evoke the Qing Dynasty, and more specifically, the Macartney Mission, as a pivotal point in Chinese-Anglo relations. Indeed, the Macartney Mission in 1793 drastically altered the way in which China and its people would forever be perceived by the West. However, to the credit of perhaps Lord Macartney and the remainder of the British assembly that was sent to China, there were indeed instances in which the manner of the Chinese could be perceived as hostile and condescending. It is critical, then, to delve further into this apparent misunderstanding and seek the underlying cause of the manner in which the Chinese regarded foreign influences, particularly the way in which the Chinese regarded the British at the time of the Macartney Mission. It was not mere arrogance or self-conceit which led to the failure of the Macartney Mission—rather, it was an ideological adherence to Confucianism and its teachings which prevented the Chinese from openly embracing the ideas and
agreements put forth by the British. Confucianism, a political, social, economic and cultural construct which governed China since its legitimization by the Chinese government during the Han Dynasty, had fully immersed itself into every sphere of Chinese thought. In turn, many of the teachings and writings of Confucius lent way to a certain cultural awareness, which, in turn, was interpreted by foreigners (i.e. the British) as a form of arrogance. The ideological adherence of the Chinese to Confucianism was misinterpreted by the British envoys of the Macartney Mission as Chinese arrogance and a lack of receptiveness to foreign influences, and it was precisely this misinterpretation which inevitably led to the failure of the mission in 1793. The following paper seeks to further expand upon this notion by examining the teachings of Confucianism and how they penetrated into both Chinese thought and practice, as well as by examining the Macartney Mission and its objectives and also by expanding upon how its failure was not a result of Chinese arrogance but rather a result of the infiltration of Confucianism into the political, social, economic, and cultural spheres of Chinese life.

HISTORIOGRAPHY

Many historians have regarded the failure of the Macartney Mission as a result of the arrogance of the Chinese and their lack of receptiveness to agreements with foreign nations. In fact, what the British perceived to be the ultimate act of arrogance was the Chinese Emperor Qianlong’s letter to the King of England in 1793 where he wrote (in response to a request from Lord Macartney’s for an opening of trade): “There is nothing we lack, as your principal envoy and others have themselves observed. We have never set much store on strange or indigenous objects, nor do we need any more of your country’s manufactures.”¹ The Macartney Mission as whole, especially the Emperor’s letter to the King of England, drastically altered the manner in which China would be regarded by the Western world. Prior to the Macartney Mission, Voltaire’s strong admiration for China still greatly influenced European minds.² In fact, China was regarded as:

A magnificent spectacle: an empire far larger than any Europe had known since the fall of Rome, governed by a central administration through officers appointed, removed, transferred, or dismissed at the pleasure of the Throne, unhampered by feudal privileges or local powers. It possessed a vast historical record far more accurate, better dated, and reaching back farther than any comparable achievement of the West.³

The Emperor was seen as an enlightened monarch who would regard Great Britain also as a powerful and civilized state, and one which would grant the requests of the British without hesitation.\(^4\) However, the aftermath of the mission saw a drastically altered conception of China by the Western World and by the middle of the nineteenth century, completely different views of China had prevailed. It was seen as “weak, corrupt, ill-governed, racked by rebellions, swept by famine, ignorant of science, indifferent to progress, and still pagan.”\(^5\) There was also the prevailing belief held among most Europeans, particularly the British, of the arrogance of the Chinese, who believed themselves to be both militarily and culturally superior to the West. Thus, the failure of the Macartney mission was attributed to a lack of receptiveness on the behalf of the Chinese, and China has been accused of arrogance ever since. Even many renowned scholars of Chinese history posit that it was indeed arrogance on the part of the Chinese which prevented them from accepting the requests made by the British, which, in the long run, would have indeed been economically beneficial for the Chinese. Joanna Waley-Cohen’s \textit{The Sextants of Beijing} argues against the image of China that is frequently portrayed by the West, as an isolationist entity that is hostile to and ignorant of the rest of the world outside of its borders, and irrationally resistant to change and innovation. She explains that:

China has a long history and, until the last two hundred years, has been accustomed to exert authority over foreigners wishing to interact with it, at either the official or the individual level, as well as over those who live within its boundaries. This does not mean that China has been inimical to knowledge and ideas that come from abroad, merely that it has preferred to exercise caution in allowing the free circulation of notions potentially subversive to the ability to operate on its own terms. The ongoing quest to strike a balance between the absorption of foreign influences and the retention of autonomy and a distinctive national identity in many ways represents a more sophisticated continuation of past struggles…\(^6\)

Waley-Cohen argues that Qianlong’s rejection of the Macartney Mission, in particular his letter to the King of England, has been taken at face value and retrospectively regarded as arrogance. She points out that when Qianlong issued the letter, he was simultaneously attempting to acquire European-style artillery, furthering her argument that China has been “energetically and enthusiastically engaged with the outside world, permitting, encouraging, and seeking the circulation of foreign goods and ideas.”\(^7\) In fact, she points out that during the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, “imperial enthusiasm for European and other imports—a preoccupation that mirrored the eighteenth-century craze for chinoiserie—was intense and spearheaded a widespread passion for things European

\(^4\) McAleavy, \textit{Modern}, p. 43  
\(^5\) Fitzgerald, \textit{Chinese View}, p. 34.  
\(^7\) Waley-Cohen, \textit{Sextants}, p. 5.
among the elite in China.” Waley-Cohen argues that when the occasion has arisen where China has indeed been hostile to foreign influences, it has been for good reason. The rejection of the Macartney Mission and in turn the restriction of trade with the West in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was not out of ignorance, or even arrogance, but rather a well-calculated measure executed by the Chinese, who knew all too well the imperial aspirations of the West. She refutes the common perceptions which attribute the failure of the Macartney Mission as a result of “comprehensive Chinese antagonism to trade, a rigid adherence to a hierarchical structure of foreign relations enveloped in ritual formalities and an overall resistance to innovation and change.” She points out that “those in authority have been consistently reluctant to allow free rein to any kind of foreign ideology, for fear of losing political and moral control over that portion of the population for whom the foreign ideology might come to prevail over Chinese values and traditions.”

Where Waley-Cohen’s argument differs from the analysis presented below, however, is the fact that she attributes Chinese hostility towards the West as a result of its having been ruled by its aggressive northern neighbors for much of its dynastic history. China was extremely wary of foreign influences and approached any measure externally imposed with the utmost caution and sometimes even hostility. She does, however, prove with sufficient evidence that China’s reserve and restraint should not be defined as a type of isolationism or even arrogance. Waley-Cohen’s argument is lacking however, in that it does not place adequate emphasis on the role of Confucianism, and the crucial effects that its teachings imposed upon Sino-Anglo relations. Confucianism’s emphasis on hierarchy and harmony, as well as on ritual has greatly impacted the way in which China and its imperial government dealt with foreign powers. Thus, while Waley-Cohen’s argument is adequately supported, it lacks a comprehensive analysis of one of the most significant elements of Chinese culture and society. The following analysis seeks to further Waley-Cohen’s argument by emphasizing the role of Confucianism in Chinese society, and its profound effects on Chinese foreign relations. The following argument seeks to negate the prevalent theory which argues Chinese arrogance as the primary cause for the failure of the Macartney Mission. It was the teachings of Confucianism that have contributed much to the thought and action of the Chinese, and thus it was the ideological adherence to Confucianism which was mistakenly interpreted as Chinese arrogance by the West.

CONFUCIANISM

In order to effectively argue the misinterpretation of Chinese ideological adherence to Confucianism for arrogance, as was done by the British envoy during the Macartney Mission, it is first necessary to examine the teachings and the practice of Confucianism in China. Confucianism is an ethical and philosophical system which originated from the teachings of Kongfu Zi, a Chinese sage. Leon Stover even goes so

---

far as to refer to Confucius as “the empire’s ideological formulator.” Confucianism is a complex system of religious, philosophical, social, and political thought which decisively influenced the course of Imperial China. It was adopted by Emperor Wu during the Han Dynasty as a political system to govern the Chinese empire, and it remained a mainstream Chinese orthodoxy until the 20th century. There are several features of Confucianism, which serve as the underlying premises on which the tradition is founded:

One continuing element is a belief in the eternal truth and universal validity of the founder’s vision of perfected man living in a stable and harmonious sociopolitical order…At the center of this vision… is the ideal of a moral order, perceived by Confucius and validated by sages and historians down the centuries. The moral order is viewed as a set of true and invariable norms for the conduct of life in society. Elaborated in the li, the codified rules of social behavior, the Confucian norms find their perfect embodiment in the well-ordered patriarchal family, which is the microcosm of the order that should prevail in state and society.13

In order for this moral order to prevail, it must be understood and exemplified by the enlightened rulers who live by the norms and spread these norms through virtuous measures such as education and social control.14 Stover goes on to define the norms in the Confucian tradition as such:

The values implicit in the Confucian vision are those of harmony, stability, and hierarchy. Moral force is held to be superior to coercion, and morally perfected men are the only ones entitled to manage the affairs of society and the state. Desirable change draws society peacefully back toward the ancient moral order. Undesirable change is violent, precipitated by uncultivated men; it is a sequence of random improvisations which will lead society away from the moral order and into chaos and ruin.15

The preservation of social order, which in turn led to harmony and stability within an empire was the ultimate objective desired by the teachings of Confucianism. Thus, it is crucial to further examine the essential components of the Confucian tradition, the teachings of which established the norms by which this social order could be maintained. The first of these would be ritual, or li. Confucius interpreted rituals not as sacrifices asking for the blessing of gods, but rather as:

12 Stover, State Cult, p.1.  
14 Wright, Confucian Persuasion, p. 5.  
15 Wright, Confucian Persuasion, p. 5.
Ceremonies performed by human agents and embodying the civilized and cultural patterns of behavior developed through generations of human wisdom. They embodied…the ethical core of Chinese society. Moreover, Confucius applied the term “ritual” to actions beyond the formal sacrifices and religious ceremonies to include social rituals: courtesies and accepted standards of behavior – what we today call social mores. He saw these time-honored and traditional rituals as the basis of human civilization, and he felt that only a civilized society could have a stable, unified, and enduring social order.\(^{16}\)

Thus, there were essentially a set of accepted values and norms of behavior in the basic social institutions, as well as in basic human relationships. Confucianism emphasizes the idea that all human relationships involve a set of defined roles and mutual obligations – each member in a relationship should recognize his or her particular role and thus act accordingly.\(^{17}\) Confucianism emphasizes five human relationships: between ruler and subject, father and son, husband and wife, older brother and younger brother, as well as between friends.\(^{18}\) By conforming to his or her role, the reform and thus advancement of society could take hold. This reform and progress of society would in turn lead to a stable and harmonious social order.

Essentially, Confucianism is based on an ancient religious foundation used to establish social institutions, values, and overlying ideals of traditional Chinese society. The imperial state, in the course of Chinese history, has continuously promoted Confucian values to maintain law and order, and set the standards for appropriate social behavior. The imperial government also sponsored the funding of morality books which encouraged the practice of Confucianism and its values: respect for one’s parents and authority figures, loyalty to the government, and conforming to one’s role within society.\(^{19}\) Thus, Confucian values became internalized within the members of Chinese society, whether they are the peasants or the high-class government officials. Much of this had to do with the fact that the Confucian ideals and values were so closely linked to everyday life. Fulfilling one’s social obligations (i.e. being an obedient wife, a good friend, etc.) seem so familiar to the average citizen, yet by consciously realizing one’s potential and thus acting accordingly, the ideal of social and moral fulfillment could be achieved. At the same time, the institutions of Confucianism are not a separate church, rather they are those of family, society, and state. Those responsible for carrying out Confucianism are not priests or ministers, but rather teachers, parents, government officials, etc. It is precisely because of this fact that Confucianism became a part of the “Chinese social fabric and way of life; to Confucians, everyday life was the arena of religion.”\(^{20}\) Confucianism was often seen as a source of hope for China and the core of what it meant to be Chinese.

---

\(^{17}\) Yang, *Religion*, p. 20.
\(^{19}\) Yang, *Religion*, p. 21.
Confucianism, in a sense, gave rise to a type of Chinese exceptionalism that characterized the Chinese character for much of its dynastic character. Confucianism, while a religion (although this point is debated by some), was also a way of life. Its teachings that were primarily based on the importance of established social standards of behavior, as well as the importance of conforming to one’s role in society, became internalized not only with the masses, but within the imperial government itself. Indeed, the Emperor saw himself as a patriarchal figure, whose duty it was to see that the needs of his citizens were met. The important point to note, however, in this descriptive analysis of Confucianism is the strict adherence to cultural traditions and this internalized view of a type of social hierarchy that was necessary to preserve social order. It was precisely this attitude that governed much of the Sino-Anglo foreign relations during the dynastic history of the Chinese. Confucianism, and the fulfillment of the Confucian ideals were synonymous with Chinese society itself, and it was only through the realization of these values could social harmony and stability be achieved.

THE MACARTNEY MISSION

It was precisely this internalization of the Confucian ideals which was misinterpreted by the West, particularly Lord Macartney and his British embassy as a form of Chinese arrogance, during the Macartney Mission in 1792. Lord Macartney traveled to China with certain objectives in mind. He was given command to:

1. To obtain one or two cessions of territory near to the tea- and silk-producing and woolen-consuming areas, where English traders might reside, and where English jurisdiction might be exercised;
2. To extend British trade and commerce throughout China if possible by negotiation of a commercial treaty and the opening of new ports under more favorable conditions than at Canton;
3. To establish a resident minister at Peking;
4. To abolish existing abuses and to obtain assurance that they would not be revived;
5. To create at Peking a stronger taste for known British products and a desire for hitherto unknown products;
6. To open Japan, Cochin China, and the Eastern Islands to British trade by means of treaties.21

The Ambassador was to obtain all the information—political, social, philosophical, military, economic, cultural, intellectual, about China, and he was also to impress upon China the strength and ability of the Great Britain in order to perhaps initiate an ongoing intercourse between the two nations.22 He was also instructed to dispel any notions of

Britain’s imperial aspirations in the Eastern World. Needless, despite the lofty ambitions of the mission, Lord Macartney was fairly confident in his ability and was reassured that the Chinese would also see the benefits of initiating trade agreements with the British, and allowing a British presence in China to take presence—he was of course, assuming that China also, like itself, would respect and revere a great Western power such as Great Britain.

The Macartney Mission was, in the eyes of the British, a failure. There has been considerable debate surrounding the issue of why the Chinese refused to honor any of the requests made by the British. W. E. Soothill indicates that the “envoy and his staff were totally ignorant of the normal methods of approach. They carried no presents; they failed to do the obeisance (kotow), without explaining the reason; their dress was unimposing; they ‘buttered no paws’; and had neither style nor tone to impress the court.” It is indeed true that there were misunderstandings on the sides of both parties. Macartney assumed that diplomatic relations could be carried out in China as they were carried out in Europe, and Qianlong assumed that Macartney would quite willingly fall into the Qing ritual practices which characteristic upon receiving foreign dignitaries in China. The exchanging of gifts was also the cause of much misunderstanding: Macartney assumed that the golden scepter that Qianlong gave was of little material value and thus essentially worthless—in truth, the golden scepter was a symbol of peace and prosperity. On the same premise, Qianlong also dismissed the lavish presents brought to him by the embassy—he did not think that they were substantially different or better than European products he had already come across.

Of more significance as well was the miscommunication that arose as a result of the British embassy’s misunderstanding of the importance of ritual within Chinese society. Macartney saw the kotow as an expression which blatantly symbolized the inferiority of the British King to that of the Chinese Emperor. However, this again was a misunderstanding of a tradition that had been practiced in China for centuries. Imperial ritual that is not performed correctly, in the eyes of the Chinese, could potentially result in natural disasters, including the mismanagement of societal affairs at the hands of an incompetent ruler. This ritual was seen as a form of preserving a social order, or in other words, a form of hierarchy within the Kingdom:

Classification serves to organize (not fix) people and things...in conjunction with cosmically emerging patterns. The engagement between cosmic pattern and human classification continually channels action way from extremes and toward a contingent spatial center that temporarily constitutes a cosmo-moral order made up of the Cosmos, earth, and humanity. This process is discernible in a variety of textual sources under the rubric ‘centering,’

---

24 W.E. Soothill, China and the West (London: Oxford University Press, 1925), p. 73.
26 Waley-Cohen, Sextants, p. 105.
fengjian shi zhong, negotiating a mean between overabundance and scarcity. Centering is also implicitly evoked in criticisms of those who go too far or do not do enough, in reminders to officials that they should be neither too humble nor too haughty...all human actions are channeled between extremes, and...this channeling embodies the centering process. As it does so, channeling organizes hierarchical relationships that are considered to be the proper order of the world at the moment of ritual constitution. To put it another way, the centering process allows the differentiation and inclusion of the powers of others into the emperor’s rulership as desirable superior/inferior relations. 28

The British embassy was requesting favors from the Emperor, and thus, it was only natural that the kotow be performed, symbolizing the relationship between the Emperor and the King of England. The kotow was not symbolic of Chinese arrogance; rather it was an intrinsic part of Qing Court ritual, which was used to establish a hierarchical relationship between the emperor and the respective individual performing the gesture. The fulfillment of the kotow was seen as a means of preserving the social and moral order of society—a fundamental principle of Confucianism. Nevertheless, this view that the mission failed because Macartney refused to fulfill the kotow, while held by many, is rightly negated by Pritchard, who points out that the Dutch Embassies, who on multiple occasions (1655, 1668, and 1795), performed the ceremony and yet whose requests were also not met. 29 It was not cultural arrogance that caused the Chinese to refuse any of the British requests—rather, it was largely a mixture of factors, most notably the apprehension of the Chinese in engaging in trade and diplomatic relations with the Western world, of whose imperial nature the Chinese knew all too well.

The Chinese were not unaware of the imperial nature of the Western World. The Qing Dynasty possessed a great deal of sophistication concerning international affairs, and by the onset of the eighteenth century, they were already extremely wary of Europeans. 30 They had already become familiar with them through court missionaries and periodic embassies, as well as through the Canton trade and other various European imperial pursuits in Asia. 31

Macao, hard by China’s shores, had for two centuries been a Portuguese enclave, Manila had been dominated by Spain for almost as long, and Batavia was the center of the Netherlands’ by now a formidable colonial power in Southeast Asia. Each was home to a sizable community of expatriate Chinese, to whom Europeans had on occasion shown great animosity. In the Philippines, in Batavia, and

in Dutch-occupied Taiwan, for instance, Chinese had more than once been attacked and massacred, sometimes in vast numbers. British imperial expansion, by now implying on the edges of Chinese territory, had not yet shown any such evidence of ill will. But even though the Qing clearly grasped the distinctions between the European countries, Britain was at least potentially tarred with the same brush.  

As Pritchard points out, the Chinese were fearful of change. While they may have benefited economically from the agreement with Britain, they were fearful of the undesirable change which “is violent, precipitated by uncultivated men; it is a sequence of random improvisations which will lead society away from the moral order and into chaos and ruin” — one of the concepts adapted from Confucianism. Indeed, the British were seen as uncultivated men (i.e. their refusal to perform the kotow, their lack of cultural understanding) and forming relations with such an uncultivated society would, in turn, lead to moral chaos and social disorder within Chinese society itself. It is also important to note that the requests themselves that the British proposed seemed illogical to the Chinese, thus furthering their conviction of Britain’s hidden imperial pursuits:

They wanted an embassy in Beijing, but foreigners resident in the capital would be too far away from their fellow countrymen trading in Canton to serve much purpose; they would simply by another group requiring supervision. They wanted more trade out of more ports, but Chinese authorities saw no reason for the British to be treated differently from other foreigners. The goods of the British were readily available through the hong system based in Canton, which ensured equal treatment of all Westerners. From China’s point of view, Qianlong suggested, unmediated trade was just too risky; it threatened social order because too often greed led to conflict or at least to divided loyalties.

Whether the Chinese government saw this moral chaos and social disorder embodied in the imperial aspirations of the British is unknown, yet there was certainly a sense of caution on the part of the Chinese to refrain from making any agreements with foreign power who was to be feared.

While many historians could reluctantly acknowledge that Qianlong and the Chinese officials did not exhibit any signs of blatant arrogance towards Macartney and his officials during the mission, they would be quick to point out that Qianlong’s famous assertion to the king of England was without a sign of blatant Chinese arrogance. Indeed, upon face value, it is so. But it is important to look behind the face value of this statement and to understand this assertion of self-sufficiency and public indifference to

32 Waley-Cohen, Sextants, p. 93.
33 Wright, Confucian Persuasion, p. 5.
34 Waley-Cohen, Sextants, p. 105.
European goods was prompt by domestic political agenda and did not reflect objective reality. Qianlong, for several reasons, did not want to make public his interest in the potential of foreign technology and innovations. His motives become clear when we place the incident in the context of late-eighteenth century Chinese politics, and understand that the Manchu Qing dynasty enforced its rule primarily by military means. Simultaneously, “it sought to present to its Chinese subjects and the world at large an image that was both thoroughly Confucian and ethnically evenhanded…This emperor, with his pretensions to universal monarchy, was hardly likely to admit openly to the representative of a foreign ruler an interest that, in Chinese minds, was susceptible of unfavorable interpretation as an intimation of inferiority.” After all, the emperor was, in the Confucian tradition, superior to all those below him, and thus commanded their subordination. In the Chinese view, the emperor was also superior to the rulers of various nations, for they believed that the Chinese emperor had the “divine right to rule” –he was truly the “son of heaven.” Thus, had Qianlong made public his aspirations for foreign technology and goods, he would undermining the very fabric of Chinese society. Much of this public assertion of political and social objectives required to maintain the Confucian tradition that had been practiced throughout the centuries in Chinese society.

CONCLUSION

The Chinese had frequently been portrayed by the Western World as arrogant and unreceptive to foreign ideas and relations. The Macartney Mission is frequently noted as a significant event in Sino-Anglo relations, which essentially altered the way in which the Western world regarded China. Yet the lack of receptiveness that the British embassy faced did not originate from arrogance, rather from a strict adherence to the principles of Confucianism which emphasize preserving a strict social order above all else, for the attainment of social stability as well as harmony. Quite frankly, the British were seen as a threat to the social order of Chinese society. Their imperial aspirations, as well as their lack of cultural understanding led to the refusal of their requests by the Chinese. While many historians maintain that it was a type of Chinese cultural arrogance that caused the failure of the Mission, this is decidedly not so. While the failure of Lord Macartney to perform the kotow perhaps led to hostility on the part of the Chinese, it certainly was not the fundamental cause for the failure of the mission. China’s internalization of Confucian ideals governed its foreign relations, and thus it is essential to understand that it was not arrogance or superiority which dictated its relations with the Western World. Confucianism was the embodiment of the Chinese people and it was the attainment of these Confucian ideals which superseded any other foreign pursuits.

35 Waley-Cohen, Sextants, p. 124.
36 Waley-Cohen, Sextants, p. 125.