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The Origins of the Cathcart and Macartney Embassies to China: New Approaches

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Cities, Migration, and Global Interdependence

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Abstract

Lord Macartney arrived in China in 1793 as the first ambassador ever credentialed to conduct negotiations with the Qing court in the name of the British Crown. Although this was an important first, the British and Chinese empires had been in contact for over a hundred years, with the most important point of contact being the East India Company's operations in Canton. The Macartney embassy, which failed to secure any of its key goals, is often interpreted in light of subsequent events – especially European colonial interventions in China in the 19th century. Older works interpreted it as China's moment of definitive failure to adapt to a changing world, while newer interpretations consider the episode from the perspective of Chinese resistance to mounting British power in Asia. However, the motivations of the British, and the nature of the British empire in east Asia in the late 18th century, have not been similarly re-evaluated. Historical treatment of this episode tends to assume that the British were a unitary polity, with a straightforward ability to identify key interests and work towards them, and that the Macartney embassy reveals the inevitability of what followed in Sino-British relations. This thesis addresses that gap in the scholarship, focusing entirely on the reasoning and motivations behind the British decision to send an ambassador to China. Drawing on New Diplomatic History, it applies a methodology that emphasises the complex nature of the British imperial polity and the overriding importance of its long-standing ties to China through the Canton system. The contemporary British empire was a complex network of groups, individuals, and structures, whose cooperation had to be secured through persuasion and negotiation. This, in turn, meant reconciling multiple ways of engaging with or seeing China, from the Crown's developing view of China as an imperial neighbour of its Indian empire to the East India Company's position as a recipient of privileges under Chinese law. The diplomatic project that culminated in Macartney's arrival in China was ultimately rooted in existing practices of inter-imperial engagement. Looking at the Macartney embassy in a wider context, including its continuities with the previous, abortive Cathcart embassy, shows that despite its unprecedented aspects, it should be understood not only in reference to the events that followed but to the Sino-British patterns of interaction that came before.

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I

Introduction

1.1 Background: The Cathcart and Macartney Embassies

On 19 June, 1793, a British diplomatic mission arrived in China, led by George Macartney, an Irish lord. It was the first delegation to any Chinese government credentialed by a British monarch to reach China successfully, a previous mission — led by Colonel Charles Cathcart — having ended abortively when Cathcart died *en route* in 1789. The embassy would become most famous for a protocol dispute between the ambassador and the Qing court over the appropriateness of the kowtow: the ambassador's refusal to greet the emperor by touching his forehead to the floor, as was customary, triggered a lengthy impasse. Macartney eventually won permission to meet the emperor, but he failed to secure the opening of new ports or the establishment of a permanent resident embassy in Beijing, both signal requests contained in the King George III's official letter to the Qianlong Emperor. Because of these failures, popular fixation on the kowtow dispute, and the catastrophic breakdown in Sino-British relations with the First Opium War fifty years later, the Macartney embassy became a rich source of allegory,[1] which has overshadowed its historiography in the centuries that have since elapsed.

The Macartney embassy is often treated as a hinge point in relations between China and the West. In the 19th century, it was employed polemically to show that Chinese political practices were unacceptable in a European-dominated world order, with the kowtow dispute used to paint Sinocentric obduracy as the root cause of the Opium Wars and the semi-colonial policies towards China that resulted.[2] In the 20th century, a basically similar interpretation of the meaning of the embassy's failure — assumed to stem at least partially from Macartney's refusal to kowtow — bemoaned a lost moment for China to 'enter the world system from a place of strength.'[3] With the post-colonial turn that followed the publication of Edward Said's *Orientalism*, opposing interpretations were offered: that the embassy marked the start of an effort to impose

[1] For instance, Colley, Linda. "Britishness and Otherness: An Argument." *The Journal of British Studies* 31, no. 4 (1992): 309–29.

[2] Quincy Adams, John. "Lecture on the War with China, delivered before the Massachusetts Historical Society, December 1841," in The Chinese Repository vol. XI. Canton: Printed for the proprietors, 1842. 277.

[3] Peyrefitte, Alain. *L'empire Immobile.* Paris: Libraire Arthème Fayard, 1989.

a European ceremonial system upon Asia,[4] or that Qianlong was motivated by resistance to British imperial expansion in Asia.[5]

This thesis is intended both to complement and critique these developments by applying a more theoretical approach to the British side of the Macartney episode than has previously been employed. Its sources, consisting of the surviving official correspondence between ambassadors, ministers, and Company officials, reveal no polity that was blindly and firmly marching down a well-lit instinctual path towards the Opium Wars or the modern world-system. Rather, the British empire in east Asia was made up of a complex array of substrates, dependent but distinctive entities within the imperial polity. Their interests were specific, changeable, and often did not entirely align.

Accordingly, this thesis aims for a broader model of British imperial governance in relation to east Asia in order to put the Macartney embassy into its proper context. By participating in the creation of the embassy, a variety of groups and institutions (notably the British Government and the East India Company) sought not only to reconcile their interests but to create an acceptable symbolic projection of the relationship between them. This thesis will show that many of these interests were linked to narrow ambitions, conventions of behaviour grounded in the past, and competing narratives of how the world worked east of Malacca; and it will consider how the British polity secured unified action despite these divisions. There was considerable contingency and fluidity in the way that 'imperial' policy was worked out, and in the specific nature of the imperial polity that the embassy ultimately sought to represent.

1.2 Research Question

Although new approaches to the Macartney episode have proliferated in recent decades, one question remains under-explored. *What was the reasoning and the motivation behind the British decision to send an embassy to China?*

On this point, explanations (and the question is not always explicitly considered) tend be burdened with three particular tropes.[6] The first is *unitariness*: the idea that the 'British empire' was a single entity capable of creating a formulation of its own best

[4] Hevia, James. "'The Ultimate Gesture of Deference and Debasement': Kowtowing in China," *Past & Present* 203, no. 3 (2009): 212–234.
[5] Harrison, Henrietta. "The Qianlong Emperor's Letter to George III and the Early-Twentieth-Century Origins of Ideas about Traditional China's Foreign Relations." *The American Historical Review* 122, no. 2 (2017): 680–701.
[6] For the example *par excellence* of all three tropes, see Peyrefitte, *L'empire Immobile*.

interests that were self-evident rather than contingent on internal controversy. The second is *inevitability*: that the embassy was simply a step in a process of European penetration and colonisation of China that, barring effective Chinese resistance, could only ever have unfolded along a single historical path.[7] The third is *predictiveness*: presuming that, in addition to being a step on that road, the embassy is unique moment in which the shape of the late 19th-century colonial order in east Asia can be discerned, even though that order would not begin to take shape until the First Opium War, fifty years later. Taken together, these tropes present the embassy as the moment in which 'the British' deliberately and decisively fired the starting pistol on a hundred and fifty years of active colonialism in China. This paper will address the research question with a particular view to confronting these tropes and suggesting a different basis for framing, contextualising, and deploying the historiographical meaning(s) ascribed to this episode.

The scope of this paper runs from 1784 (when the first concrete discussions of Cathcart's embassy appear in the sources) to 1793, ending with Macartney's arrival in China. It specifically avoids discussion of events in China or the embassy's consequences, but covers both the Cathcart and Macartney embassies. Although work has been done on this topic, it is mostly narrative history.[8] This thesis aims not only to examine how the process unfolded but what it meant for the British empire in 18th-century Asia to *reason*, to be *motivated*, and to *act* at all.

1.3 Historical Context and Problems

The British empire was a complex system of constituent parts whose interrelationship was fairly fluid and not wholly defined, and which (especially the Government and the East India Company, themselves fluid aggregations of many individuals and factions) influenced the embassy-formation process in different directions and to different ends, while the ambassadors themselves exercised significant autonomy in reconciling them. Rather than marking an inevitable path towards the Opium Wars, the embassies were formed in reference to long-standing practices of Sino-British relations. The image of the British empire replicated in the embassies was rooted solidly in its 18th-century structure, involving an interplay of semi-autonomous substrates capable of embracing diplomatic ambiguity and jurisdictional complexity.

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[7] Bellamy, Andrew. "Lord Macartney's Duelling Fates: Writing, Reading and Revising the Macartney Embassy, 1792–1804." *Britain and the World* 15, no. 1 (2022): 66–85. Bellamy deals with the *inevitability* trope in public opinion about the results of the embassy, but not as closely with its formative period.

[8] Pritchard, Edward. "The Instructions of the East India Company to Lord Macartney on His Embassy to China and His Reports to the Company, 1792–4. Part I: Instructions from the Company." *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain & Ireland* 70, no. 2 (1938): 201–30.

In order to account for this layered and multifaceted context, and to invest the problems it poses to historical understanding with appropriate importance, this thesis looks to understand the embassy-formation process within a specific diplomatic *ecosystem*. This approach avoids the tropes of a 'clash of civilisations,' especially those connected to unitary, inevitable, or predictive actions and outcomes, and instead emphasises the agency and perspective of a multiplicity of actors.

The idea that diplomatic, commercial, and cultural encounters can be conceived in terms of an 'ecosystem' opens up valuable methods of understanding the past, but also creates substantial challenges. Ecosystems seldom lend themselves to straightforward boundaries, and moreover exist across time as well as space. Some Company documents plunge deep into the Middle Ages to support their view of the Chinese political system,[9] and the embassy-formation process periodically occasioned interactions with places outside China and outside the British empire.[10] If the idea of an ecosystem is at the heart of a historical methodology, then deciding how far it extends is an important question.

The diplomatic relationship between the British and Chinese empires far predated the 'first' British embassy. As we will see, British experiences in China, which extended over a hundred years to the beginning of British trade on the China coast, cumulatively constituted a knowledge base from which a framework of Sino-British relations could be constructed, understood, and reproduced in policy.[11] This Sino-British framework incorporated two distinct, but highly intertwined, dimensions: the internal relationship of the components of the British polity, like the Crown and the East India Company, which was heavily determined by the differing sources and natures of their relationship with China; and the Chinese political-commercial system, which was interpreted not only as an obstacle to 'British' interests (however defined) but also the necessary condition for their fulfilment. The assumption that success for the embassy would come only from successfully working within it is never challenged in the British sources.

Within this ecosystem, a large variety of actors influenced the formation of the embassies, including individuals (such as the ambassadors themselves), groups, and organisations. Chapter 2 outlines the key actors and the relationships between them,

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[9] See especially: British Library, London (hereafter BL), India Office Records (hereafter IOG), inv. Nr. IOR/G/12/91, Historical Sketch, undated.

[10] For example: BL, IOR, IOR/G/12/91: 2-197, Letter Dundas to Macartney (enclosing a copy of the Memorial of the Dutch Government [in Batavia]), 8 September 1792.

[11] For a general assessment of knowledge production in the context of long-term Sino-British contact in the 18th century, see Hevia, James. *Cherishing Men from Afar: Qing Guest Ritual and the Macartney Embassy of 1793*, 57–83. Durham: Duke University Press, 1995.

with particular attention to the British Crown and the East India Company. Both the Crown and the Company were separate venues in which information about, and diplomatic postures towards, China were worked out, articulated, and put forward in the hopes of influencing the embassy's structure and the British polity's discourse surrounding its purpose and goals. This is not to say that Crown and Company were wholly separate, let alone that the separation between them should be understood as the main fact of British imperial policymaking. Information exchanges between the two were not only vast but generated many shared points of reference about Chinese culture, history, and diplomatic practices. However, they did not form an integrated policymaking system, and both formulated separate views of what would best serve 'British' interests in China. The organisational and institutional relationship between the Crown and Company (as well as their internal composition, considering institutions such as Parliament, the Government, the Company's London-based Directors, and its Canton authorities) is explored in greater detail in chapters 2 and 3.

The British imperial polity, in turn, has to be placed in the context of its interactions with China, which in turn can be understood as part of a broader array of interrelated practices that appeared in various forms throughout Asia. Because the scope of this thesis precludes the embassy's actual encounter with China, this involves, for the most part, understanding China through British eyes, and recognising as such that what is at play is effectively an 'imaginary' of China, with which Sinologists could certainly find fault *vis-à-vis* the reality of Chinese history.[12] That being said, this perception of China was rooted in the long-running experience of the British with Chinese people and institutions, which therefore formed part of the ecosystem in which the formation of the embassy occurred.

The most immediate and most influential site of the interaction between the British imperial polity and China was the Canton System, so called because Canton was the only port where Chinese business could lawfully be conducted with Europeans. The Canton system was open to virtually all foreign ships, and carefully managed by the Chinese government with a view to encouraging trade and its expansion — especially as the commerce conducted there made up an ever-greater share of Chinese prosperity.[13] It was prone to significant changes and evolutions, such as the periodic dissolution and instatement of monopolies on the right of Chinese merchants to do business with foreigners. Far from existing in China only on sufferance, the East India Company was

[12] For an example of this sort of critique, focussing on European perceptions of Chinese law: Chen, Li. *Chinese law in Imperial Eyes: Sovereignty, justice, and Transcultural politics*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2016.
[13] Van Dyke, Paul. *Merchants of Canton and Macao: Success and Failure in Eighteenth-Century Chinese Trade.* Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2016.

able to influence its fortunes through its relationships with both officials and the merchants themselves.[14]

The commercial regulations formed the core of the Canton system, but it had a number of attendant aspects that formed part of the wider milieu that Europeans encountered in China. Notably, Chinese officials insisted upon their own right to police Europeans, even those who were subordinated to the hierarchies of trading companies, a source of tension (due to Europeans' low opinion of Chinese justice) that would crop up several times in the discussions about the Macartney embassy's remit. Private debts between British and Chinese individuals also became a diplomatic problem, one which created substantial tension between the Crown and the Company during embassy-formation, due to the political influence and lobbying of the British creditors;[15] the problem was addressed by making the ambassador the creditors' attorney, complicating what it meant to be a diplomatic figure in this context.

At the same time, Canton does not constitute the entire horizon of the Sino-British system. Europeans were restricted to a segment of Canton, barely allowed to access the rest of the city and certainly not permitted to venture beyond it. On the other hand, the information networks that emanated outward from the Company's factory in Canton encompassed large parts of China. The Company's instructions to Macartney[16] included lengthy descriptions of information to be sought — but the nature of the request shows that, far from being in the dark about the rest of China, the Company possessed considerable understanding of China's regions and their commercial products. When the scope of British informational networks and mercantile relationships emanating from the Company's factory are considered, the ecosystem with which the British engaged in China through Canton proves to be not only long-lasting but socially and geographically broad.

Chinese government and society, beyond the layer to which the British had direct exposure via the Canton system, were necessarily understood more hazily, and consequently prone to (often self-interested) conjecture and mischaracterisation.[17] Nonetheless, the British had detailed impressions of how China was governed, and the use made of them was highly relevant to discussions about the formation of the embassy. We will see in greater detail how the British made use of historical understandings as well as experience-based conjecture to construct a sense of how

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[14] Van Dyke, *Success and Failure*, 72-74.

[15] Hanser, Jessica. "British Private Traders between India and China," in Van Dyke, Paul, and Schopp, Susan, eds. *The Private Side of the Canton Trade, 1700–1840: Beyond the Companies.* Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, HKU, 2018.

[16] Pritchard, "Part II," 201–30.

[17] Hevia, *Cherishing Men from Afar*, 57-83.

China worked and, consequently, how and to what ends Sino-British diplomacy ought best to be conducted. The process of harmonizing these ideas was pivotal in the process of embassy-formation.

Canton and its 'system,' interpreted generally, therefore constitute a crucial centre in the diplomatic ecosystem through which, and in relation to which, the Macartney embassy was formed. Taking a wide view is crucial to gaining a full understanding of this ecosystem. John Carroll, for instance, has written extensively, and persuasively, on how Canton represented a complex and multifaceted 'contact zone' between Europe and China.[18] The process of embassy-formation leading up to the Macartney embassy demonstrates a broader point: that while contact may have been mediated through Canton, and the particular institutions and relationships that obtained there, it extended to a much wider encounter between British and Chinese societies,[19] forming an extensive space in which British imperial institutions worked to articulate diplomatic interests and influence the emergence of an ambassadorial 'person' and embassy that was properly equipped to identify and pursue them.

1.4 New Diplomatic History: Methodology and Approaches

The approach taken in this thesis is drawn from New Diplomatic History.[20] Although not yet a wholly integrated methodological system, New Diplomatic History describes an approach to diplomatic encounters which avoids the reification of states and national interests and critically re-evaluates the traditional reduction of diplomacy to professional practitioners and policy outcomes.[21] Works in this vein de-centre inter-state negotiations and the content of diplomacy. They focus on the symbolic, cultural, and interpersonal as well as political aspects of diplomatic actions and exchanges. In this work, I envision the context of the Macartney embassy's formation as akin to an *ecosystem of actors*, aligned to greater or lesser degrees by organisational and institutional factors, aspiring not only to cause specific outcomes but also to influence others into closer alignment with themselves.

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[18] Carroll, John. *Canton days: British Life and death in China*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2020.

[19] As an example of one facet of this system of contact, the breadth and depth of information gathering and exchange, see de Vries, Jan. "Understanding Eurasian Trade in the Era of the Trading Companies," in *Goods from the East*, Berg, Maxine; Gottman, Felicia; Hodacs, Hanna; and Nierstrasz, Chris, eds. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015.

[20] For a general introduction to New Diplomatic History as both scholarly practice and a historiographical tendency, consider Watkins, John. "Toward a New Diplomatic History of Medieval and Early Modern Europe," *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 38, no. 1 (2008): 1–14; and Sowerby, Tracey. "Early Modern Diplomatic History," *History Compass* 14, no. 9 (2016): 441–56.

[21] See, as an illustrative example, see Frigo, Daniela. "Prudence and Experience: Ambassadors and Political Culture in Early Modern Italy." *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 38, no. 1 (2008): 15–34.

Using NDH approaches to the research question opens the possibility of understanding the embassy-formation process in a way that accounts for the internal complexity, fluidity, and disharmony which can be found underneath the label 'the British empire' and which was, itself, rooted in a broader political, diplomatic, and cultural ecosystem from which the imperial polity was not hermetically sealed off.

Several works have already used NDH principles to investigate the Macartney embassy, such as studying the ambassadors' musical entourage or the uses made of the his delivery of gifts.[22] This thesis approaches the ambassador as a carefully constructed public 'person' who serves as both a site and a source of efforts to imagine, reproduce, and present an understanding of the British imperial polity which was acceptable to all the crucial stakeholders in the embassy as a project. In the act of becoming a 'representative', the ambassador was necessarily communicating judgments about the nature of the thing being represented, judgments for which he needed his backers' acquiescence. By looking at his instructions and his credential-letters (and the discussions leading up to them), other correspondence relating to his appropriate role and function as a diplomat, and his (often self-interested) efforts to articulate a status he considered appropriate to a British ambassador in China, the 'construction' of the ambassador's person can be understood as a process of internal negotiation in which multiple actors sought to influence the diplomatic process into alignment with their own interests.

The definition of the ambassador's role is inseparable from the formation of the embassy as a whole. This approach looks at the discursive process of enlisting key stakeholders and securing their support by finding points of agreement or convergence and navigating differences of outlook or interest. The pivotal aim of all the protagonists in the embassy-formation process was to influence this process by which various understandings of the British empire, the Chinese state, and the nature of their relationship were integrated, reconciled, or contested. We trace the unfolding, and the results, of this process, answering the question of the 'reasoning' and 'motivation' of the British embassy from the starting position that large-scale imperial polities neither reason, nor are motivated, in an objective manner but rather as the consequence of discourse between actors and institutions that are multifaceted, contingent, and contextually variable.

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[22] Examples of this burgeoning genre include Guo, Fuxiang. "Presents and Tribute: Exploration of the Presents given to the Qianlong Emperor by the British Macartney Embassy." *Extrême-Orient, Extrême-Occident*, no. 43 (2019): 143–72. Harrison, Henrietta. "Chinese and British Diplomatic Gifts in the Macartney Embassy of 1793. *The English Historical Review* 133, no. 560 (2018): 65–97. Lindorff, Joyce. "Burney, Macartney and the Qianlong Emperor: The Role of Music in the British Embassy to China, 1792-1794." *Early Music* 40, no. 3 (2012): 441–53.

By conceiving a diplomatic 'ecosystem' in which both institutional and cultural boundaries, and legal-institutional entities like states and empires, are not presumed to be totally determinative, this thesis continues the application of NDH to this historical episode. Approaching political identity and persona as something 'constructed' alongside policy (and via the same broad process) further advances that goal, showing how performance, and the projection of relationships and purposes, was the result of multifaceted, contingent individual and institutional encounters within that ecosystem.

NDH, in moving away from the presumption of organisational (and especially state) predominance in determining diplomatic interests and shaping diplomatic practice, runs a certain methodological risk of seeing the pendulum swing too far the other way, to a point when the influence of states and other organisations over individual action can be perceived as more provisional than the historical record justifies. A major challenge in conceptualising a diplomatic 'ecosystem,' in which the agency of individual actors is prioritised and the organisational/institutional determination is not automatically presumed, is the need to identify the role that organisational and institutional relationships *do* play.

Although both Crown and Company were composite entities, the most important interaction in influencing the formation of the embassy was institutional. Within the overall diplomatic ecosystem in which the British and Chinese imperial polities met, the formation of the embassies occurred in a constrained institutional space, access to which could only be negotiated via the Company or the Crown. The embassy was formed not only in the wider inter-imperial ecosystem but in a more confined 'diplomatic space,' within that ecosystem. Only grievances that were given access to that space were considered for inclusion in the embassy's stated or potentially acceptable goals.

Making sense of the role that power imbalances played in the embassy-formation process is not straightforward. A major challenge lies in modelling a relationship of the Company to the Crown that is defined by both a profound power imbalance *and* the need of each to secure the cooperation of the other, as well as additional stakeholders, in formulating a common set of goals and constructing a specific projection of their common identity. Although fixed legal or bureaucratic relationships do not solely explain the process of forming the embassies, they were nonetheless important. One of the aims of this thesis is to understand the large-scale collection and mediation of information about about China through institutionalised channels, and how methods for bridging significant gaps between British and Chinese culture and practices were discovered and applied.

The East India Company's political nature is the subject of wide debate, from Philip Stern's argument that it should be seen as a state in its own right[23] to more complex models of its integration with both British and non-European polities. Rejecting the latter view, this thesis argues that a fundamental aspect of Crown-Company relations were their incommensurability, with the Company, in particular, acting on the basis of a politically dependent relation to both the British Government and the Chinese state. As such, the Company's role is best approached using models that contrast the formulation of its interests and positions with the methods used by the polities (both British and Chinese) with which it engaged. Notably, William Pettigrew's 'corporate constitutionalism'[24] offers a more nuanced model for counterbalancing the Company's considerable autonomy in exercising its political and territorial power with a need to secure stable, predictable political status through integration with existing states.

Cátia Antunes' distinction between 'economic' and 'business' diplomacy offers another useful theoretical insight in understanding early-modern corporate entities as actors within a diplomatic ascribing statehood[25]. Whereas economic diplomacy is an effort by a diplomatic actor to maximize its own economic advantage, business diplomacy starts with the proposition that the acquisition of money and resources, rather than being all-determining, is one of several interwoven interests, including legal and juridical stability and strong relationships with stakeholders. Antunes proposes three dimensions that define early-modern business diplomacy: the use of petitions to represent the business as a responsible entity to state authorities; the 'contractualising' of privileges; and the auctioning off, in turn, of state functions which are delegated to it under these privileges. In the formation of the Macartney embassy, the Company sought to benefit from its close association with the British Crown as the Emperor's sovereign equal. At the same time, it influenced the embassy to serve as a petition-bearing expedition seeking to alter, but crucially not to eliminate, the jurisdictional environment defining the Company's dependent relation with the Chinese state.

The East India Company occupied a complicated place in the diplomatic ecosystem surrounding the Macartney embassy. The challenge of providing theoretical explication of this relationship still leaves an outstanding question of terminology. In this thesis, I refer to the East India Company as a 'substrate' of the British empire, meaning a large-scale complex of interlocked institutions that formed a distinctive entity within the imperial polity, albeit ones that were incapable of existing independent of that polity. The term is not overly freighted with presentist assumptions about the nature of

[23] Stern, Philip. *The Company-State: Corporate sovereignty and the early modern foundations of the British Empire in India*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012.
[24] Pettigrew, William A. "Corporate Constitutionalism and the Dialogue between the Global and Local in Seventeenth-Century English History." *Itinerario* 39, no. 3 (2015): 487–501.
[25] Antunes, Cátia. "Early Modern Business Diplomacy: An Appraisal." *Diplomatica* 2, no. 1 (2020): 20–27.

imperial governance. It also contains enough semantic space to allow for a further nuance of the Company's position: the fact that it had direct relationships with both the British and Chinese empires. The Company's status as a substrate of the British imperial polity, in turn, underpins both its role in the formation of the embassies and the ways in which it attempted (and often succeeded) in using that influence.

1.5 Sources

To implement this approach, this thesis examines available documents relating directly or indirectly to the creation of both the Macartney and Cathcart embassies in the British Library's India Office collection, amounting to over 1,000 pages of correspondence.[26] These papers deal with the two embassies between 1784 and 1792 (with the respective ambassadors departing for China in 1787 and 1792, respectively) and contain the contributions and discourses of a number of distinct parties and stakeholders. They were collected by examining all available India Office records from these years that relate to China and the Canton trade, and selected for relating to the formation of a royal embassy to China (potential or ongoing, depending on the date), for discussing aspects of Sino-British relations, or for highlighting areas of grievance with the Canton system. Some papers have individual authorship, while others are written on behalf of a larger group;[27] some of the latter are signed,[28] whereas others are not.[29] (Chapter 2 discusses the production of these sources in detail) Documents produced by Crown officials and Company employees, as well as actors not organisationally affiliated with either, are included in these sources.

Primary documents relating to the Macartney embassy present serious sourcing challenges because they are widely scattered, and there are major gaps due to loss in the intervening two centuries.[30] The use of this specific collection of sources allows a tight focus on the decision-making process within the British imperial polity, and the methodology outlined in the previous sections was developed with this consideration in mind. By the same token, Chinese sources are not consulted. Although some Chinese sources are available in translation,[31] access to the Qing archives remains limited to certain scholars.[32] The concept of this thesis was developed with regard to this

[26] Contained within the following series: IOR/G/12/90, IOR/G/12/91, IOR/G/12/92, and IOR/G/12/93 at the British Library.
[27] For example, BL, IOR, IOR/G/12/91: 2-157, Letter Rogers to Dundas, undated.
[28] For example, BL, IOR, IOR/G/12/90: 196, Letter Smith to Nepean, 10 October 1788.
[29] For example, Historical Sketch, undated.
[30] Swanson, Robert. "On the (Paper) Trail of Lord Macartney." *East Asian History* 40 (2016): 19–25.
[31] Peyrefitte, Alain. *Un choc de culture: la vision des chinois*. Paris: Fayard, 1991.
[32] Mao, L.iping and Zhao Ma. "'Writing History in the Digital age': The New Qing History Project and the digitization of Qing Archives." *History Compass* 10, no. 5 (2012): 367–374.

limitation as well, taking as its sole focus the British process of organising and sending the embassies – with the deliberate intention of separating intention from outcome, keeping with the desire to avoid the 'inevitability' trope.

This paper treats the India Office sources as the site of this encounter rather than merely a detached record of it. (See particularly chapter 2) The generation, circulation, engagement with, and responses to correspondence are consequently an aspect of the diplomatic ecosystem which played a partially determinative role in the outcome of the process. How different actors expressed their views and responded to those of others, negotiating cooperation and alignment behind not only specific policies but an implied vision of their relationship to one another in the British imperial polity *and* the Chinese political and commercial, is referred to in this paper as 'discourse' or as 'discursive' encounters. As shown in chapters 2 and 3 especially, this discursive process was especially important as cooperation between 'British' actors could not be secured simply by top-down legal or bureaucratic command.

1.6 Outline

This thesis comprises three further chapters and a conclusion. Chapter 2 expands on the idea of an 'ecosystem' and details the specific situations, positions, and interests of the key players, with particular attention to the way that existing patterns of engagement with Chinese society and the Chinese state influenced a diplomatic event that is often treated as historically transformative.[33] Chapter 3 explores how various actors within the British polity engaged with one another in the process of constructing a set of motivations and purposes for the embassies, looking closely not only at their formulation and negotiation of diplomatic policy but also at how the embassy replicated and reproduced a statement of their mutual relationships within the British polity while simultaneously adjusting to their distinct positions with China. Chapter 4 focuses on the ambassadors themselves, showing how they sought to construct a personal identity suitable to the needs of their political stakeholders, their understanding of China, and their own interests. That chapter pays particular attention to how the construction and self-fashioning of the ambassador's person can only partly be explained in reference to prevailing 'British' practices of state diplomacy, and were in fact substantially specific to the particularities of the British situation in China.

The second and third chapters, in particular, undercut any view of the British empire as possessing a *unitary* legal-bureaucratic machinery capable of formulating and acting on 'objective' British interests. The manner in which competing arguments,

[33] See especially Peyrefitte, *L'Empire Immobile,* 486.

viewpoints, or demands – many rooted in a long-standing Sino-British relationship – were reconciled often involved complex and ambiguous interchanges in which decisions were neither definitive nor subject to one universal interpretation. This, in turn, goes against the idea that the British polity was, by this process, driven by *inevitable* changes in a single direction — and against the tendency to read those changes, in turn, as *predictive* of the course of British imperialism in China in the next century. The conclusion provides a final assessment of the inappropriateness of such an interpretation of the Macartney episode.

II

The Players

2.1 Introduction

This chapter describes the institutional and personal forces that influenced the formation of the Cathcart and Macartney embassies. Who were the actors and stakeholders in the process, and how was their relationship to one another in this process determined and negotiated?

The India Office papers relating to the two embassies span the years 1785 and 1792 (with the ambassadors departing, respectively, in 1787 and 1792) and contain the contributions and discourses of a number of distinct parties and stakeholders. All items are recorded in the forms of correspondence with a named sender and recipient, although many other types of documents, such as minutes of meetings of the Company's supercargoes in Canton, are included as attachments to letters forwarding them. Moreover, some documents are structured as individual correspondence but are intended for wider circulation and reflect the results of extensive consultation — such as the two sets of instructions (one from Henry Dundas, one from the Company's Court of Directors) given to each ambassador, which take the form of letters but certainly also constitute statements of policy. The credentials of the two ambassadors, taking the form of letters from George III to the Qianlong Emperor, fall into this category as well.

The majority of the letters have either an address or return address in London. Correspondence exchanged in London often received prompt replies — as little as one or two days — and occasionally contained references to recent in-person conversations between the correspondents.[34] Other documents came from further afield in England,[35] but still record an ongoing back-and-forth between correspondents. Another important centre for the production of the correspondence included in these papers is Canton. However, communications between London and Canton, as well as other points of origin for certain letters written by individuals based in Asia, only went one way at a time:[36] eastward from England to Asia in the spring and early summer, with return mail posted only in the autumn, due to wind patterns. As such, documents originating in Canton and elsewhere in Asia tended to enter the discourse occurring in and around

[34] For example, BL, IOR, IOR/G/12/91: 2-213, Letter Dundas to Macartney, 8 September 1792.
[35] For example, Letter Rogers to Dundas, undated.
[36] Bowen, Huw. *The Business of Empire: The East India Company and Imperial Britain, 1756-1833*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008, 154-156.

London in large packets, forwarded by the Supercargoes (the Company's representatives on the ground) in Canton and containing minutes, committee resolutions, and reports on events in China. Responses were forwarded in a similar form by the Court of Directors in the next season.

In the active correspondence going on at London, there are three core actors, whose letters to and from one another constitute a majority of the items contained in the overall sources (although often with other letters and documents attached to them): the successive ambassadors, Henry Dundas, and the Court of Directors. We can describe this triangle as the core of the embassy-formation process not only based on the volume of letters but on the qualitative basis that most participants in this network of correspondence are brought into it on the recommendation or reference of one of them. For example, the Canton packets are forwarded to the ambassadors and to Dundas by the Directors,[37] while, through Dundas, a series of naval officers are involved in the process arranging for a Royal Navy vessel to be attached to the Macartney embassy.[38]

This chapter analyses the interplay between these core actors, additional actors bought into the embassy-formation discourse at their individual encouragement, and the institutional relationships against which they formulated and articulated their views. To this end, it approaches the sources to understand not only their content but also their form and structure. Beyond that, it places the correspondents into the broader context of the British imperial polity and the system of Sino-British relations in the late eighteenth century.

The core actors were certainly not on an equal footing in terms of relative power. Dundas and other representatives of the 'Crown,' as actors in British imperial policy-making, possessed both the legal and the institutional basis to override others in any controversy. In a direct clash of interests or views, the Crown indeed tended to get its way. However, institutional and legal relationships are insufficient for understanding how the different groups went about influencing the embassy-formation process. The relationships reflected in the India Office papers instead point to a British imperial ecosystem in which personal relationships and a mutual desire to secure voluntary cooperation by diverse elements allowed different groups to influence the process in a variety of ways. Considering diplomatic activity in this manner is a key aspect of the New Diplomatic History approach for re-appraising the purposes and motives of the British embassies. British imperial action during this episode was not *unitary* in the sense of being determined by a single, integrated legal or bureaucratic organisation. Neither was

[37] For example, BL, IOR, IOR/G/12/93: 5, Letter Chairs to Dundas, with enclosed Packet, 2 April 1793.
[38] Letter Smith to Nepean, 10 October 1788.

it the result of an *inevitable* transition to a certain political form. The NDH approach shows that British policy was the result not only of many competing internal interests, but of the need to navigate and sustain a variety of different relations of British actors to the Chinese state. Its historiographical significance cannot be properly assessed without a recognition of its role as a site of negotiated assertion of a particular pattern of power relations within the British polity, specific to Great Britain's long history of involvement in China.

2.2 The Core Actors

One of the challenges of understanding the political and diplomatic ecosystem in which the embassies were conceived and developed lies in identifying the legal and institutional basis for the key relationships without losing sight of the role played by personal and discursive factors in the process. The India Office papers, in particular, do not support a presumption that legal and institutional relationships played a supreme or even predominant role in determining the outcome of the embassy-formation process. At the same time, the relationship between the 'core' actors and additional actors brought into the process cannot be understood with reference to interests, strategies, and postures in an institutional vacuum. Without unduly imposing *a priori* organisational relationships onto what was, in fact, a much broader discursive process, it is nonetheless necessary to outline the legal and institutional factors underpinning it.

Two men, in sequence, were named as royal ambassadors to China: Charles Cathcart, a Scottish MP who was commissioned in 1787[39] but died *en route* to China the next year.[40] After a period when the effort was suspended, it was resumed in 1791. George Macartney was named ambassador the following year,[41] arriving in China in 1793. The ambassadors were significant actors in their own right. The extent of their initiative and contextual limits of their agency are discussed at greater length in the following chapters. So are the areas of continuity and difference between the two embassies. It is worth noting that they came from fairly different backgrounds. Both had experience in imperial service, but Cathcart had risen to prominence through Parliament, winning election due to his connections to Henry Dundas's family[42] and acting as a parliamentary ally for Dundas and Pitt's government, especially on matters of

[39] BL, IOR, IOR/G/12/90: 108, Letter Dundas to Cathcart (Instructions), 30 November 1787.
[40] BL, IOR, IOR/G/12/90: 255, Letter Nepean to chairs, 10 August 1789.
[41] BL, IOR, IOR/G/12/91: 1-23, Letter Macartney to Dundas, 4 January 1792.
[42] Hayden-Guest, Edith. "CATHCART, Hon. Charles Allan (1759–88), of Sauchie, Clackmannan." In *The History of Parliament: The House of Commons, 1754-1790.* London: Boydell and Brewer, 1964.

imperial policy.[43] Macartney had also been an MP (in the less prestigious Parliament of Ireland) but had experienced a more illustrious career in imperial service, as ambassador to Russia, the royal governor of Grenada, and governor of the EIC-held Madras.[44]

Between the Crown, the Company, and the ambassadors themselves, 'the Crown' is certainly the broadest term of the three. In the broader metonymic sense of the power-centre of the British state imbued with the final exercise of its sovereignty, it consists of a number of institutions, but some are more important in this study than others. The most important is the Government, but one could narrow that down even further to Henry Dundas, the driving force behind both the Cathcart and Macartney embassies. He is not the whole of the Government for our purposes – Pitt the Younger, the Prime Minister, has some small part in the correspondence surrounding the embassies – but he is the minister most directly interested in creating a mission to China.

A Scottish MP from a family of prominent lawyers, Dundas had risen to the heights of power, as a trusted lieutenant of Pitt and the most powerful politician in Scotland, entirely within the domestic politics of Great Britain[45] – unlike the two men he would put forward as ambassadors, both of whom had attained prominence in imperial service. He held the title of Treasurer of the Navy during the formation of the Cathcart embassy, and was made Home Secretary in 1791, but his real role in government was not co-extensive with his official position.[46] He was, among other things, the principal government minister on matters relating to the British empire in Asia. As both author and addressee, he is one of the most important participants in the rounds of correspondence in London relating to the formation of both embassies. Aside from Pitt's few interventions, his body of letters sent and received is almost coterminous with the Government's direct involvement in the process.

Of course, the 'Crown' as a whole consisted of infinitely more components, which is why we must distinguish its aspect in east Asia. In this aspect, the Crown consisted first and foremost of the Government, in whose name Dundas mostly, and Pitt occasionally, spoke, and which was most directly involved in forming the embassy. Along with Dundas were a handful of civil servants and military administrators whose

[43] Hayden-Guest, "Cathcart."
[44] Encyclopaedia Britannica, s.v. "George Macartney, Earl Macartney, Viscount Macartney of Dervock, baron of Lissanoure, Baron Macartney of Parkhurst and of Auchinleck, Lord Macartney." *Encyclopedia Britannica,* 2024. https://www.britannica.com/biography/George-Macartney-Earl-Macartney [retrieved 12/06/2024].
[45] Fry, Michael. "Dundas, Henry, first Viscount Melville (1742–1811), politician." In Goldman, Lawrence, ed. *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004.
[46] Fry, "Dundas, Henry."

correspondence concerns their management the granular details of the embassies' formation-process (such as the assignment of naval vessels).[47] Further back from the process, involved not as direct actor but a focus of symbolic value, stands the King.

The 'Crown,' then, as an actor in the embassy-formation process, was an internally coherent system of power-relationships — in which Dundas could speak for the government, supported by his ability to procure everything from naval vessels for the embassies to the King's signature for the credential letters.

By the same token, the East India Company was also an actor, or rather a system of actors, forming a distinct substrate within the British imperial polity. The actors represented in the process are, primarily, the Court of Directors in London. They are invariably represented in correspondence to Dundas or the ambassadors in letters jointly signed by John Smith Burges and Francis Baring, the president and vice-president, respectively, of the Court.[48] The Supercargoes in Canton are distinguished from the Directors for several reasons, including factors geographical (with their centre of communications being Canton) and temporal (the fact that their input entered into embassy-formation discourse via intermittent packets) as well as differences in interests, perceptions, and emphasis.

The polycentric nature of the Company, with London and Canton separated by both physical distance and complex communication patterns, means that it cannot be treated as a single unitary actor possessing a comprehensive legal-bureaucratic decision-making structure.[49] Because Cathcart and, later, Macartney had been guaranteed by Dundas access to all internal communications forwarded from Canton,[50] with the incoming packets duly forwarded to them, the Supercargoes were certainly actors in their own right in the discursive process surrounding embassy-formation. On the other hand, there was undoubtedly a meaningful legal and institutional power structure that bound them to each other in an unequal relationship. With the exception of the ambassadors' sets of official instructions, the only communications contained in the India Office papers unambiguously structured in the form of outright commands are between the Directors and the Supercargoes.[51]

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[47] Letter Smith to Nepean, 10 October 1788.

[48] For example, BL, IOR, IOR/G/12/91: 1-37, Letter: Chairs to Dundas, 20 January 1792.

[49] For an example of internal dissension between the Directors and the Supercargoes, see Van Dyke, Paul. *Merchants of Canton and Macao: Success and Failure in Eighteenth-Century Chinese Trade.* Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2016.

[50] BL, IOR, IOR/G/12/90: 15, Letter Dundas to Cathcart, 26 August 1787.

[51] Letter Chairs to Dundas, 20 January 1792.

The Company is best understood, then, as a complex grouping of actors with independent agency but, at the same time, with unequal relationships rooted in legal and institutional structures. Those relationships appear in the discourse surrounding the formation of the Cathcart and Macartney embassies but reflect a long-standing organisational relationship that strongly influences and limits individual actors' ability to participate in the process. The Company appears as a substrate of the British imperial polity, possessing long-standing organisational structures that play a significant role in determining outcomes. It has a continuous organisational existence and is made up of institutions and groups that cannot, or at least not readily, remove themselves from it. The Canton factory could not withdraw from Company governance, no more than the Company could secede from the British empire and survive.

Even applying the respective terms broadly, however, the Company and the Crown were not the only actors. Among the core actors were the ambassadors, who had wide latitude to select their own secretaries, clerks, and servants (though they had to negotiate with the Crown or the Directors when selecting military and naval attachés). A significant amount of ambassadorial correspondence deals with financial matters, or with the appointment of persons to their 'establishment.'[52]

An additional group who feature extremely prominently in the India Office papers are the 'Creditors.'[53] ('Creditors,' with a capital C, is the term used consistently in the sources for this somewhat hazily-defined group) These were British merchants who had given loans to Chinese merchants in Canton and were unable to press for repayment, due to the Canton authorities' uninterest in their claims and the Company's hostility to them. The Creditors show that outside groups could only become involved in the embassy-formation process by the sponsorship of one of the key actors. In their case, the redress of their grievances was included in the embassies' goals, though not explicitly in the official instructions (though their influence can, as we shall see, be detected there as well), upon the insistence of Dundas.

Although brought into the process by the intervention of Dundas, the Creditors quickly became primarily an issue for the ambassadors themselves to address. Cathcart undertook the most important part of this task, going through the process of organising the creditors into a committee which then granted him its power of attorney. It was probably the single most significant legacy he left to Macartney, who simply picked up these ready-made institutional developments. The Creditors, although only involved in the process because of the support of the Crown, nonetheless play so significant a role

[52] BL, IOR, IOR/G/12/91: 1, Letter Cathcart to Dundas (Preliminary Proposal), 20 June 1787; BL, IOR, IOR/G/12/91: 271, Letter Macartney to Dundas (Preliminary Proposal), 8 June 1792.
[53] Hanser, "British Private Traders," 1-3.

in the embassy-formation (at least measured by the share of paper-volume their issues generated) that they can be included among the core actors as key stakeholders. (See section 2.4)

2.3 Legal and Institutional Factors

Just as the Company possessed permanent organisational relationships between its internal groupings and power centres that determined actors' agency in the embassy-formation process, so did the British imperial polity itself. The three sets of 'core' actors — the successive ambassadors, Dundas and the Crown, and the Directors and the Company — engaged in discourse by which each sought to influence the overall structure and purpose of the emerging embassies. That discourse reflects a system of imperial decision-making in which outcomes remained highly contingent on efforts to secure at least a degree of willing participation by autonomous stakeholders. At the same time, the ecosystem in which it occurred cannot entirely be reduced to self-interest and independent efforts to influence and persuade. The legal and institutional relationships between the actors must also be addressed.

In the formative period of the two embassies, the interaction between the Crown and the East India Company was the object of extensive legislation, and was undergoing a period of rapid change.[54] Though the original charter by which the Company acquired legal existence and a share in the lawful authority of the British state was a royal decree, constitutional evolution in the intervening centuries had placed Parliament, not the Crown, as the undisputed source of legislation. Parliament had involved itself in the affairs of the British empire in Asia in other ways — ways which implicated the power and responsibility of both the Crown and the Company, A notable example was the high-profile impeachment of Warren Hastings, Governor-General of India, on extensive corruption charges in 1785, a legal and political conflict which unfolded throughout the entire period of the two embassies.[55]

'Parliament,' of course, was no more a unitary entity than the Crown or the Company themselves, being divided by parties, political factions, and interests — and the line separating it from the Government, which as we have seen exercised much of the Crown's power in the imperial context of east Asia, was hazy. Pitt himself had been responsible for steering legislation in the early 1780s on a course that avoided

[54] Bowen, *Business of Empire*, 69-78.
[55] Marshall, P. J. "Hastings, Warren (1732–1818), governor-general of Bengal." In Goldman, Lawrence, ed. *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004.

wholesale administrative control by the Government over India, settling instead on a system that Huw Bowen calls 'dual administration,'[56] in which the Company remained an essentially distinct substrate within the system of imperial governance, answerable to ministers but not regularly directed by them. Parliament's increasing intervention in the way that the Company exercised its power in Asia, which included several major laws in the 1760s and 1770s in addition to Pitt's 1784 India Act, played a significant role in propelling the Crown into a key role in managing the imperial polity in Asia.

At the same time, these legal changes had significantly altered the operations of the Company itself. Shareholder participation had been regulated (removing smaller shareholders from the voting pool that selected Directors) while the Court of Directors had itself been reformed to improve administrative continuity. Of particular significance was the creation, under the 1784 Act, of the Board of Control, which created a mechanism by which ministers could exercise direct control over the Directors.[57] By 1785, Parliamentary involvement had created an unambiguous legal relationship with the Crown as the Company's superior, able to override the Directors with no basis in law for the Directors to refuse their explicit direction. With the Board of Control, an institutional arrangement emerged that reflected that legal relationship — 'dual administration,' perhaps, but not the co-administration of equals.

The effect of these changes in law did not restrict itself to the management of Company affairs. There was also an economic component. In 1784, Parliament also passed the Commutation Act, which reduced the duty on tea imports with the aim of eliminating smuggling and consolidating the Company's monopoly on the east Asia tea trade.[58] Again, the line between Parliament and the Crown as distinct actors is hazy — the Commutation Act was perceived as Pitt's own work.

In this context, it is perhaps surprising, on its face, that Parliamentary politics are not mentioned at all, even by implication, in the entirety of the India Office papers relating to the formation of the two embassies. Lord Sydney, the President of the Board of Control until 1790, corresponded with Dundas about the political situation in India in 1788 but otherwise stayed on the fringes of the embassy-formation process.[59] Taking a broader view of the substance of the India Office papers, however, this becomes less perplexing. The formation of the Cathcart and Macartney embassies demonstrates, in practice, that the system by which different actors within the British imperial polity

[56] Bowen, *Business of Empire,* 78.
[57] Ibidem*,* 64.
[58] Mui, Lorna, and Hoh-Cheung. "William Pitt and the Enforcement of the Commutation Act, 1784-1788." *The English Historical Review* 76, no. 300 (1961): 447–65.
[59] BL, IOR, IOR/G/12/90: 180, Letter Cathcart to Sydney, 13 March 1788.

reached decisions regarding cooperation and the projection of imperial identity remained highly personal.

The nature of the sources, as much as their content, argues against starting from the assumption that the legal and institutional relationships between the Crown and the Company were determinative of how cooperation was secured between them in China. Correspondence did not use official letterhead — participants were not obviously interacting on the basis of defined institutional relationships. For someone like Dundas, this presents an interesting quandary: was he wielding his influence on the process in his capacity as a minister of the Crown, as an intimate confidante of Pitt possessing his trust in Asian affairs, as a grandee of the governing party in its own right, or (after 1793) as President of the Board of Control? The only title by which he is addressed on any of the letters is 'one of His Majesty's principal secretaries of state, &c., &c.'[60] The letters were transmitted and subsequently archived within an institutional framework, so there is no doubt that his letters were taken to convey 'official' authority, but it dovetails with a broader feature of the India Office papers: the absence of any overt appeal to the superiority of one party to compel the cooperation of another. As mentioned above, explicit commands only appear in the ambassadors' own instructions (following discussion and negotiations between the ambassadors and their instructors) and in a few arrangements that the Directors command the Canton Supercargoes to undertake.

The persistently agreeable register of correspondence is a scholarly challenge in its own right. One fairly typical example of this prose style, from the Directors (co-signed Baring and Burges) to Dundas, reads, 'we have neither the intention nor the disposition to enter into the slightest controversy with his Lordship [Macartney] relative to any part of the business in contemplation. The confidence we repose in the integrity, zeal, and ability which his Lordship has always manifested in the Company's service, added to the cordial and zealous manner in which His Majesty's Ministers have been pleased to recommend the Embassy to the consideration of the Court of Directors…'[61] The practical problem posed by this ornate language comes in identifying meaningful points of disagreement between the actors in the embassy-formation process. Looking for straightforward points of conflict and acts of resolution places an *a priori* expectation that is not justified by the source material itself. A better approach embraces the subtlety of this writing style to identify points of agreement, convergence, and divergence, the latter being conceived broadly to include points of disagreement even when they are not introduced in openly oppositional terms.

[60] BL, IOR, IOR/G/12/91: 1-57, Letter Chairs to Dundas, 10 February 1792.
[61] BL, IOR, IOR/G/12/91: 105-106. Letter Baring to Dundas, 20 April 1792.

The legal and institutional relationships between the Crown and the Company were undoubtedly of considerable importance, but it is difficult to pin down exactly how important they were compared to interpersonal factors and the desire to secure a degree of voluntary cooperation. The ambassadors, Crown officers, and agents of the Company sought to secure voluntary participation of as many actors and groupings as possible — even when, as a matter of legal theory, mechanisms for compulsion were technically available. In the sources' style and structure, the legal/institutional identities and relationships contained in individuals' office were sublimated into personal identities. The consistent use of particular rhetorical approaches reveals actors' approaches to generating and maintaining trust, fostering the convergence of different interests or perceptions around particular outcomes, and replicating and deepening a sense of moral community within the actors capable of engendering cooperation absent the application of legal and institutional mechanisms.

2.4 Partners in Discourse

These observations, specific to the history of the two embassies, correspond with Bowen's observation that 'the Company had to all intents and purposes been incorporated within the Hanoverian state machinery of empire' after 1767.[62] It did not fall entirely freely to the Crown to determine the exact extent to which it would suffer the Company as a junior partner, however. In the embassy-formation process, the Company played a direct role in shaping the British empire's understanding of itself and its place in China, which significantly shaped the policies ultimately adopted by the Crown in the credentialing, instructing, and ennobling of the two ambassadors.

In the previous section, I argued that the legal and institutional relationships between the Crown and the Company as substrates of the imperial polity were, in themselves, insufficient for the securing of agreement and cooperation between them. The legal and institutional superiority of the Crown shaped but did not totally determine the ultimate results of the embassy-formation process. In the India Office papers, we can detect two major results of this fact.

First, from the Crown's perspective, there was a need to maintain the active participation of the East India Company as a stakeholder in the imperial polity and in its cooperative efforts to organise an embassy to China. My use of the term is drawn from the work of Regina Grafe and Alejandra Irigoin,[63] whose model of a 'stakeholder

[62] Bowen, *Business of Empire*, 83.

[63] Grafe, Regina, and Irigoin, Alejandra. "A Stakeholder Empire: The Political Economy of Spanish Imperial Rule in America." *The Economic History Review* 65, no. 2 (2012): 609–51.

empire,' based on systems of regional governance in the Spanish empire during the 18th century, provides an applicable methodology for understanding cooperation between central authorities and local élites as a strategy for imperial governance even in the absence of a statutory mechanism compelling the authorities to share power. In this model, legal-institutional hierarchies only go so far in explaining how all the different component parts of an imperial polity were mobilised towards combined ends — the remainder is explained by successfully inducing different groupings, organisations, and substrates to invest their own interests in the process. Not only the Crown and the Company but the private creditors and the ambassadors themselves appear in the sources as important stakeholders, in this sense, in the process.

Second, personal relationships, and a powerful inclination toward achieving cooperation based on an agreeable rapport between imperial substrates like the Company and other stakeholders, play a pivotal role in working out the details of institutional cooperation. The various strategies that are applied, and that play out, in the documents can best be understood in light of this fact. These include how information is shared and formed; rhetorical posturing and the emphasis of certain aspects of the actor's relationship with particular stakeholders; and appeals to an asserted moral and/or civilisational basis for solidarity and cooperation. The through-line between all of these is that, in the British imperial polity in China, despite the increasing legal regularisation and institutional formalisation of their relationships with one another, different stakeholders nonetheless retained a degree of autonomy and contingency in their relations with each other that necessitated a degree of negotiation The discourse required in order to bring about the alignment of potentially disparate positions created a space in which there was considerable opportunity to exert influence beyond what was afforded by one's place in the legal-institutional structure.

2.5 The Canton System

In the specific case of the Cathcart and Macartney embassies, this space entailed considerable scope for influencing both common imperial policy and the projection onto it of a shared image of who and what the stakeholders of the imperial polity in China were, and how exactly their positions and demands related to one another. Indeed, for the key stakeholders, including the Crown, this is how the 'unprecedented' nature of the embassy was most obviously perceived. Despite expressing hope for some fairly radical changes in the embassy's outcome (and arguing to enshrine them as policy), the actors in the embassy-formation process do not envision a new model of Sino-British relations. The energy and time poured into the India Office sources reflect a variety of approaches

to framing certain aspects of the longstanding system of Sino-British relations as problematic — while often clashing over which aspects should be reaffirmed.

The discourse surrounding the formation process consisted of a process, contested in parts and negotiable in others, of problematisation. This brings us to the final component of the diplomatic 'ecosystem' in which different actors were situated, and in reference to which their efforts to influence broader cooperative outcomes must be understood: China itself.

The British had been 'in China,' using the preposition properly in its broadest sense, since the seventeenth century — as long as there had been British people conducting commerce there in meaningful numbers, the East India Company had been there as well,[64] although not all British people in China were there under its jurisdiction.[65] By extension, the British imperial polity had existed in China in some or other form for over a hundred years when the organisation of the Cathcart embassy was begun in 1785.

In that year, and throughout the period covered in this paper, the British imperial presence in China consisted of two enormous 'contact zones.' The first was Canton itself — although the physical areas and social milieux in which Europeans and Chinese could interact in Canton were tightly limited and controlled, the overall 'contact zone' was much vaster than the city itself, incorporating trading routes and informational networks that reached deep into China and outward into other regions of Asia and integrating them with a corresponding trading sphere that penetrated far into Europe and the Americas.[66]

The second was located in the Himalayan region, where a political and commercial system strongly tied to China had come into contact with the British empire after the latter had established direct control over abutting regions of northern India.[67] Direct British contacts in this region were limited to sporadic diplomatic missions — not to China, but to countries China claimed as dependencies — but, as with Canton, the full extent of this contact zone was considerably broader than these points of physical meeting. Questions stemming from this relatively new Sino-British border appear, albeit as matters of secondary importance, in the concerns raised by Dundas in relation to the embassies.

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[64] Dermigny, Louis. *Le Commerce A Canton Au XVIIIe Siècle, 1719-1833*. Paris: S.E.V.P.E.N., 1964, 76-78.
[65] Hellman, Lisa. *This House Is Not a Home: European Everyday Life in Canton and Macao 1730-1830*. Leiden: Brill, 2019, 75-82.
[66] De Vries, Jan. *Goods from the East*, Berg *et al* eds., 2015.
[67] Lamb, Alistair. "Tibet in Anglo-Chinese Relations: 1767-1842." Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland, 3, 4 (1957): 161–76, quoted in Dermigny, *Le Commerce A Canton,* 1118.

The 'Canton System' is a loose term for the complex and highly regulated structure in which Europeans and other foreigners were permitted to trade for Chinese wares in that city. The Canton system was open to virtually all foreign ships, and carefully managed by the Chinese government with a view to encouraging trade and its expansion — especially as the commerce conducted there made up an ever-greater share of Chinese prosperity.[68] It was prone to significant changes and evolutions, such as the periodic dissolution and instatement of monopolies on the right of Chinese merchants to do business with foreigners. The commercial system at Canton was not closed off to foreigners: far from existing in China only on sufferance, the East India Company was able to influence its fortunes there through its relationships with both officials and the merchants themselves.[69]

The commercial regulations formed the core of the Canton system, but it had a number of attendant aspects that formed part of the wider milieu that Europeans encountered in China. Notably, Chinese officials insisted upon their own right to police Europeans, even those who were subordinated to the hierarchies of trading companies, a source of tension (due to Europeans' low opinion of Chinese justice) that would crop up several times in the discussions about the Macartney embassy's remit.

A pivotal feature of the Canton system was the regulated monopoly of a number of trading houses, known as the *hong*, on any transactions with European merchants. This formed the basis of a number of methods used by Chinese officials to ensure competition and a stable market for foreigners' goods. The *hong* system was prone to substantial evolutions as officials responded to individual merchan houses' efforts to secure permanent advantages at the possible expense of these aims.[70] Despite these precautions, the *hong* were able to impose on European merchants, who depended on them to for reliable trading conditions in the long term, and Chinese merchants frequently ran up large debts from Europeans as the price of keeping their friendship. Debts were tricky to pursue even by those present in China, as contracts between foreigners and Chinese were technically illegal under Chinese law. In principle, Chinese officials were generally willing to enforce contracts in order to keep foreigners placated, but this was done in secret, informal sessions, which made the investigation of claims exceedingly difficult for those who were not in China,[71] or anyone whose claims Chinese officials were unwilling to take up. This was the institutional backdrop for the question

[68] Van Dyke, *Success and Failure,* 1-18.
[69] Van Dyke, *Success and Failure*, 72-74.
[70] Van Dyke, Paul. *Merchants of Canton and Macao: Politics and Strategies in Eighteenth-Century Chinese Trade*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2011. 25-27.
[71] Van Dyke, *Politics and Strategies*, 31-33.

of the 'Canton Creditors,' who were not based in China and therefore looked to the ambassador to serve as an agent.

2.6 Cultural Oneness and Otherness

Louis Dermigny traces the period of the two embassies from the Commutation Act of 1784, describing them as 'amounting… to a national approach'[72] to the commercial system linking Great Britain and China. The term 'national' generally risks implying more than the writer intends to say, and no less so here, though it is a reasonable enough short-hand for the direct involvement of the Crown, a unifying element of the imperial polity, in an area that had previously been more directly left to the Company's autonomy.

The legal and institutional changes starting in the 1760s had certainly pushed the Crown into the Sino-British 'contact zone,' just as the Crown had was involved more broadly in the policies and governance of the Company and its domains in India. It is hard not to see the Crown's initiative in organising the embassies, and the interests it pushed during their formation, as being consistent with this same impulse (not least because the effort involved so many of the same politicians as protagonists). The creditors would be perhaps the single most effective stakeholder-group to press their advantage in the discursive space resulting from this shift, in which their grievances could be, in effect, re-problematised from commercial disputes to matters of British imperial interest.

Nonetheless, the idea that the British empire in China was being made 'national' — or, in the terms I have used, being brought into a system of unitary imperial government capable of designating 'objective' imperial interests — in the process of creating the embassy is misleading. Cooperation between individual actors was effected amidst considerable fluidity and ambiguity in their internal relationships. We will see in the next chapter how those differences in position and interest, in this relational ecosystem, played out in the discourse surrounding the embassy-formation process.

However, framing the unprecedented aspects of the two embassies around a 'national' evolution in imperial diplomacy creates another, perhaps more significant problem: it does not account for the ambivalence of political and cultural identity in the Canton system.

[72] Dermigny, *Le Commerce A Canton*, 1118. My translation.

In its broader sense, the Canton system not only regulated the exchange of cash and goods but managed a major and ongoing process of cultural, social, and political encounter. Several recent studies have approached the history of the Canton system through the lens of a major intercultural contact zone,[73] and Hellman in particular illustrates that the Canton system put European political and cultural identities under significant pressure. Among Europeans, national differences were simultaneously being accentuated by officials' and merchants' ploys to pit different companies against one another, attenuated by the shared (and enforced) status as cultural outsiders, and confused by the fact that individuals' national origin frequently did not align with the company they served.[74] A greater complexity was that Canton was also a zone of civilisational contact. In addition to reams of commercial and geographic information, Canton was also the point through which political and cultural understandings of China passed into European minds.

To some degree, the Crown was interested in problematising some of these tensions — Dermigny is certainly correct that Dundas expressed doubts about the reasonableness of the Company monopoly as the basis for all British trade in China.[75] What he leaves out is that Dundas did not actually press the point, and two of Dundas's ideas that most alarmed the Company (eliminating its monopoly and including other Europeans in the new trading privileges he hoped the embassies would procure) were dropped from discussion and left out of the official instructions before Cathcart, let alone Macartney, had even departed for China.

The encounter with Chinese civilisation created contradictory reactions among Europeans. On the one hand, negative reactions to Chinese justice and Chinese officialdom were well-known. On the other, in the shared picture of China that was expressed in the embassy-formation process by both Crown and Company officials, notable virtues were ascribed to China and especially to its government, which made for a highly optimistic tone of discussion about what could be achieved upon request to the emperor. Civilisational claims would go on to serve multiple discursive purposes for actors in the embassy-formation process, from explaining and justifying the basis of British imperial identity to forming the basis for mutual understanding between the British and the higher levels of Chinese society. This is the most important argument against equating the Crown's new role in managing British imperial affairs in China with a directional bent towards a 'national' polity. The results of the embassy-formation process would include the reiteration of an ideal of Sino-British civilisational interaction that was deeply rooted in the Canton system

[73] In particular, Hellman, *This House Is Not A Home*, as well as John Carroll, *Canton Days.*
[74] Hellman, *This House Is Not A Home*, 4-15, 24-38, 264-269.
[75] Dermigny, *Le Commerce A Canton*, 1118; also, Letter Dundas to Cathcart (Instructions), 30 November 1787.

2.7 Conclusion

These civilisational arguments form one of several areas of convergence, divergence, contestation, and consensus between different actors that are covered in the next chapter — against the backdrop of the diplomatic ecosystem outlined in this one. Despite significant expansion of both legal and institutional mechanisms for the cooperation (on unequal terms) between the Crown and the Company, acts of imperial policy by the British empire in China nonetheless relied upon the ability of key stakeholders to align around common understandings and purposes, via discourse in which relationships could be both contested and negotiated. (Incidentally, many of these 'key stakeholders' were substrates such as the Company, whose own internal components related to one another in a process describable in comparable terms) The sources then have to be analysed holistically, with reference not only to their content but to stylistic and compositional choices, and without imposing *a priori* or prescriptive expectations of how historical meaning is to be found in them.

Reframing the political and social context of Great Britain's relationship in China as a complex ecosystem offers the basis for a New Diplomatic History-driven approach to understanding the role of a wide array of actors and the institutional influences on them. The British imperial polity neither was nor became *unitary* before or during the formation of the embassies. Despite three decades of legal and institutional changes, and the extension of the Crown's role in China, the actual practice of imperial governance remained heavily reliant on key stakeholders, and on discourse in which influence could be exercised beyond legal-institutional mechanisms. By the same token, its outcomes were not inevitable, and indeed those outcomes cannot be simplified to the triumph of one group or power-centre over another. This is a key point for the next chapter.

III

When the Company Met the Crown

3.1 Introduction

How did the Crown and the East India Company, represented by a variety of actors with different interests and legal-institutional relationships, negotiate their relationship with one another, and how did their engagement in correspondence shape the character and purpose of the embassies? With the participants in the embassy-formation process having been discussed in Chapter 2, this chapter will trace and analyse how this process unfolded.

To some extent, the process was mediated by the ambassadors themselves: especially, for instance, in incorporating the Creditors' interests into the embassy's mission, which entailed both (contested) policy negotiations and individual legal acts. By approaching this encounter via New Diplomatic History, this chapter and the next will provide an explanation for the formation of British policy towards China during this episode that gives proper weight to the undetermined and ambiguous institutional, personal, and political relationships within the British imperial polity. The British did not have a straightforward system for determining 'objective' national interests in China, or a strong ideological vision to which their diplomacy naturally worked. This approach reveals, rather, how much the formation of diplomatic policy was rooted in decades of British engagement with China. This experience was not universal but particular to certain actors and factions. It would influence the results of a diplomatic effort that sought the cooperation of such varied stakeholders.

The brief given to Cathcart, in Dundas's instructions to him, lays out the wide scope of the ambassador's role. Cathcart was expected to find his own personnel, cultivate his own contacts in the Company or outside it (such as friendly non-British missionaries in Beijing), arrange his own finances, and to use his own discretion when it comes to the tactics of securing the Emperor's goodwill. This was within the range of standard practice in contemporary British diplomacy.[76] Much the same briefing was given to Macartney – indeed, large parts of Dundas's instructions to Macartney are copied word-for-word from those given to Cathcart, and Macartney also drew on many of the arrangements made for Cathcart's abortive embassy, especially in terms of personnel.

[76] Horn, D. B. "Rank and Emolument in the British Diplomatic Service 1689–1789." *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 9 (1959): 19–49.

The overall process by which the embassy was endowed with its political mission was the same for Cathcart and Macartney. After an initial swirl of correspondence between Dundas, the Directors, and the ambassador, Dundas presented the ambassador with instructions, outlining the Government's hopes for the embassy.[77] The ambassador, for his part, furnished Dundas and the Directors with a 'sketch of the embassy', which outlined his response to the instructions and contained details of proposed financing, personnel, and timetables.[78] The Company would then submit its own instructions.[79] Further correspondence would follow, but the instructions were a pivotal event: issues raised and discussed before it were reflected in its text, and correspondence afterwards tended to focus on interpreting its meaning in detail. All of this was done on the understanding that, once in China proper, the ambassador would be out of easy communication. Then, any assessment of what was and was not possible, when faced with the reality of an encounter with the imperial court, would be left to his own discretion. Dundas had the ambassadors provided with a cipher for secret communications but urged that it be used only in case of great need, fearing that it would excite the suspicions of the Chinese.[80] Regular correspondence, even with Canton, was not expected once the ambassador was in China.

The value of a New Diplomatic History approach to understanding these institutional encounters, and the ambassadors' role in them, is that it allows a view of the processes at work without assuming that legal and bureaucratic 'order' or 'objective' interests wholly determined the outcome. Rather, the exact relationship that the Crown, the Company, and other factions had to one another was worked out, to a great extent, in the process, and as a function, of the construction of an embassy representing the whole imperial polity. The ambassador was one of several internal actors. At the same time, the British polity was not approaching China from a remove, but in the context of a long-standing relationship with that country that had many points of contact including, but not limited to, commercial, geopolitical, and cultural interactions.

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[77] Letter Dundas to Cathcart (Instructions), 30 November 1787; BL, IOR, IOR/G/12/91: 178-196, Letter Dundas to Macartney (Instructions), 8 September 1792.

[78] Letter Cathcart to Dundas (Preliminary Proposal), 20 June 1787; Letter Macartney to Dundas (Preliminary Proposal), 8 June 1792.

[79] BL, IOR, IOR/G/12/90: 23, Letter Chairs to Cathcart, 9 November 1787; for the EIC instructions to Macartney, see Pritchard, Edward. "The Instructions of the East India Company to Lord Macartney on His Embassy to China and His Reports to the Company, 1792–4. Part I: Instructions from the Company." *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain & Ireland* 70, no. 2 (1938): 201–30.

[80] Letter Dundas to Cathcart (Instructions), 30 November 1787.

The strategies that the Crown (mainly Dundas) and the Company both used when corresponding about the formation of the embassy should be understood as having a variety of purposes. One was to secure policy decisions that reflected the interests of the correspondent. This meant influencing the outcomes of the official instructions, especially those issued by Dundas, which the Company's own instructions had to work within and around.[81] Another, related, purpose was to shape the ambassador's own thinking, on the understanding that he would be conducting negotiations at his own discretion.[82] An NDH allows us to understand these contingencies much more effectively than conventional diplomatic history, giving space to the agency and individuality of these actors against a presumption of institutional inevitability.

Indispensable to this institutional encounter were the Creditors — a group of British men who had made loans to Chinese merchants on a private basis and, having little confidence that they could recover the debts through the Canton system's dispute-resolution mechanisms, sought to have the issue raised at the imperial court. The Creditors, most of whom had a background in imperial and/or Company service, included a number of influential citizens, had sought to influence the Government to act on their behalf for decades — although defining them as a distinct, continuous group is challenging. As the institutional relationships within the British imperial polity worked themselves out, the positions and influence of the Creditors created a number of challenges, both for the Government which was under pressure to accommodate their demands and the and the Company which was broadly hostile. The NDH approach to the Creditors' involvement in the embassy-making process elucidates how the actors and factions within the British empire were constituted into a diplomatic entity in relation to China, finding the sources and sites of action and of negotiation. It also shows that the dichotomy of imperial and 'private' interests in Asia was drawn, and contested, in a way that went beyond the relationship between the Crown and the Company. The Creditors' involvement was not only a matter of reconciling settled policy with factional interests, but also required their development as an institutional form within the broader imperial polity.

The embassy-formation discourse served to bring different worldviews into contact with each other. In proposing and justifying particular positions, the actors brought forward differing images and narratives of how the British empire's view of itself in relation to China was to be construed, aiming to project these onto the embassy itself. As the embassies came together from the negotiated cooperation of different

[81] For instance, on the possibility of extending British demands on behalf of all Canton traders. See Letter Dundas to Cathcart, 26 August 1787.

[82] The Company's detailed requests for commercially valuable information falls into this category. See Pritchard, "Part II," 218.

stakeholders, the question of what it meant for the British empire to be 'in China' was highlighted and contested.

3.2 Patterns of Agreement, Divergence, and Settlement

The sources offer relatively few set-piece clashes illustrative of institutional infighting, but that does not mean that they do not contain distinct institutional and personal forces bringing their influence to bear upon one another. For all their congeniality, the documents reveal much to a close reader who takes care to consider the modalities contained in each stage and layer of the exchange. In practice, this means looking at how points of agreement might differ from points of convergence (in which similar policies have different meanings for different parties), and, by the same token, considering that divergent views had a broader range of rhetorical purposes than simply attempting to block certain courses of action (such as preserving objections or keeping possibilities open to the ambassador's discretion). We must also consider the significance of types of rhetorical posturing, and at how the information supplied from different sources, especially the Company, acted to influence not just the specific policies but the shared understanding of the backdrop against which they would be implemented.

Of the key players, Dundas plays the decisive role in settling divergent views. This was due not only to the Government's legal and institutional authority over the Company, which as we have seen was rarely explicitly invoked. It was also inherent to the project: an embassy of the Crown required the use of the King's name, which only the Government could furnish. The King's symbolic backing was immanent in the project, not only in the letters to the Emperor in his name but also in the availability of a Navy vessel as Cathcart's flagship, which Dundas presented as a manifest proof that the embassy acted on 'His Majesty's hearty desire to promote the present undertaking… in order to give the greater dignity to the Embassy.'[83] Dundas's hand was present in the Macartney embassy in a number of other ways that reflect greater symbolism of royal backing, such as the provision of a military guard to accompany him.

The Company's engagement with the process, including communications originating from the Directors and those originating in Canton, reflected this basic inequality. There is a pattern on areas where the Company's ideas or interests diverged from those of Dundas, which is detectable in the documents in the aggregate, underneath the genteel language of accord that accompanies each individual incident: where the Directors express a view and Dundas overrules it, the rhetorical approach in

[83] Letter Dundas to Cathcart (Instructions), 30 November 1787.

subsequent correspondence is to accede entirely to Dundas's position while still obliquely re-stating doubts.

During the formation of the Cathcart embassy, for example, Dundas proposed that the ambassador might petition the Emperor for new ports to be opened not to British commerce specifically but to that of all European nations.[84] The deeper logic of this connects to an impulse that is present in much of Dundas's framing of his policy interests: persuading the Emperor that the presence of the British in east Asia is now a general fact of international relations, rather than a specific aspect of his policy towards the Company as a substrate, and suggesting a possible reorientation of British diplomacy in China from a 'business' to an 'economic' focus.[85] The Company sublimates its evident alarm – for its response shows that it sees itself in competition with other European presences in China for the Emperor's favour, a competition in which the other Europeans are thought to play dirty by means of slanders against it[86] – under an acceptance of it this approach as a sound tactic to show good faith rather than self-interested avarice, while preserving its opposition to the principle.

This rhetorical strategy should be taken together with other ones in order to illuminate the ways that the Company sought to assert itself. In fact, these sorts of qualified concessions are less apparent than the Company's assertion of a posture of total support for the ambassador and the Government's aims, which its correspondence often goes out of its way to emphasise. The financing of the embassies is a case in point.[87] The duty of funding the embassies fell, in its entirety, to the Company.[88] The Company was willing to haggle over details (a large portion of the correspondence between the Directors and both ambassadors is devoted to this), but it was also very eager to stress its willingness to provide the funds as proof of its support. In fact, the question would only ever have been moot. There was already a law in place obliging the Company to fund military expenses undertaken in its interests even without its consent (which would have included, at the very least, the cost of the Naval flagships),[89] but even this is to see the point too narrowly: the fact is that, given the range of mechanisms by which the Government could direct the Company, from the Board of Control to the implied possibility of new legislation, the Company was unable to refuse decisions taken by the Government. The Director's effusiveness in emphasising the costs

[84] Letter Dundas to Cathcart, 26 August 1787.
[85] See chapter 2.
[86] Letter Dundas to Cathcart, 26 August 1787.
[87] Letter Chairs to Cathcart, 9 November 1787.
[88] Horn, D.B. "Rank and Emolument," 20-25.
[89] Philips, C.H. "The New East India Board and the Court of Directors, 1784", *The English Historical Review* 55, no. 219 (1940): 438–446.

that the Company had borne, both indirectly (one letter boasted that orders had been sent to Canton to prioritise the ambassador's interests over any other consideration)[90] and directly in terms of the drain on its treasury, can be seen as making a virtue of necessity – or, more broadly, as a strategy that allows an institution in a manifestly inferior position, in a matter that bears directly on its own interests, to reassert its role in the process.

There is no evidence that this was the product of conscious intent. The institutional needs and stresses of the Company manifested themselves in the efforts of its employees and representatives. That said, we shouldn't imagine this to be a mere expression of frustrated men's efforts to have the last word. The rhetorical strategy of conceding points while reiterating doubts, and that of emphasising the Company's eagerness to participate willingly where it had no realistic alternative, both served a purpose, when we keep in mind the enormous latitude that was given to the ambassador in terms of formulating how he would deliver the Government's policy agenda to the Emperor. Even where the Company was powerless in practical terms, that is, the rhetorical postures and strategies that it adopted in those contexts still stood to exercise influence on the overall outcome of the process.

3.3 The Crown, the Company, and Empire

To a point, the interests expressed by Dundas, the Directors, and the Supercargoes correspond to Antunes' view of the difference between 'economic' and 'business' diplomacy (see Chapter 1), particularly the use of petitions to represent the business as a responsible entity to state authorities, and the 'contractualising' of privileges, as fundamental aspects of business diplomacy.[91] Both are present in the aims which the Company aims to incorporate into the embassy's stated mission.

Significant among the aims of the Company is the desire to secure legal jurisdiction over its own employees in Canton, removing them from Chinese criminal jurisdiction, which was held to be arbitrary and barbaric.[92] This corresponds to Antunes' second dimension, the contractualising of privileges.[93] Seeking to have immediate privileges transformed into regularised jurisdictions would make the relationship

[90] "Chairmen to Dundas," IOR/G/12/91: 90-97, India Office Records, British Library, London.
[91] Antunes, "Early Modern Business Diplomacy," 23.
[92] It was common in the early modern period for charter companies to seek legal jurisdiction over their own employees, trading sites, important markets, etc. The demand was not unique to China. For a general overview of the relationship between corporate colonialism and jurisdiction-seeking behaviour, see Benton, Lauren and Ross, Richard, eds. *Legal pluralism and empires, 1500-1850*. New York: New York University Press, 2016.
[93] Antunes, "Business Diplomacy," 24.

between the business and its benefactor more stable in the long term, while providing the business with a degree of security and predictability for future operations by securing legal supervision of its own agents and staff.

This distinction can be traced in the complementary sets of instructions and in several other exchanges between Dundas and the Directors. The Company's instructions to Macartney offer clarity as to where the Company perceives itself most likely to benefit from his efforts. This is especially clear on matters relating to trade practices: the bulk of the instructions are given over to lengthy, technical descriptions of types of information that Macartney might acquire that would benefit the Company commercially. These include information that might improve the quality of goods produced by the Company in India that were struggling to compete with Chinese exports;[94] an understanding of the regions of China in which British imports were most widely consumed; and a sense of what British imports might be potentially interesting to Chinese consumers.[95]

By contrast, other proposals emanating from Dundas to improve commerce were treated warily in the Company's correspondence. One of the central tenets of Dundas's policy, included in his own instructions to both Cathcart and Macartney, was to persuade the emperor to open at least one additional port to British trade.[96] In principle, the Company expressed hope (assuming that their Canton problems were the result of bad and corrupt provincial officials) that competition between two ports would compel the officials in both to be more accommodating to British merchants. However, the Company was cagey about specifics. There was a commercial dimension to this: they aimed to ensure that such a port was near either to the regions producing their primary exports or, failing that, those most likely to consume British goods.[97] The deeper problem, though, was that the Company feared that its sailors' dissolute behaviour would further harm its image with the emperor if its ships had access to ports closer to Beijing.[98]

The directors bought up a 1784 dispute in which a British sailor on the *Lady Hughes* inadvertently killed two Chinese men while firing a salute, and the Canton authorities had embargoed trade until the accused was turned over for execution.[99] The

[94] Pritchard, "Part II," 218.
[95] Ibidem, 221.
[96] Letter Dundas to Cathcart (Instructions), 30 November 1787.
[97] BL, IOR, IOR/G/12/91: 166, Letter Chairs to Dundas, 25 July 1792.
[98] Letter Chairs to Dundas, 25 July 1792.
[99] Chen, Li. "Law, Empire, and Historiography of Modern Sino-Western Relations: A Case Study of the 'Lady Hughes' Controversy in 1784." *Law and History Review* 27, no. 1 (2009) 1–53.

Lady Hughes incident was an important moment in which European dissatisfactions with Chinese justice were consolidated into a broader critique of that justice as being 'barbaric' and morally insupportable. This type of invective was not new and was certainly consistent with later justifications of colonial intervention in China.[100]

That said, the use made of this incident in the India Office papers falls well short of even a theoretical justification for overthrowing Chinese legal authority. The arguments made in the Company's instructions were somewhat tortured. Its authors express certainty that the authorities' actions were contrary to the will of the Qing emperor, yet they are loath to raise the topic with higher officials for fear of it coming back on them in a way that harms their position in Canton. While insisting that it was an unjust misunderstanding, they also propose that a new port should be at a considerable distance from Beijing, lest such events get back to the Qing court and harm the Company's standing.[101]

Dundas faced significant resistance from the Directors in many of his proposals for major reforms to the overall system of Sino-British trading. They argued that the problems with the system were manageable and the worst aspects of it were receding.[102] On the whole, the risks that came from calling the Canton system into question alarmed them more than the problems that were, in their view, inherent in it. Their sanguine position on the status quo was not shared with the Supercargoes in Canton, who delivered letters to the Directors (to which Macartney certainly had access, although he never refers directly to them in his letters) arguing that the situation in Canton was on the verge of rendering commerce in China impossible.[103] The Directors, by contrast, aimed to keep this matter out of the ambassador's remit, to such an extent that they supported Dundas's initiative to have the ambassador land directly in China proper, rather than at the factory in Canton.[104] This is a telling incidence of convergence: where Dundas wanted to emphasise that the ambassador was not simply a Company representative, the Directors endorsed the decision to avoid the risk of him taking the supercargoes' complaints to heart.

The Directors' position on the Canton system diverged from that of the Supercargoes because the former feared that bringing complaints at that level would trigger a reaction from the Chinese officials who were assumed to be corruptly prospering off the defects in that system.[105] That said, there was a commonality

[100] Chen, "The 'Lady Hughes' Controversy," 44-46.
[101] Pritchard, "Part II" 213-4.
[102] Pritchard, "Part II" 210.
[103] BL, IOR, IOR/G/12/93: 118. Letter Supercargoes to Macartney, 13 January 1793.
[104] Letter Chairs to Dundas, 25 July 1792.
[105] Letter Chairs to Cathcart, 9 November 1787.

between the Directors and the Supercargoes, which reflected the deeper position of the Company in China. Both constitute attempts to influence the embassy to reflect an image of the Company as a subject of the Chinese state.

This idea constitutes the core of the Company's 'business diplomacy' in the embassy-formation process. Both the Directors and the Supercargoes approached their grievances in China through the lens of a petitioner.[106] Indeed, the Directors proposed to Macartney that the ambassador, having (hopefully) improved the position of the British by securing an imperial audience and, perhaps, favourable decrees, would travel to Canton and negotiate with provincial Chinese officials himself.[107] Ultimately, the Company's most notable influence on the embassy would be shaping it to operate as an advocate for the Company as a Chinese petitioner.

Dundas's letters suggest another worldview. Simply by involving himself, as the King's effective representative, in Chinese affairs, Dundas was articulating a different diplomatic posture to China. At a ceremonial level, Dundas was responsible for securing a military guard from royal rather than Company forces and ensuring that the ambassador traveled in a naval vessel.[108] Dundas's instructions also show a deep concern for regularising the emerging (but still frangible) British dominance of India. The India Office papers contain relatively little discussion about Indian affairs, but communications between Dundas and Cornwallis (Governor-General of India) and the Board of Control preceded the section of Dundas's instructions that detail how British power in India should be explained to the Chinese emperor: as a lawful exertion of rights the British acquired legitimately from the emperor of India, and as powers exercised to pacific ends, with no British desire to expand these powers at China's expense.[109]

Ceremonially and politically, Dundas's position is distinct from the Company's: persuading the emperor that the Crown's presence as an Asian power in its own right is an accepted component of the framework of Sino-British relations. This is a separate concern from Dundas's interest in expanding commerce, although the two could be rhetorically intertwined (see below). The fact that the Directors, intent on benefitting from direct British sovereign relations with China, nonetheless hope to remain outside

[106] The Company had considerable experience engaging in diplomacy in India. Guido van Meersbergen argues that the Company's Indian diplomacy consisted most commonly of petitioning, and that 'Company envoys presented themselves as obliging participants in the ceremonial performance of an asymmetric relationship,' suggesting that, notwithstanding the unprecedented nature of a royal embassy to the Qing court, the Company was to some degree drawing on its established modes of diplomacy. See van Meersbergen, Guido. "The Diplomatic Repertoires of the East India Companies in Mughal South Asia, 1608-1717." *The Historical Journal*, 62, no. 4 (2019): 875-898.
[107] Letter Chairs to Dundas, 25 July 1792.
[108] BL, IOR, IOR/G/12/90-133. Letter Whitehall to Strachan, 30 November 1787.
[109] Letter Dundas to Cathcart (Instructions), 30 November 1787.

the Emperor's direct frame of reference, speaks to a deeper contradiction. No matter how much the Government sought to carry out east Asian trade as a sovereign affair, the Company's China traders were still bound to operate within the political framework of the Chinese state.

That said, there is not a clear difference between absolute, opposing 'Crown' and 'Company' positions in the overall embassy-formation discourse, certainly not justifying a distinction between a supposedly conservative Company and a reforming Crown. The Company's interest in improving its stock of detailed information reflects a meaningful commitment to taking advantage of the novelty of the embassy, given the crucial role that this kind of information played in the contemporary business environment.[110] The Directors' aim of improving the Company's position by envisioning the ambassador as a petition-bearer was also ambitious.

The Crown remained basically committed to the Company's commercial position. As discussed above, the Company was, practically, an indispensable stakeholder, and any commercial growth would only ever go through the Company. Scholars sometimes make much of a letter[111] from Dundas which proposed to Cathcart that, if necessary, the British might propose sharing the benefits of a new port with other European traders.[112] Taken on its own, this might seem to be a premonition of the system of combined European colonial exploitation that followed the Opium Wars, but the reality is more prosaic. For one thing, this proposal did not actually make its way into Dundas's instructions, although Dundas never renounced it. In any case, it was proposed by Dundas as a bargaining chip during speculation over other European powers' ability to impugn British intentions to the emperor[113] — taken in this context, it is a proposal to neutralise accusations of British self-dealing, rather than a serious break from the Crown's commitment to the Company's position in Asia. Dundas's letters consistently equate British commercial interests with an expansion of the Company's business. If Dundas was interested in supplanting the Company's business diplomacy with a broader British policy of economic diplomacy, it was not a very strong concern, and was not meaningfully included in the definition of the embassies' purposes.

For its part, even though the Company's business interests included much beyond a simple increase in revenues, the Directors' views also converged with the economic diplomacy pressed by Dundas.

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[110] De Vries, "Understanding Eurasian Trade," 14-17.
[111] Letter Dundas to Cathcart (Instructions), 30 November 1787.
[112] For example, Hevia, *Cherishing Men from Afar,* 58-62.
[113] Letter Dundas to Cathcart (Instructions), 30 November 1787.

Dundas, for his part, had one 'purely' economic motive: his concern that the British silver stock was being drained by importing Chinese tea without exporting goods of equivalent value.[114] This was highlighted early in both sets of instructions. The Company was far more relaxed in this respect. Its own instructions to Macartney argue that, even with the Canton monopoly remaining in place, its prospects for selling more British wares on the Chinese market in the future are good.[115]

This motive, in Dundas's instructions, was compounded by a number of overlapping interests connected to India.[116] Widening markets for Indian wares would shore up British control of India. Any attempt to draw a distinction between commercial and political interests in this area risks getting caught in a circular argument. Dundas expresses concern that if that trade cannot be put on a more secure footing (referring, presumably, both to wider market access and to improving the privileges of the Company in China), it will endanger the stability of British India – and, conversely, that the recurring conflicts between Indian states and the British would give the impression that Great Britain was inclined simply towards conquest, which might impede the Company's trading privileges.

In his instructions to both Cathcart and Macartney (much of the latter being copied directly from the former), Dundas framed these interests in a certain order.[117] He began by asserting a general principle that the King cared that his subjects in China and was concerned for their ability to operate under decent conditions, regardless of the question of commercial gain. Then he formulated an overarching message to the Emperor: that the British empire had no interest in China beyond good commerce, without undue 'hindrance' or 'embarrassment'. Within this framing, all the details of his instructions, and that subsequent correspondence that supplemented it, were laid out. In fact, the remainder of the instructions devote considerable attention to political questions related to India. Thus, in Dundas's correspondence, economic diplomacy formed part of a broader system for integrating political and business concerns. By allowing us to focus on the process by which that integration was negotiated, instead of reifying or overemphasizing those concerns themselves, NDH allows us to recast this episode as a moment in which imperial identity was being constructed and reconstrued at the same time it was diplomatically asserted.

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[114] Letter Dundas to Cathcart (Instructions), 30 November 1787; Letter Dundas to Macartney (Instructions), 8 September 1792.
[115] Pritchard, "Part II,", 210.
[116] Ibidem, 213-4.
[117] Letter Dundas to Cathcart (Instructions), 30 November 1787; Letter Dundas to Macartney (Instructions), 8 September 1792.

Conversely, the Company's response did not try to reduce the embassy to its narrow business interests. Instead, it presented — by means not only (or even mostly) of confrontation but rhetorical strategies of deference, convergence, and polite divergence — an alternative integration. In this view, the elevation of its position by means of careful consideration of its status as a Chinese petitioner would produce the salutary economic results sought by Dundas. The Crown and the Company did not occupy straightforwardly differentiated, let alone opposed, positions in the embassy-formation process. Rather, actors connected to them engaged, through argument and rhetoric, in a dynamic process to build mutual cooperation around a shared agenda incorporating multiple strands and variegated interests and positions.

3.4 Imagining the Emperor

One of the Company's most significant sources of influence over the embassy-formation discourse came from its ability to supply information, and the perceptions and imaginings of China implied within it. This enabled it to shape the embassy even as the Government retained the absolute power of decision. A useful illustration of the influence that came with the information supply comes from a lengthy document referred to simply as 'an historical sketch.'[118] It was delivered to Lord Macartney before his departure by the Company's Superintending Committee in Canton. It begins with the merchants of the Arabian Caliphate in the eleventh century and continues, chronologically, through the process by which the Russians, Portuguese, and Dutch established trade relations in the early modern period, along with discussions of trade ties between China and central Asian states. It traces the closed-country policy of the Ming and the controlled opening of the Qing, which led to the creation of the Canton system.

This treatise has no explicit thesis as an historical argument. Rather, it is more of a potted history of a very long period drawing on a variety of named sources, presented 'with a view to point out the sources whence information respecting China and its intercourse with Europe could be derived.'[119] No work of history can be a wholly neutral list of facts, however, and 'in the Prosecution of the work, remarks were naturally suggested.'[120] There is a perception of China that is encoded within it. Indeed, part of the effect of the work is to communicate the Company's view of China, and to project it upon the organization of the embassy.

[118] Historical Sketch, undated.
[119] Ibidem.
[120] Ibidem.

It conveys a view of China in which diplomacy and foreign trade are inextricably linked, due to the supreme role of the Emperor. Commerce cannot be, or at least never will be, conducted in China without the grant of special privileges by central decree, and those privileges are given not with an eye to economic gain but in recognition of imperial esteem of the nation whence the traders originate. The fact that it draws a through-line from the caravans of the Silk Road to the state of European charter-companies contains a very specific image of diplomacy and commerce are intertwined. Commerce, in this telling, was an abstraction in the Chinese mind, a source of corrupt earnings for officials,[121] and for the imperial court, something that was granted or withdrawn on the basis of policy without regard to economic calculus. Commercial success – a desire which, as we will see, wholly united the Government and the Company, although with subtle differences of emphasis – could only be achieved through political means: the negotiation and renegotiation of the traders' privileges as Chinese subjects, which must derive from successful diplomatic efforts by the polity of which those commerçants were also subjects and representatives.

Contained implicitly within what is presented as little more than a mere annotated bundle of potentially useful information, the Company conveyed into the embassy-formation process a conceptualisation of the Sino-British diplomatic framework through its own eyes. This particular document is illustrative, but the entire correspondence sent from the Directors and the Canton officials to the ambassadors and to Dundas brim with information relating to the political situation which the embassy can expect to face in China.

None of this information was unavailable in England. Indeed, information about (and impressions of) China had been conveyed to Europe as a consequence of trade, and sometimes directly through material exchange — *chinoiserie* having become a yardstick by which educated Europeans assessed Chinese culture.[122] Europeans had gone through periods of both predominantly positive and negative views of China, and by the late 18th century the latter was becoming more widespread, not least as fallout from the mounting frustrations of European traders with the Chinese state.[123] European images of China certainly influenced all actors in the embassy-formation process, and the Company was certainly not purely influenced by its direct knowledge of that country.

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[121] Commerce was also not seen as a highly respectable profession in the traditional Confucian social order; see Watson, James. *Class and social stratification in post-revolution China*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010, 20-24. In practice, however, Chinese officials demonstrated a high level of motivation in supporting the Canton trade; see van Dyke, *Politics and Strategies,* 25-27.

[122] Hevia, *Cherishing Men from Afar*, 69.

[123] Ibidem, 65-72.

The purpose of reconstructing this information, as part of the discursive effort to influence the formation process, had rather a more practical purpose. Constructing a shared image of the Chinese system of government was indispensable because it would define the relationship between the ambassador's role as a petitioner for the Company and as the representative of a fellow Asian sovereign. In relation to India, Dundas set out an argument that the expansion of power in India was both blameless and unthreatening, containing an implicit assumption that the emperor would be inclined to accept these arguments. The Company, meanwhile, portrays the emperor as possessing qualities of wisdom and justice that will allow its position to be improved by means of a petition.[124]

The frequent derogatory references to Chinese customs and the Chinese mentality that occur in this and many other documents (from both the Crown and the Company) must be taken together with references to the positive qualities imagined of China – its antiquity, its venerable civilisation, and its love of wisdom. These occur both in the 'historical sketch', and throughout both Government and Company correspondence. They, too, are placed in this mental model of how China operates. The layers of bureaucracy and hindrance separating the Company, and the British more generally, from the Emperor are characterized by the vices ascribed to China (which naturally explain the failure to secure more favourable privileges for British traders). By contrast, not only is the Emperor endowed with great qualities, but he is assumed to be the only person capable of unlocking these finer national qualities and bringing them to bear upon the Sino-British relationship. In any event, while the British certainly consider themselves culturally superior in many crucial respects, their dim view of Chinese customs does not contain any implication of illegitimacy of Qing sovereignty. On the contrary, the presumption that China's sovereignty can and must endure, as the only basis for securing British interests in that country, is bolstered by the array of potentially good and useful characteristics that are imputed to the Emperor and his own 'despotic' power.

Creating a common understanding of the Chinese imperial system was a crucial step in securing convergence of the Crown and the Company around specific policies and aims. It was an area in which the Company was able to influence a significant discursive influence on the process, using its experience in China as leverage. The 'historical sketch' and other descriptions of power-relations in China served to highlight the Company's self-image as a somewhat mistreated subject within the Chinese state, portraying the emperor in terms of his relationship with other Chinese officials.

[124] Historical Sketch, undated.

3.5 The Creditors

The process of achieving convergence between the Crown and the Company around a particular diplomatic agenda was not smooth or uncontested, but it largely occurred without direct expressions of sustained opposition by the Directors. The major exception to this was the issue of the Creditors.

The 'Creditors' is a general term used in the sources to refer to British moneylenders who were, or felt themselves to be, owed substantial debts on loans made to Chinese merchants — and saw no way to recover them except through diplomatic intervention. The term is never defined and refers sometimes simply to any British national in that position. At other times it refers to particular committees formed to represent such people by means of specific representatives. Committees had been formed on some creditors' own initiatives as early as 1778, but it would ultimately be at Cathcart's initiative that a new committee would be formed in 1784 to exercise its members' power of attorney: an interesting case of a faction being incorporated into the imperial polity. The Creditors were a faction in their own right, but their ability to exert influence on policy was dependent on the cooperation of the Government (which they secured through political pressure exercised in Parliament).

The incorporation of the Creditors' interests into the embassies' brief is the subject of a substantial proportion of the India Office papers, not least because the Company was openly antagonistic. Private creditors in China had posed problems for the Company in the past. British creditors lending to Chinese merchants were based not only in the United Kingdom but throughout the empire in Asia, with concentrations in Madras and Bombay and a few in Canton.[125] Many were, or had been, Company employees. Substantial sums had been loaned to Chinese merchants in or connected to Canton, but around 1775 British creditors panicked and called in loans faster than the Chinese merchants could pay. Because Chinese subjects were not legally allowed to take loans from foreigners, the creditors could not seek redress directly from Chinese officials.[126] The stymied creditors sought out political backing within the British polity instead.

A decade before the formation of the Cathcart embassy started, the Company had initially been willing to offer them support,[127] but had become rather more hostile to their cause when the aggrieved lenders took matters into their own hands. The

[125] Hanser, "British Private Traders," 1-3.
[126] Van Dyke, *Success and Failure*, 72-73.
[127] Hanser, "British Private Traders," 8.

'Creditors' are a somewhat nebulous group, but they proved to be highly politically active, forming a committee in 1778 in London that advertised for others in their boat in the newspaper.[128] More brazenly, they suborned a Royal Navy admiral to send a warship to Canton, without permission from the Company authorities either in Madras or in Canton, which startled the Chinese officials into investigating the debts.[129] The complicated matter resulted in an imperial decree, which compensated the creditors at a small fraction of their outstanding loans, in 1779.

This did not satisfy the all creditors, especially a core group with the largest investments. Everyone who was a Canton creditor was not necessarily one of the 'Creditors' referred to in the India Office papers (with insistent capitalisation), but several key figures kept up the pressure on the British government to make the matter a diplomatic issue. One of them, George Smith, penned a 'narrative' of the issue that was forwarded to Dundas and from there to Cathcart.[130] The Company was anxious about the disturbance of already strained relations with Chinese officials, which was the reason that the Company raised to Dundas in answer to Smith's submission.[131]

The Creditors nonetheless secured their place at the table through intense lobbying efforts. Smith corresponded closely with Dundas and testified before Parliament.[132] Another Creditor, George Vansittart, was himself an MP from 1784 to 1812.[133] Dundas's sympathy was not their only source of influence on the embassy formation process. Pitt, the Prime Minister, only makes three interventions in the India Office sources, once in a letter to Cathcart, the other two times in the context of personal meetings between them that are referred to in subsequent letters. The Creditors successfully gained an *entrée* into the embassy-formation process both because of their influential positions in the British imperial polity and due to organised and persistent engagement with the British political system.

Dundas, in fact, drew a line while recommending the Creditors' cause to Cathcart, declaring that he would not include the issue in his formal recommendations to the ambassador. Nonetheless, the recommendation was enough for Cathcart to make considerable efforts to include the Creditors' demands within the policy framework of the embassy. Much of the correspondence deals with the process of forming the

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[128] Hanser, "British Private Traders," 2.
[129] Ibidem, 3.
[130] "Narrative on Debts: Smith & Cathcart," IOR/G/12/91: 39-45, India Office Records, British Library, London.
[131] Letter Chairs to Dundas, 25 July 1792.
[132] Hanser, "British Private Traders," 3.
[133] Namier, Lewis, ed. *The History of Parliament: The House of Commons, 1754-1790,* s.v. "Vansittart, George." London: Boydell and Brewer, 1964.

debtors into a legally-constituted committee (the 1778 committee having presumably lapsed) and transferring power of attorney to Cathcart.

Although Dundas offers no specific justification for his refusal to include the debt issue in the official instructions, it is reasonable to assume that it reflected the need to defer, to some degree, to the Company's hostility — proof that he still wasn't willing to overrule the embassy's most important institutional stakeholder. Jessica Hanser argues that Dundas was ambivalent about intervening to support them,[134] although he was evidently somewhat sympathetic or at least willing to express himself as such. However, Dundas's reticence only went so far. His instructions to Cathcart and Macartney both include a plea for the right of British subjects to be heard in Chinese 'Tribunals'[135], which seems likely to have reflected a desire to see the Creditors acquire the legal standing to press their debts in Chinese courts. Similarly, Hanser sees Macartney as being opposed to the Creditors' interests, while Cathcart was favourable — perhaps true to an extent, but a straightforward opposition is hard to support. Macartney certainly expressed clear and loud distaste at representing the Creditors, but as ambassador he stepped into the same attorney position that Cathcart had worked out. It is perhaps the most important instance of continuity between the two embassies.

The Creditors' involvement in the formation of the embassies was a key part of the construction of a diplomatic representation of the British imperial polity. As with the articulation of interests by other factions and stakeholders, the Creditors were not part of a 'unitary' British apparatus of governance that formulated fundamental interests and then put them into practice. Rather, their involvement in the power-structure was, itself, ambivalent: openly opposed by the Company, it depended on (probably tepid) support from Dundas but, more than that, on the ambassador's willingness to adapt his role accordingly. This came at the end of over a decade in which the political role of the creditors had been both dynamic and ambiguous: acting on private initiative, they had managed to deploy a Royal Navy ship in order to spur Chinese officials into favourable action. Combining lobbying with parliamentary action, they had blurred the line between private stakeholders and participants in the power structure in order to secure the Government's backing. They lacked continuous organisational coherence,[136] yet their ability to constitute themselves as a singular legal personality, and to make the ambassador take on an additional role as their attorney, was intrinsic to the way that

[134] Hanser. *Mr. Smith Goes to China: Three Scots in the Making of Britain's Global Empire*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019, 120-145.
[135] Letter Dundas to Cathcart (Instructions), 30 November 1787.
[136] There were two sequential committees representing their interests, formed under virtually opposite circumstances — one to lobby the Government, the other at the Government's own suggestion — and it is impossible to know if every single person with loans out in Canton was involved in either of these.

their interests were incorporated into the purposes and justification imputed upon the embassies.

The Creditors' contributions to the embassy were rooted in long-standing engagement in China. Like the Company, they required the willing intervention of the Chinese state to advance their goals, and their influence on the embassy saw the ambassador as a petitioner. It is interesting to note that the Creditors shared the Company's conception of British diplomacy in China as involving, to a large extent, petitioning on behalf of British subjects operating within Chinese rule. On the other hand, their enlistment as stakeholders in the embassies' policy goals came about quite differently. Evolving and increasingly formalised institutional interrelationships between the Crown and the Company underpinned their cooperation. By contrast, the Creditors' incorporation as stakeholders occurred entirely because of their ability to secure the political backing of the Government, as the result of strategies that straddled the line between private lobbying and institutional connections via Parliament.

3.6 Conclusion

The strength of an NDH approach comes from seeing the embassies themselves as sites in which relationships within the polity were worked out. Before any ambassador set foot in China, the instructions, suggestions, counter-suggestions, and seemingly neutral information emanating from different sources had sought to influence the image of the British imperial presence in China that the ambassadors would use as their baseline in advancing 'British' interests. We can identify certain dichotomies: between economic and business diplomacy, for instance, or between 'state' interests (such as stabilising British rule in India) and 'private' interests (like those of the Creditors). However, these distinctions were, in the first place, not absolutely aligned with particular stakeholders. The Government never envisioned an economic policy that fundamentally compromised the Company, while a hard-and-fast distinction between the Creditors as 'private' citizens and the Company as an intrinsic part of the state is undercut by the way that these antagonistic groups nonetheless converged around a specific idea of the ambassador's purpose.

Stakeholders varied, at the same time, in their experience of China, which is another aspect of NDH that sheds light on this episode. British stakeholders' relationship to one another was determined not only by institutional relationships and personal initiative, but by the position that each stakeholder already had in the Chinese context. Rather than there being an 'absolute' practice of British diplomacy, the British empire in China is being defined through the interaction of factions whose interrelationship is *also*

defined by their role as Chinese subjects. The process of constructing a policy brief for the first royal ambassador to China, rather than being an epochal moment of change, was rather a negotiation between these factions, and the final result involved reconciling variety of contrasting positions.

IV

The Ambassador's Person

4.1 Introduction

The final chapter of this thesis will consider the construction of the ambassador's person and the embassies that undergirded and reflected it, on the symbolic plane as well as the political. How did the ambassadors themselves influence this process, and how far were they constrained by the need to secure the buy-in of stakeholders?

The ambassadors had different careers and entered office from different social *milieux*, but both had been born into genteel but non-élite backgrounds (moreover, neither was English) and had augmented their social status through service in the British empire. Colonel Charles Cathcart, the first ambassador, was the second son of a Scottish nobleman and clan chieftain. His father had distinguished himself as a British officer and ambassador to Russia.[137] The younger Cathcart's own career was mostly military, taking him to North America and India as an officer, before he returned to Scotland to stand for Parliament with the backing of the enormously influential Dundas family.[138] Joining Parliament in 1784, he was an ally of Pitt and Dundas and contributed to the bill that became the India Act of 1784.[139] Dundas explained his decision to appoint Cathcart as ambassador by praising his integrity and insight, but Cathcart's willing involvement with what was known as the 'Dundas interest,' Henry Dundas' patronage network,[140] undoubtedly played a major part.

George Macartney's background — an Anglo-Irish family with no aristocratic links — was less impressive, though sufficient to give him a solid start in life with a degree from Trinity College, Dublin.[141] Macartney proved diplomatically precocious, however, being appointed as British envoy to Russia before he had turned thirty (as the predecessor of Cathcart's father, in fact), before serving variously as governor in both the east and west Indies and involving himself in the Government of Ireland.[142] When he

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[137] Scott, H. M. "Cathcart, Charles Schaw, ninth Lord Cathcart (1721–1776), army officer and diplomat." *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004.
[138] Hayden-Guest, "Cathcart."
[139] Ibidem.
[140] Furber, Holden. *Henry Dundas: First Viscount Melville, 1742-1811: Political Manager of Scotland, Statesman, Administrator of British India*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1931. 201-238.
[141] Encyclopaedia Britannica, s.v. "George Macartney, Earl Macartney." *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 2024.
[142] Britannica, "George Macartney."

was made Cathcart's successor, he was already substantially more distinguished in terms of public offices held than Cathcart had been, and better-connected at the highest levels of British political society.[143] At one point the King personally intervened in a feud to which Macartney was a party.[144] Like Cathcart, he was a close ally of Pitt and Dundas, but was a higher-profile figure in his own right when he was tapped for the role of ambassador to China — as well as a personal acquaintance and ally of key figures in Pitt and Dundas's India administration, notably Lord Cornwallis, Governor-General of India. He had already been ennobled in the Irish peerage (Ireland, at the time, had a separate parliament and peerage),[145] and made a Knight of the Bath,[146] before being selected as ambassador.

Against such differences in background, we must ask how these men made themselves representatives of the British empire – embodying an image of it that satisfied the embassies' various stakeholders while also aligning with the British perception of what sort of ambassador would be effective in the Chinese context. The personal role of the ambassador in the embassy-formation process is already touched on in the previous chapter, especially the way that the ambassadors related to the Creditors. This chapter will continue to explore that aspect of the process, especially by showing that the role of a British ambassador to China was taken, to some degree, as a new area.

4.2 Contextualising the Ambassador's Role

An NDH approach allows us to understand how particular actors shaped an outcome that was not totally determined either by institutional relationships or by inexorable evolutionary currents. This chapter also responds to the challenge posed in 2016 by Tracey Sowerby's article on the state of the NDH approach. 'Questioning where the boundaries of diplomatic agency lay, whether with respect to the types of political societies that could engage in it or with regard to the individuals or groups who could exercise it on their behalf, has been a marked feature of much recent scholarship,' Sowerby writes. 'This need to probe the limits of diplomacy is particularly acute.'[147] I have argued that the participants in this process were self-consciously involved in an

[143] Robbins, Helen. *Our First Ambassador to China: An Account of the Life of George, Earl Macartney*. New York: Dutton and Co., 1908. 156-160.
[144] Robbins, *Our First Ambassador*, 164.
[145] McCahill, Michael, and Archer Wasson, Ellis. "The New Peerage: Recruitment to the House of Lords, 1704–1847." *The Historical Journal* 46, no. 1 (2003): 1–38.
[146] Recorded in *The Gazette*, issue 11262, June 1772, 1. https://www.thegazette.co.uk/London/issue/11255/page/1 [retrieved 12/06/2024]
[147] Sowerby, "Early Modern Diplomatic History," 444.

important moment in British diplomacy while highly committed to maintaining existing frameworks of Sino-British relations. Those frameworks included both the 'external' — i.e., the perception of China, the imperial state, and the Canton system — and the 'internal', i.e. the system of broadly autonomous imperial actors and substrates relying on mutual persuasion and consensus as the basis of policy.

As such, the 'limits of diplomacy' extended deep within the internal relations of the British imperial polity. They are very difficult to separate from a broader set of political orientations. The purpose of this paper is to identify how the diplomatic effort embodied in Macartney's arrival in China was shaped by the political structure of the British empire, and the point of relying on an NDH model is to reflect the degree of contingency, negotiation, and contestation that was latent in the process.

Looking at the ambassador's 'person' — a role that was constructed through institutional, political, and discursive factors — allows us to continue with this purpose. A key motivation of contemporary NDH approaches, raised by John Watkins[148] and flagged again by Sowerby,[149] is to question and deconstruct the idea that modern diplomacy 'culminated' in an orderly system of resident ambassadors. One of the major hopes for the mission, included in King George's letter to the emperor[150] and discussed extensively in the instructions and in Company documents,[151] was that a permanent embassy might be established in Beijing. This could be taken to indicate that the British were simply pressing China to accept the extension of a 'global' diplomatic system.[152]

Yet the India Office papers reveal a different context in which this request was made. A signal concern of both Dundas and the various Company correspondents was that the emperor was exposed to anti-British malice because of the presence of Catholic missionaries at court in Beijing.[153] The desire for a resident embassy came from a need to provide a counterweight to these influences, not an abstract will to bring Sino-British relations into a preconceived template. Incidentally, the British were also willing to work with friendly missionaries: French Jesuits, assumed to be pro-British out of hostility to France's anti-clerical revolutionary government, were recommended to Macartney as

[148] Watkins, John, "Toward a New Diplomatic History of Medieval and Early Modern Europe," *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 38, no. 1 (January 1, 2008): 1–14, 1.
[149] Sowerby, Tracey. "Early Modern Diplomatic History," *History Compass* 14, no. 9 (2016): 442.
[150] BL, IOR, IOR/G/12/90: 125, Letter George III to Emperor Qianlong, 19 July 1789; BL, IOR, IOR/G/12/91: 175, Letter Superintending Committee to Viceroy (Canton), 27 April 1792.
[151] Letter Dundas to Cathcart (Instructions), Letter Dundas to Macartney (Instructions), 8 September 1792; Letter: Chairs to Dundas, 20 January 1792.
[152] Peyrefitte, *L'empire Immobile,* 452.
[153] Letter Chairs to Cathcart, 9 November 1787.

potential allies.[154] In formulating a resident ambassador as a policy aim, the British were responding to particular circumstances rather than envisioning a new model of diplomacy on principles drawn from outside China. What is not discussed in the text supports this argument as strongly as what is: matters of diplomatic rank, which were a highly important aspect of diplomatic positioning in Europe,[155] are barely discussed and certainly not flagged as matters of debate in any of the surviving correspondence. European precedents, more broadly, are not used to advocate for the appropriateness of seeking a resident embassy.

This is not to say that the British approached diplomacy with China as a totally blank slate, which would be an over-exaggeration of the evidence. Certainly, the British were drawing on familiar diplomatic experience in some respects. The King's letter to the Qianlong Emperor contains a number of aspects which reflect broader British habit, yet the King's letter was more than a pro-forma document, as Hui Wang demonstrates.[156] It served as an introduction of the King, who calls himself 'sovereign of the seas…who has obtained victories over [his] enemies in the four quarters of the world.'[157] Even in a document that consolidated, rather than contributed to, the British consensus over the purpose, form, and nature of any embassy to China (for no one in the King's private service contributed to the discourse in any other way) we can see that the British approach was neither fixed nor systematised. The embassy would embody a diplomatic approach that treated Sino-British relations on their own terms, rooted — as we have seen — in over a century of existing practice and not excessively wedded to a fixed ideal of diplomatic practice, whether European or drawn on previous British practice in India or elsewhere.

Rather, the formation of the Cathcart and Macartney embassies saw the role of the ambassador evolve in relation to specific aspects of the British imperial polity: the longstanding position of the East India Company in China and the emerging relationship of the Crown and the Company in the governance of a growing empire in Asia, as discussed in the last chapter, and the needs and interests of the ambassadors themselves, discussed in this chapter. The discourse surrounding the ambassador's 'person,' how to go about constructing that person, and to what end, came to revolve around an idea that I have termed 'eminence,' which emerges from the correspondence as the master-concept for achieving diplomatic success in China — and which

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[154] "Directors to Cathcart," IOR/G/12/90: 27.

[155] For a general introduction to European diplomatic rank, see Bayne Horne, David. *The British Diplomatic Service: 1689-1789.* Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1961.

[156] Wang, Hui. "Translation between Two Imperial Discourses: Metamorphosis of King George III's Letters to the Qianlong Emperor." *Translation Studies* 13, no. 3 (2020): 318–32.

[157] Ibidem, 320-323.

Macartney, in particular, advocated strongly in order to improve his own domestic position.

The construction of the ambassadorial person not only served to advance policy aims in China, in the British view. In line with NDH approaches, this paper takes the view that embassies, and ambassadors themselves, are not simply straightforward means to *a priori* political ends. They are also representations in a more general sense: of the polity that has sent them, of the international system in which the actual and intended bi- or multilateral encounter is situated, and of the interplay between the material and symbolic aspects of diplomacy. Cathcart and Macartney's efforts reflect the need to project an image of how the British polity worked, and how its components related to one another, in which all the stakeholders found to be a satisfactory reflection of their place in it.

The way that the Creditors' claims were addressed, with fulfillment of their demands becoming a partially-acknowledged matter of public policy (through Dundas's ambivalent statements of support) as well as a private matter (through the ambassador personally taking on the legal status of their attorney), is illustrative. The Creditors' demands were met, but other actors were able to use their influence over the process to ensure that the repayment of private debts was not fully integrated into the diplomatic policy of the British empire in China, even at this moment when that policy was changing and expanding significantly. Instead, the ambassador related to the Creditors as private persons, limiting the Creditors' influence on the embassy relative to the Crown and the Company, while still incorporating them as stakeholders by a direct personal relationship to the ambassador. Therefore, distinctions between 'public' and 'private' roles, and between policymaking and execution, do not go far enough in explaining how the embassy was shaped. Rather, the ambassador's own initiative, and its interaction with the interests of the stakeholders and the broader discourses of imperial identity in China, must be centred. We shall see, in this chapter, how the idea of 'eminence,' and especially Lord Macartney's eagerness to augment his own, would influence how the ambassador reflected and projected an image of British imperial cooperation and of the place that the British empire occupied in China.

4.3 Civilisational Rhetoric

To understand the backdrop against which the ambassador's 'person' was conceived and constructed, we must consider what I class, for want of a better word, as 'civilisional' rhetoric. Simply defined, this is rhetoric that makes use of the large cultural gap between the British and Chinese imperial polities. The existence of this gap in the

minds of the British during this process is beyond doubt — many documents, especially those supplied by the Company (such as the short 'history' of foreigners in China),[158] reflects a sense that China is still largely an unknown quantity despite decades of British presence there. However, in keeping with an NDH approach, the cultural differences and the idea of a civilisational encounter should not be treated as objective facts. A better approach to understanding the origins of the British embassies would look at the way that it is perceived and how those perceptions are used.

Current scholarship on the embassies looks closely at this question, but tends to begin from the presumption that alienation defined British views of Chinese culture. Hevia[159] outlines how European views of China had grown increasingly negative in the preceding half-century and had made use of supposed cultural deficiencies in the Chinese character to explain things that were found problematic about the Chinese diplomatic and commercial regime. He demonstrates, moreover, that many of those negative perceptions were woven into the embassy formation process, reflected in correspondence produced by all the main actors discussed in this thesis.[160] Looking specifically at the Chinese justice system, Li Chen makes similar arguments,[161] while Wang identifies implied assertions of superiority in the King's letter to the Emperor.[162] Hevia and Li both link these developments to subsequent developments in European colonialisation of China, while the secondary literature that Wang cites also shows an orientation towards the Opium Wars and their legacy.

Certainly, highly negative views of China abound in the India Office papers, and one use to which they were put was to problematise aspects of Chinese practice in order to consolidate and justify diplomatic policy. However, civilisational rhetoric served an additional purpose: providing clarity not only to the source of problems but also solutions within China. Dundas, the Directors, and the Supercargoes all refer to positive qualities ascribed to the Emperor or to Chinese governance generally.[163] Wang specifically dismisses the complimentary remarks in the King's credential-letter for Macartney as diplomatic boilerplate,[164] but it is in fact consistent with the positive statements in the India Office correspondence, which had no intended Chinese audience.

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[158] Historical Sketch, undated.
[159] Hevia, *Cherishing Men from Afar*, 57–83.
[160] Ibidem, 62-68.
[161] Chen, Li. *Chinese law in Imperial Eyes: Sovereignty, justice, and Transcultural politics*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2016.
[162] Wang, "Translation between Two Imperial Discourses," 322-335.
[163] Historical Sketch, undated; Letter Chairs to Dundas, with enclosed Packet, 2 April 1793.
[164] Wang, "Translation between Two Imperial Discourses," 319.

These critiques are used to create an understanding, based on (biased) experience, of how to navigate within Chinese sovereignty — especially in Company sources. Furthermore, considerable effort in the formation-process went to constructing the ambassador, and the embassy, as representatives of British civilisation — as Joyce Lindorff[165] and Henrietta Harrison[166] show in their works on how the gifts to the emperor, and the musicians brought as part of Macartney's retinue, were selected.

The Company was especially eager that the embassy would show a better side of British culture than the Emperor had heretofore seen, just as it hoped that the Emperor's favour to the ambassador would raise the prestige of all British subjects in the views of Chinese officials.[167] This offers an excellent example of how civilisational rhetoric in this context played a complex role in navigating two culturally distinct but intertwined polities. Another such example is how the Crown and the Company both sought to turn Britain's non-interest in Christian proselytisation into a strength, playing on the Emperor's perceived suspicion of that religion.[168] What this example shows is that civilisational rhetoric made use not only of varied perceptions of China but of British culture itself. Religion, after all, played an important political and moral role in many aspects of the British state and empire, but in the Chinese context the British were willing to define themselves *against* Christianity (at least the form it took in China) in order to present themselves more palatably.

The through-line in all these rhetorical uses of civilisation is that one civilised nation recognises another — and that the Chinese, for all the perceived defects in their culture, possessed the ability to recognise British civilisation when they saw it. The British actors in the embassy-formation process did not seek to delegitimise or displace Chinese cultural values as the basis for their interaction with that country. Rather, they used their understanding of their comparative cultures to suggest ways in which China could be successfully navigated, and to work out how to understand the British empire in the Chinese context.

4.4 Rank and Eminence

In the formation of the Cathcart and Macartney embassies, two aspects of the ambassador's projected personage shed light upon this process. The first is the personal status of the ambassador, which pertains to rank and titles. The second is the

[165] Lindorff, "Burney, Macartney and the Qianlong Emperor," 441–53.
[166] Harrison, Henrietta. "Chinese and British Diplomatic Gifts in the Macartney Embassy of 1793. *The English Historical Review* 133, no. 560 (2018): 65–97.
[167] Historical Sketch, undated.
[168] Letter Chairs to Cathcart, 9 November 1787.

institutional shape of the mission as a whole. In both cases, the process of constructing the ambassador's personage involved an effort to model the relationship of the institutions directly concerned in the embassy. The encounter of institutions within the British polity has been analysed in the previous chapter. The process projected those institutions' perceived relationship to the broader framework of Sino-British relations onto the embassies, resulting in symbolic aspects that reflected how the process' participants understood both their distinctive roles and the nature and system of their collective relationship in the context of the British imperial presence in China.

I have already argued that the embassies were conceived in relation to a diplomatic framework specific of longstanding patterns of interaction between Great Britain and China. The matter of diplomatic rank and titulature reflects the specificity of the episode. In particular, the importance granted to diplomatic rank shows the extent to which the British approach differed from prevailing European practices. In Europe, a formal system of diplomatic rank prevailed, with significant meaning attached to such distinctions as that between ambassadors and diplomatic ministers. These niceties were absent in the considerations of the Government, and the ambassadors themselves, *vis-à-vis* China. The official letters written for each envoy to carry from the King to the Emperor both refer to the bearers as ambassadors,[169] but there is no discussion of the subject in the India Office papers beyond that. The term is used generically, rather than in relation to a system of other diplomatic titles.

The overarching concern of the British concerning the ambassador's person, by contrast, was not rank but eminence. Dundas's instructions, and the preliminary correspondence leading up to them, have nothing to say about what the title of ambassador says for its holder's right to speak for the British empire, but he invests much in the personal eminence of the individual.[170] This is framed as a consideration of what will impress the Emperor that the ambassador truly speaks for the Crown. In Cathcart's instructions, Dundas wrote that 'it is presumed, that a Gentleman of honorable [sic] Birth, as also a member of the Legislative Body [Cathcart was an MP], would be most likely to have a favorable [sic] reception from a proud and ostentatious People, accustomed to think meanly of the commercial Character.'[171]

This is not purely an initiative of the Government, either, for Dundas's next line helpfully hammers home to us the fact that this perception of China was itself the result

[169] Letter George III to Emperor Qianlong, 19 July 1789; Letter Superintending Committee to Viceroy (Canton), 27 April 1792
[170] Letter Superintending Committee to Viceroy (Canton), 27 April 1792; Letter Dundas to Macartney (Instructions), 8 September 1792.
[171] Letter George III to Emperor Qianlong, 19 July 1789.

of the same process of interchange between Crown and Company that we explored in the last chapter: 'the propriety of this distinction is enforced by the decided opinion of the most respectable Persons, who have been experienced in the Company's concerns at Canton, and Witnesses of the vexations under which they labor [sic].'[172]

4.5 Macartney's Peerage Campaign

Macartney was altogether more ambitious than Cathcart when it came to the question of personal eminence. His embassy was under formation for longer than Cathcart's, and it drew not only on the practical aspects of the Cathcart embassy but also on the fact that expectations for its success, once cultivated, had expanded in the intervening years. Dundas's instructions to Macartney, for instance, are substantially longer and more detailed than those to Cathcart;[173] so are the Company's instructions,[174] which also contain explicit references to the ways in which the Company's hopes for the mission have been augmented since they instructed Cathcart.[175] The greater volume of correspondence itself speaks to this development. It is in this light that we should consider a package of documents expounding on Macartney's campaign to be raised to an earldom.

The package is dated 4 June, 1792[176] – presumably the date that Macartney forwarded it to Whitehall – and contains a covering letter,[177] setting out Macartney's case for his elevation in his own words, as well as several letters of reference from colonial bodies which he had either served or perform some signal service for, including the Company's administration in Madras[178] and the colony of Grenada[179] in the Caribbean; he had served as governor of both. There are three prongs to this 'peerage campaign': first, a higher title than he possessed (Macartney was, at the time, already a baron in the Irish peerage); second, the grant of a title in the British peerage; third, induction into the Privy Council of Great Britain, a more prestigious body than that of Ireland, of which he was already a member. The lobbying effort would win with mixed success: he was elevated to an Irish viscountcy, and would be made an earl on his return

[172] Letter George III to Emperor Qianlong, 19 July 1789.
[173] Letter Dundas to Macartney (Instructions), 8 September 1792.
[174] Pritchard, "Part II," 201–30.
[175] Letter Chairs to Cathcart, 9 November 1787.
[176] BL, IOR, IOR/G/12/91: 117-129, Table of Contents (Peerage Materials), 11 November 1792.
[177] BL, IOR, IOR/G/12/91: 131, Letter Macartney to Dundas, 11 November 1792.
[178] BL, IOR, IOR/G/12/91: 140 Resolution of the Court of Directors, Signed by Thomas Morton, 13 April 1786.
[179] BL, IOR, IOR/G/12/91: 137, Letter: Frederick Corsar et al. to Macartney, 1779.

from China (and subsequently a British baron as well), but would not join the British Privy Council.[180]

The details of the campaign are less significant than the vision of the imperial polity that is implicit in the documents that were assembled. The effort might easily be ascribed to mere opportunism, depending on how readily the historian accepts Macartney's protestations, in his covering letter, that he cares only about the utility of his title for the mission and has no thoughts of himself whatsoever. (Similar formulations appear in most of the letters of reference) That would be to miss the point: opportunism in itself reveals not only the perception of an opportunity but a sense of what is required to derive advantage from it. Macartney's peerage campaign tells us much about how he formulated a sense of his own role as an agent operating within the British polity. It also contains a particular imagining of how the separate parts and substrates of that polity acted as both autonomous entities and in relation to the larger whole. In seeking to make a case for his elevation to the peerage and tying it to what the Crown perceived to be necessary to make an effective ambassador, he was offering up a symbolic vision of the inward organisation of the British empire and its outward identity.

In the arguments that Macartney put forward to show how the peerage would allow him to represent Great Britain all the more efficaciously, we have the opportunity to look at how he mentally constructed his sense of the ambassadorial personage – how he saw himself as representative of the British polity as he understood it and how he sought to present it in China, and how it dovetailed with the imagining of China that formed out of the interaction between Crown and Company.

Dundas's idea of the primacy of eminence over rank is carried over in the peerage campaign. Macartney's explicit aim is to enhance his own eminence. To a great degree, such ambassadorial eminence extended from association with the King, whose symbolic role in the political agenda of his embassy we have already explored. The peerage is a royally-bestowed honour, although it grants the holder a permanent individual status in his own right.[181] The Privy Council speaks even more to an association of oneself with the King, as Macartney's letters point out[182] (although it was wholly ceremonial in practice, whereas the peerage came with a seat in the House of Lords).[183] Yet the peerage's entire significance is not encompassed in its symbolic

[180] Thorne, Roland. "Macartney, George, Earl Macartney (1737–1806), diplomatist and colonial governor." *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004.
[181] McCahill and Archer Wasson. "The New Peerage," 3-5.
[182] "Macartney's Peerage Materials – Cover Letter," IOR/G/12/91: 131.
[183] Encyclopaedia Britannica, s.v. "Privy Council." *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 2024.

connection with the King. The European system of diplomatic rank was also concerned with the sovereign.[184] By contrast, the focus on individual eminence as being suitable the Sino-British context aligns with a very different way of mentally constituting the imperial polity in east Asia.

The peerage campaign is replete with significance for the symbolic aspects of the ambassadorial person. It conveys an image, projected by Macartney, of what individual eminence entailed, and for which he sought the endorsement of the Crown. It also offers the only real opportunity, within this thesis' area of interest, to put the substrate model into some comparative context.

One dimension of this vision is in the particular idea of service to the empire, which is involved in the service of imperial substrates. This dimension comes through most clearly in the letters of reference, which describe important services that Macartney undertook on the initiative, or at least in the interest of, individual imperial substrates, such as the Madras presidency[185] or the colonial administration of Grenada.[186] (We can assume that these letters, which have a number of common rhetorical beats, took their cue at least partly from Macartney himself). The ambassador's prior service to the British empire, in the formulation that Macartney used to claim it here, is conceived as service to the interests of individual substrates, carried off not under orders from above but on his own responsibility. By discursively aligning these bona fides with the Government's interest in enhancing his eminence, he was proposing a model of imperial leadership in which independent action on behalf of far-flung imperial substrates constituted justification for recognition by, and both literal and symbolic association with, the Crown.

If the Crown was sending him to represent the King and the polity that the Government hoped that the Chinese would accept as neighbour and friend, and to do so partly through personal eminence rather than purely on the basis of his credentials (i.e., purely on the basis of the Crown's own authority), he was now suggesting what it meant for a man of the empire in Asia to possess such personal eminence. In this vision, political eminence, and the intendant moral authority, involved a degree of free agency, and originated in enacting the initiatives of substrates at the empire's periphery rather than implementing the direct rule of the British state at its centre. If wider still and wider British bounds were to be set, then it fell to this kind of peripheral free agency, rather than a sense of administrative service to a unitary empire-state, to do the work. It is a far cry from the 19th-century colonial order of which Macartney is often seen as an

[184] Horn, "Rank and Emolument," 19–49.
[185] Resolution of the Court of Directors, Signed by Thomas Morton, 13 April 1786.
[186] Letter: Frederick Corsar et al. to Macartney, 1779.

agent and herald. We see an image of the ambassador's person drawing from Macartney's own life of service in the context of a highly decentralised empire of distinctive, overlapping substrates. To be raised to the peerage, that honour which at once confirms the King's confidence and recognises one as an independent force rather than simple royal agent, did not mean being removed from that milieu but for being recognised as an exemplary actor within it.

4.6 The Sources of Ambassadorial Eminence

The second dimension of Macartney's vision that is conveyed by the peerage campaign is what we might loosely call 'values-authority'. This is a claim that the ambassador's eminent position should be rooted in a broader vision of the imperial polity as a body of autonomous entities unified by common values — one of the uses of the civilisational rhetoric described in section 2.2.

This refers to a sort of quasi-ideological sense that certain values provided both unity to the diversity of substrates and imbued the entire imperial polity with a distinctive definition beyond the functional autonomy of individual parts. By linking it to a request for recognition at the centre – by the Crown – Macartney suggests an array of personal qualities that endow this free agency with its value to the imperial polity as a whole. Numerous references to such genteel virtues as probity, dignity, seflessness, and seriousness speak to this dimension. In the vision that the peerage campaign lays out, greater political eminence comes not just from a practical record of service but from mastery of these authoritative values which provide a quasi-ideological basis for unity between disparate British substrates.

Such authority, moreover, constituted the basis of the imperial polity's outward legitimacy in this vision – the sort of thing it saw itself as being, simply put, as distinct from the powers and entities that it perceived outside its bounds. Even if Macartney's peerage bid was constituted as it was for purely tactical reasons in a bid for upward mobility, those tactics reveal much, because they align with the 'civilisational' aspects of the policy agenda that the Government and Company shaped for the embassy. After all, though it is an obvious given that the British empire was highly culturally removed from the native powers it came into contact with in Asia, the exact meaning extrapolated from those cultural differences was contingent and subject to institutional interests and preoccupations, especially insofar as it formed part of the basis of an unprecedented

royal embassy. Both Dundas[187] and the Directors[188] were interested in projecting a set of civilisational characteristics via the embassy that would define the British imperial polity as a whole, in Chinese eyes: great scientific attainment, superb manufacturing, civilised customs, and honourable leadership. Both imputed different purposes on, and invested different hopes in, that agenda. Nonetheless, the peerage campaign shows that the process was not only the work of these two institutions but was also something to which the ambassador was working towards. Both the ambassador's initiative, and the policies around which Crown and Company converged, served to construct the ambassador's symbolic personage, embodying a specific vision of the British empire which made sense for both the world-imaginings and the interests of all involved.

As a practical matter, the Crown only accepted part of Macartney's request, but in considering the symbolic constitution of his person as ambassador, a distinction between what the Government did and didn't *accept* blurs the deeper story that the sources tell. The Crown's picture of how the British empire worked, and how that picture ought to be changed by its policies, converged with the ambassador's sense of what it meant to convey the oneness of a multifaceted empire by means of personal eminence. Macartney's peerage campaign allows us to recognise that the ambassador's person reflected a vision of the British empire that was specific to its time, not one that exclusively embodied a vision of the future or the imposition in east Asia of a pre-existing diplomatic system.

The lobbying campaign shows that institutional relationships had an enormous influence on the ambassador's individual decision-making, for all the practical leeway and discretion that fell to him. Moreover, the symbolic aspects of his representational role were not his alone. He needed his patrons to see themselves in the way he represented them and their inter-relationship in order to secure their buy-in, and even then, additional symbolic meaning was projected onto him. The Company, notably, added onto his vision an aspect that suited their own interests: a role as the Emperor's messenger to his own officials, turning the hoped-for friendship of the Emperor into an asset for itself within the Qing polity.[189] Dundas, for his part, hoped that he would convey a specifically British sense of world-purpose that would set itself apart *vis-à-vis* other European nations, by emphasising science and a love of learning and by completely lacking any religious component in his constructed personage or his policy agenda.[190]

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[187] Letter Dundas to Cathcart (Instructions), 30 November 1787. Letter Dundas to Macartney (Instructions), 8 September 1792.
[188] Letter Chairs to Cathcart, 9 November 1787.
[189] Letter Chairs to Cathcart, 9 November 1787; Pritchard, "Part II" 215-219.
[190] Letter Chairs to Cathcart, 9 November 1787.

The accuracy of this self-image is beyond this paper's scope. The point is that Macartney was offering to the Government and the Company this image of themselves, each other, and their interrelationship, and they were willing to accept it. Symbolically projecting the polity that he was representing onto his person, in a manner that suited his patrons' interests, was a crucial task, which fell in great degree to the ambassador's own initiative. It had to be a suitable reflection of reality as they saw it, but also a vision that sufficiently served the institutional interests of both. The peerage campaign illuminates how Macartney went about carrying out that job, and therefore offers us insight into the symbolic significance of other aspects of the embassy.

4.7 Conclusion

The Cathcart and Macartney embassies' symbolic aspects do not reflect an inevitable future of a unified empire engaged in a single-minded colonial project. Rather, they should be considered, like the policy agenda behind it, not on the axes of 'past and future' but between the novelty of the moment and the familiarity of the context. Set against the novelty of sending an ambassador to China to convey both the policy aims and the image of the British empire as a whole, we see the ambassadors taking the initiative in constructing that image – how substrates relate to the whole and how being an eminent Briton relates to being a subject and envoy of the Crown, both of which were, of course, directly relevant to the embassy's goals of representing both the British empire as a whole and the Company in its aspect as Chinese subject. On the other hand, we can also see how the ambassador's freedom of initiative in this novel moment was constrained. Macartney proposed a vision of the ambassador as a somewhat independent figure, operating in the space between two sub-imperial bureaucracies, linked to both but wholly part of neither. Part of his job as ambassador was to construct a coherent vision of how, in symbolic terms, these components could be coherently projected as forming a single polity – and, for all the latitude that he had in that role, he was ultimately constrained by the need to make that symbolism embody the institutional relationships and interests of this patrons.

While cultural commonality is often explored as an aspect of New Diplomatic History as a means to effect alignment between actors, the Sino-British context poses an interesting problem: approaching the diplomatic context as a dynamic ecosystem while also recognising the major cultural gap, between Chinese and British people, at its heart. The India Office papers allow for two complementary insights on this score. Shared ideas about the civilisational value of 'Britishness' as a basis for legitimating cooperation between the Crown and substrates of the imperial polity were commonly evoked. At the same time, this idea could be instrumentalised *outwards*, forming part of the British

imperial self-image that, it was hoped, could be showed to the Emperor to secure more favourable treatment.

In all these aspects of the embassy, the result of institutional negotiation within the British polity are apparent – this ideal of the common or 'uniting' values of the British empire was worked out in the context of institutional encounter. The ambassador constructed his own person in line with, and indeed as an expression of, these values. The British perception of how Sino-British diplomacy worked, deeply rooted in the experience of a long bilateral relationship, required the ambassador to possess personal eminence as well as the backing of the state. Macartney's own initiative in the process reveals the extent to which the ambassador's own agency was an indispensable part of the process, and his peerage campaign shows how he constructed a sense of his diplomatic personage that reflected the dispersed British empire as it understood itself as well as the set of civilisational values in which it perceived its own unity and its own outward appearance.

V

Conclusion

If this paper could be reduced to a single banality, it would be that the polity that send Lord Macartney to China was an eighteenth-century empire. It should be treated as such, not as an empire on an inexorable path to becoming one of a number of similar European colonial empires that jostled in China and throughout the world in the next century, and not as a modern nation-state demanding that China join the global order that is familiar to us today.

Why were the embassies sent to China? It would be impossible to offer a simple answer without reducing the 'British empire' to a single apparatus for making and executing decisions, and without isolating any process from the existing context of a sustained and extensive British presence in China. The purpose of applying the insights of New Diplomatic History to this question is to avoid those traps, as well as the danger of seeing primary sources as straightforward 'witnesses' to decisions rather than both sites and products of discursive effort to negotiate, contest, define, and justify them. The reasonings and motivation behind the embassy rooted in a complex array of stakeholders' ability to secure influence not only in policy outcomes but in the embassy as a staged reproduction of the British imperial polity. Consequently, those policies and that reproduction were created and understood through a layered process by which the convergence of stakeholders was sought and their divergence managed.

The failure to understand the specific nature and context of the British empire between 1787 and 1795 has engendered a historiographical milieu in which it is easy to treat Macartney as the ghost of colonialism future. The purpose of this paper is to give a theoretical treatment of the formative period of his embassy and that of the unlucky Cathcart. In my introduction, I laid out three particular fallacies that are undercut by a close read of the relevant papers and correspondence.

The first is the notion of British unitariness – the idea that the arrival of Macartney represented the irruption of a wholly integrated administrative state into China, setting the nation-state's cat among the pigeons of an antiquated native diplomatic order founded on the Qing tributary system. We have seen that the British empire of this period was actually a complex system of autonomous substrates. Moreover, the embassies themselves were designed around that system, in which encounters between the substrates and the Crown were negotiated in complex ways. The outcomes of those negotiations, in turn, often reflected a convergence of different

interests and perceptions, rather than the directed efforts of a single imperial machinery.

The second notion is inevitability – that the Macartney embassy was another step in the inexorable progression towards the Opium Wars and the world that resulted from them. The Cathcart and Macartney embassies, to be sure, were conceived in the hope of changing Sino-British relations in ways that suited the British empire. Such is the nature of foreign policy. However, they were also formed within a prevailing system of relations between the two powers that was well-established and venerable, and whose core tenets were taken for granted in every formulation of its aims and successes. The point about looking at the British polity as simply an eighteenth-century empire, rather than the becoming-stage of something else, is particularly relevant here. It does not refer to a grander theory of stages in British imperial history, which is beyond the scope of this paper. Rather, it illustrates the fact that the British had a framework of relations with China within which they hoped to achieve their aims – and that the two embassies were organised by institutions strongly invested in this framework, as they perceived it. Sending a royal ambassador to Beijing was a novel act in this context, which was linked to an ambitious policy agenda, but it was not conceived as a blow against that overall framework. On the contrary, the key points of it – the Company's dual role and the extraordinary importance placed on the Emperor's beneficence – were wholly encoded into that policy agenda.

The final point is predictiveness, which differs from the trope of inevitability in that it suggests that the Macartney episode radically altered not just the British empire in China but the entire global order. This seems especially pernicious. The symbolic construction of the Macartney embassy, discussed in chapter four, is a useful corrective, for it shows that the embassy was intended to represent a polity that was, in itself, far from 'modern'.

Discussing the predictiveness of an historical event, however, risks bringing us into the vexed territory of philosophy, for it is inseparable from discussion of historical consequences. Most of the history of the Macartney embassy's role on the British side of the equation deals in its consequences. I have not argued that these assessments are wrong; I am in no position to make that judgment. Rather, I have sought to outline the fact that those consequences do not bear a one-on-one relationship with the motivations for sending the embassy in the first place. In order to understand the episode fully, we must recognise that Great Britain and China were alike in certain ways. Both were large, complex empires that were organised on much different principles from a present-day nation-state, and they had an existing bilateral relationship – one which the embassy was intended to amend but not demolish – with deep historical

roots, a relationship that followed very different lines from diplomatic systems in Europe in which the precursors of the modern world order are generally identified. Before they were anything else, they were two empires of the late eighteenth century.

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