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Qing Guest Ritual and the Macartney Embassy of 1793

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On the tenth day of the eighth lunar month in the fifty-eighth year of his reign, Hongli, the Qianlong emperor, received George Lord Macartney, ambassador of Great Britain, in audience at the Qing empire's summer capital in Rehe (present-day Chengde). Dressed in ordinary court audience robes, the emperor took his throne in a tent set up in the Garden of Ten-thousand Trees (Wanhuu yuan), an audience site located within a larger complex called the “Mountain Retreat for Avoiding Summer Heat” (Bishan shan zhuang). Eager to demonstrate his regard for "oriental customs and ideas," the British ambassador wore a "rich embroidered velvet" coat, over which he displayed "the mantel of the Order of the Bath, with a collar, a diamond badge and a diamond star." On his head was a hat of enormous white plumes. Macartney approached the throne, and rather than performing the humiliating "genuflections and prostrations" (later termed kowtow) demanded by the Chinese court, knelt on one knee, bowed his head, and placed directly in the emperor's hand a jewel-encrusted box containing a letter from his sovereign, George III, King of Great Britain, Ireland, and France. As was usual in such circumstances, Hongli handed Macartney a ruyi, or jade scepter, which, the ambassador noted, did not "appear in itself to be of any great value." The emperor then inquired after the ambassador's and his king's health. Thus began, at least from the point of view of Lord Macartney, the first formal contact between the two richest and most powerful empires in the world.

This brief account of the audience of September 14, 1793, is taken primarily from Lord Macartney's journal of his embassy, and from drawings made by embassy members of the event.1 Chinese-language court records

1. MD, 122-123. See the pictures in Singer 1992 and Peyrefitte 1992. Additional discussion can be found in chapters 4 and 7.
indicate only that the emperor wrote a poem for the occasion. One purpose of the present study is to reconsider the differing presentations of this historical encounter by Qing and British participants. It is also concerned with the significance of gestures that seem, at first glance, trivial—Hongli’s inquiries into King George’s health, for example, or Macartney’s dismissal of the jade scepter as an object without “great value.” Lastly, it is about how this event has been remembered over the past two hundred years.

The Macartney embassy is, of course, not a new subject of research. Since the 1930s Anglo-American historians have written a number of studies based on archival sources in Great Britain and China. More recently, the embassy drew renewed attention as the Qing archives in Peking were reopened to Western scholars and as the bicentennial of the embassy approached. Most previous scholarship has treated the meeting between the Qianlong emperor and Lord Macartney as symbolic of the confrontation between “traditional” and “modern” civilizations at the dawn of modernity (see section 1.2 below).

My concerns are somewhat different. For the purposes of this introduction, two of them are of primary importance. The first has to do with my attempt to reevaluate the encounter between the Qing and British empires in light of recent theoretical and empirical studies of imperialism and colonialism in Asia. These works have raised significant questions not only about interpretation, but perhaps more significantly about the moral ground upon which engagements between present and past are constituted. The second has to do with new research emphasizes in China studies that have arisen over the last two decades. In particular, there has been a growing imbalance toward endogenous as opposed to exogenous factors in explaining change in late imperial China. In the following sections of this introduction, I will explore each of these topics and, drawing from my critical engagement with them, indicate the ways in which this book takes a different approach.

1.3 New Patterns in the Study of Imperialism

Since the 1970s the study of European imperialism and colonialism has undergone significant changes. Stimulated in part by liberation movements in Africa and Asia, by social movements of women and people of color in the industrialized world, and by the movement against the Vietnam War, scholars who studied imperialism began to challenge the notion that economic considerations were the primary and, in some cases, the exclusive explanation for European global expansion. Theoretically, much of this rethinking was stimulated by new strains of Marxist criticism that flourished in England, France, and Germany. Directed at strict economism and overly mechanistic interpretations of base/superstructure relations, historians and social theorists as diverse as E. P. Thompson, Raymond Williams, Stuart Hall, Michel Foucault, Louis Althusser, Roland Barthes, Jürgen Habermas, and Barry Hindess and Paul Hirst directed attention to the complex processes of making social worlds within the constraining conditions of industrial capitalism and the imperial state. With the exception of Hall and a few writings by Barthes, however, these scholars seldom dealt directly with the question of European colonial domination. Yet the particular theoretical turn they effected enabled others to introduce a host of new subjects of study.

Among these topics have been gender construction in the colonial setting, the role of intellectuals and elites in the colonial and postcolonial world, routines and rituals of colonial administration, the part played by imaginative fiction in shaping the subjectivities of colonizers, the mutual implication of race, class, and gender in the construction of bourgeois culture and consciousness, and the modes of producing and deploying knowledge of colonized peoples. In many cases, scholars have sought to defamiliarize objects and products of knowledge, while blurring the conventional boundaries between disciplines. Most fruitful in this regard has been the way in which these shifts in emphasis have allowed significant strains of criticism from the former colonial world (and here I think especi-

3. The works of each of these writers are well known and voluminous. Rather than repeat them here, I would direct attention to a few works which help to locate their significance for scholarship: see Brautinger 1990, Rosenau 1992, G. Turner 1990, and R. Young 1990. Also see P. Burke 1992 for an extended treatment of the relation between history and social theory.


5. Exemplary in this regard have been the writings of Cohn 1987 and the essays collected in Hobbsawm and Ranger 1983. Also see the discussion in Hebdige 1988 on postmodernism (181–207).
cially of "third-world" feminism and the Subaltern Studies Group) to enter the study of imperialism and vastly enrich the discussion.4

A central element in these new directions of research and writing has been a sensitivity to the place of representation in the imperial projects of North Atlantic nation-states, particularly its crucial role in the production of knowledge about colonial others. Just why representation would become a focal point of colonial studies, however, is far from obvious and requires some elaboration. Consider, for example, how the domains of practice in which many of us routinely operate are founded upon representation. From the national to the local level, the political system of the United States functions in and through representation; so, too, the legal system. The origin myth of the liberal nation-state is ordered around issues of representation, which are welded to the economic through the constantly reiterated phrase, "No Taxation without Representation." The right of representation, defined as the law of inheritance from eldest son to eldest son, serves as a model of Euro-American patriarchy. In a historical social formation that had long privileged the relationship between the individual mind and a stable external object world or fixed reality, representation has simultaneously functioned as the thing observed, as the act of presenting to the eye and mind, and as the product of mind; that is, it might be understood as a clearly conceived idea, concept, or description. In this last sense, representation is thoroughly implicated in what we define as knowledge, as well as in knowledge’s philosophic framing discourse, epistemology.7 Representations can be pictorial, mathematical, or linguistic—and each kind has its own theoretical understanding of how a present figure stands for and refers to an absent reality. If we are personally to function within the social order we inhabit, we must be adept at constructing and recognizing, making and engaging with, representations of ourselves, others, and the world. Moreover, the logic of representation has completely colonized our own world, to say nothing of the worlds of countless others. If something cannot be represented, it is not simply invisible, but, more importantly, not real.

It was precisely the recognition of the hegemonic force of a particular cultural commitment to the logic and practice of representation that helped to revolutionize the study of imperialism and colonialism. Critics from fields as diverse as feminist studies, literary criticism, cultural anthropology, and history began to note that scrutinizing or gazing at other places, peoples, and peoples’ artifacts and then re-presenting them in writing or in pictures (first drawing and painting, later photography) was a fundamental way in which knowledge was produced about colonized populations in European empires. Rather than seeing knowledge in all times and places as constructed in this way, some scholars argued that the colonial mode of producing knowledge was an historically specific form of practice, one that gave ontological priority to the ocular faculties as the primary conduit for making things known and knowable.3

Exemplary in indicating the political and intellectual significance of representation in the colonial context has been Edward Said, whose Orientalism (1978), perhaps more than any other single work, forced the question of representationalism into scholarly consciousness.3 Focusing attention on images of the "Orient" produced by Euro-American politicians, businessmen, and academics on the one hand, and the political and economic actions of European nation-states in the Orient on the other, Said suggested that knowledge about the Orient was intimately linked to European domination of the Orient. The effect of this link between knowledge production and state projects was to authorize a kind of bird’s-eye view of the non-Western world, one that positioned the knowing observer as superior in every respect (more rational, logical, scientific, realistic, and objective) to the object of contemplation. Combining the theoretical insights of Antonio Gramsci, Raymond Williams, Walter Benjamin, and Michel Foucault, as well as those of early postcolonial critics such as Anwar Abdel-Malek (1965), Said’s analysis reworked European expansion as a broadly cultural project, while simultaneously opening a new intellectual space for the study of colonialism.

Said’s timely analysis had a number of important consequences. It dem-

7. For historical and philosophic critiques of representation see Judith 1988; Lloyd 1984; Lynch and Woolgar 1990; Rorty 1979;1990; and, more recently, Stewart 1994.
9. Many critics have, I believe, misconstrued the nature of Said’s argument by making claims about it that are difficult to locate in the work itself. One of the more common ones is to ignore the fact that his focus is primarily on the nineteenth century. To argue, as some have done, that Said is speaking about knowledge in general or about the last four hundred years of Euro-Asian contact is to misunderstand or misrepresent his project. See, for example, Spence 1992;1990.
onstrated, for instance, how one might go about launching a critical project designed to take up issues of knowledge, epistemology, and culture as they relate to imperialism. Close readings of orientalist sources, combined with contemporary scholarship in Africa and Asia, helped to destabilize classic orientalist representations. Drawing attention to images of the Orient and Orientals current in Western scholarship also made it possible to discern that in order for orientalism to operate, it had to control what Foucault called the “enunciative function” (1972:88–109). The orientalist’s mastery of the Orient was thereby shown to be based on commanding the sites of its representation. Such authority, in turn, excluded native constructions except insofar as they were translated by the orientalist and transported for consumption in imperial metropoles. As a result of this engagement with the forms of knowledge production characteristic of orientalism, Said’s work suggested that it might be possible to think different forms of knowledge, knowledges which might operate through other epistemological formations just as powerful as that which provided the foundation for representationalism.

At the same time, Said also suggested that there was no simple way out of the orientalist’s discourse,10 that one could not simply substitute “true” representations of the Orient for “false” ones. This is so because representations are more than simply passive reflections of reality. Rather, they contribute to the production of the real. This has especially been the case in a situation where epistemological issues were conjoined with the physical power and resources at the command of imperial states. As the works of those who followed Said have shown, imperial projects constructed an Orient that mimicked orientalist representations, and these constructs were, in turn, recovered by later generations of Western scholars as proof of the timeless regularities of the East.11

Finally, by including theoretical analyses that presented alternative understandings of colonialism in Africa and Asia, Said drew attention to a pervasive practice among orientalists and their area studies successors—the tendency to apply “objectivist” Western theory, particularly social science models, to non-Western data. In Said’s terms, such strategies constructed the relationship between “West” and “East” as one of ontological and epistemological priority of the former over the latter (1978:2–9). After Orientalism, it became extremely difficult to sustain a position that purported merely to reflect or passively to report on “non-Western” realities. It was also difficult to ignore the political relationship between first-world scholars and their subjects of study. Rather Said persuasively demonstrated that the relationship between “Occident” and “Orient” was, and to some extent remains, one of “complex hegemony” involving forms of political, economic, and cultural domination.

In the following sections of this introduction, I draw upon Said both to question the usual representations of “China” and the “West,” and to challenge the kinds of models or theoretical frameworks that have been brought to bear on the subject. As such, this study is necessarily positioned in dialogue with both postcolonial criticism and China area studies scholarship. Further, throughout the book, I will treat British, American, and some recent Chinese representations—images in words and pictures, the themes and tropes of cross-cultural encounters—of the Macartney embassy as themselves historical events taking place within real conditions, ones which have, moreover, been substantially produced in practices of representation.12

1.2 The Great Transition and China-centered History

For most of the postwar period, the historiography on eighteenth- and nineteenth-century China has been dominated by two approaches. The first of these, the sociocultural (Cohen 1984), arranged China’s history with reference to the grand narrative of the “Great Transition,” the move from traditional to modern society.13 Scholars usually referred to this pattern of

10. On the notion of discourse I follow Foucault, especially 1977:199, where he makes the important point that the regularities of discourse are not confined to a single work. Also see H. White 1978:230–260. Belsey provides a useful working definition of discourse as “a domain of language use, a particular way of talking (and writing and thinking) involving certain shared assumptions which appear in the formations that characterize it” (1980:13).


13. Scholars globally, whether broadly defined as Marxist or liberal, have taken it as axiomatic that they not only understood the general characteristics or features of the modern and the traditional, but that the latter would inevitably be replaced by the former. For a discussion see Francis, who emphasizes that the very notion of transition was based on ideas of holism and contrast (1987:1).
development under the rubric of "China's Response to the West" (Teng and Fairbank 1954). Positioning a stagnant and involved traditional China, socioculturalists took the Western invasion of the nineteenth century as the necessary stimulus that effectuated the transition from traditional to modern China. Moreover, since the role of Western influence was a crucial feature of this interpretative framework, China's traditional form of foreign relations and its early relations with the West were a central focus of scholarly inquiry.

By the 1970s, the sociocultural approach came under a variety of assaults. In the general atmosphere of New Left criticism and opposition to the Vietnam War, some charged that practitioners of the approach, especially those who worked on foreign relations, had constructed an elaborate apologetics for Western imperialism in China. Others abandoned the approach altogether and turned to other currents then shaping the Euro-American scholarly world. Under the influence of the Anales school and the descriptive structural sociology of G. William Skinner, a new "China-centered history" (Cohen 1984) emerged that discovered a China rich in events and energized by patterns of development with their own internal logics. In addition to providing ready-made bounded entities that did not demand the reference to a Chinese totality, Skinner's micro-regionalism undercut its predecessor in another significant way: it treated culture as epiphenomenal and variable, helping to muddle, perhaps irreversibly, the coherent notion of tradition that the sociocultural approach to China's past had taken as its foundation.

As eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Chinese history became laden with events, scholars also uncovered a rich and dynamic history of social movements, ordinary life, class and gender conflict, intellectual ferment, and political and economic transformation. However, like its European counterpart, this emphasis on social history had the consequence of allowing, perhaps unintentionally, the state and China's relations with maritime Europe and Inner Asia to recede from view. As a consequence, a field once dominated by an interpretation which privileged exogenous factors as the primary cause for the change from traditional to modern China suddenly found little from the outside that was relevant to the state's internal development. As a result, China now has a dynamic internal history, while studies of China's external relations have been neglected for the past twenty-five years. Moreover, most writers who find it necessary to give passing mention to foreign relations in their studies uncritically retain the venerable sociocultural interpretation of those relations known as the "tribute system." Meanwhile, a small number of scholars who still have an interest in historical Chinese foreign relations find it increasingly difficult to support such broad generalizations (e.g., Wills 1988:229). It is to the tribute system and current discussions of its limitations that I now turn.

1.3 The Tribute System and Its Critics

Beginning as early as the 1930s, historians in the United States and China identified the causes of nineteenth-century Sino-Western conflict as more than simply a result of Western imperialism and expansive capitalism, but also as a product of the peculiar nature of traditional Chinese foreign relations. According to this view, isolated from other great centers of civilization and complacent in its own cultural superiority, China developed early in its history a unique method of dealing with foreign powers, one that required the acknowledgment of the supremacy of China's "Son of Heaven" (Tianz 子) as superior to all other rulers in the world. Foreign princes expressed their acceptance of this proposition in two "symbolic" ways, by presenting ritual tribute (gong 供) to the emperor and performing the "full" koutou 補酬, kneeling three times, each time bowing their head to the ground thrice. Over the course of the last two thousand years, these symbolic elements of the system were buttressed by ever more sophisticated bureaucratic institutions and regulations. Modern scholars call this institutional and textual complex the "tribute system." As elaborated by John K. Fairbank, this system defined Chinese attitudes and practices in foreign relations from virtually the dawn of Chinese civilization until the confrontation with the West in the nineteenth century.

But why, we might ask, would Chinese imperial courts or foreign princes see the necessity of constructing or participating in such elaborate sym-

15. Parenthetically it is worth noting that many of those who followed Skinner continued to maintain (however anachronistically) notions of tradition and culture that remained firmly embedded in the earlier approach.
16. Wills has noted that since the late 1960s the foreign relations field has been "unfashionable and underpopulated" (1988:229).
17. For the "original" formation see Fairbank and Teng 1941. For examples of ongoing use see Naquin and Rawski 1987:27–28 and Elman 1989:389.
bolism? In his seminal essay “Tributary Trade and China’s Relations with the West” (1942), Fairbank took up this question by observing that tribute was “not exactly what it seemed.” On the one hand, the value of the items presented by foreign rulers were of little benefit to the imperial treasury. On the other, the value of the items given by the Chinese court to missions balanced or outweighed the value of the tribute gifts (1942:129, 135). What, then, did the court gain from this clearly unequal economic transaction? According to Fairbank, the motivation of a succession of dynasties was quite clear when one considered that the emperor claimed the Mandate of Heaven (Tianming) to rule all humankind. As he put it, “if the rest of mankind did not acknowledge his rule, how long could he expect China to do so? Tribute had prestige value in the government of China, where prestige was an all-important tool of government” (1942:135). Tribute presented by foreign rulers performed, therefore, the useful function of garnering to the court the prestige it needed to remain in power. In other words, the submission of foreign princes to the emperor functioned to legitimize the ruling house. For their part, foreign rulers gladly participated because they desired the valuable imperial objects bestowed by Chinese courts, as well as the opportunity for trade with other kinds of Chinese goods such as tea and silk. In this sense, what sustained the tribute system over long stretches of Chinese history, as Fairbank later elaborated, was that it had become an “ingenious vehicle” for trade (1953:32).

Implicit in Fairbank’s argument was another, one that appears heavily influenced by nineteenth- and twentieth-century studies of historical empires, especially that of Rome. In the 1930s, historians of ancient history seem to have understood tribute as an archaic form of political submission and as an arbitrary form of fiscal extraction. Over time, tribute gradually gave way to new definitions of sovereignty and to regularized taxation epitomized in the ever-increasing economic rationality of disinterested capitalism. Coterminal with the development of economic rationality was the growth of legal rationality. Here law functioned in two ways: it protected the domain of economic activity within a bounded entity such as a

nation, and established rules of behavior within and between nations, societies, and cultures.

Because of the tribute system (as imagined on the model of the Roman empire), none of this happened in China. Rather, the absence of external challenges was seen to have produced a kind of involution in which law and economic activity collapsed into culture. The tribute system, presumably inappropriately, combined “diplomacy” and “trade,” while never overtly acknowledging that it was fulfilling either of these quasi-natural functions. This was because within the terms of Chinese culture there could be no true diplomacy (based as it must be on natural equality between sovereign states) and because commerce was not as highly valued as, say, farming.

The upshot was that a sino-centric and isolated China developed an entrenched culturalism, as opposed to a more modern nationalism (see Fairbank 1942; Levenson 1968; and Fairbank, Reischauer, and Craig 1989: 177–179), and was, as a result, ill prepared to deal with the Western powers when they arrived in force at China’s door in the nineteenth century.

Unwilling or unable to recognize the new international order of state-to-state relations spearheaded by European powers, or to separate diplomatic intercourse from commercial relations, China found that its classic defensive strategy of the tribute system provided little guidance or precedent for responding creatively to demands made by Europeans. The main cause of this blindness was cultural, including the traditional anticommercial and antitechnological biases of China’s dominant belief system, Confucianism. Moreover, it was precisely this distinct culturally produced system of rigid forms that Lord Macartney confronted when he arrived in China. Macartney’s inability to break through the intellectual and bureaucratic barriers of the tribute system explains why his embassy failed to open China to wider intercourse with the West and why relations between China and the West were so fraught with conflict in the nineteenth century.

Those who have followed Fairbank have generally accepted the useful-

18. Also see Fairbank’s discussion of the tribute system in the many editions of The United States and China: there is very little variation, except for a subtle shift from tributary to tribute system; see 1948:139-135, 1958:139-118, 1979:137-160, and 1997:158-161.

19. See, for example, the entry under “tribute” in the ss. In the most recent edition of the ss (1974), tribute has become synonymous with traditional China.

20. To paraphrase Parsons, whose sociological categories Fairbank claims to have employed (1982:236), Chinese culture, while in some aspects providing the basis for rationality, was strongly subject to substantive rather than formal rationalization, and was shot through with particularist themes, all of which served to retard proper development (1966:77).

ness of the tribute system and its associated beliefs as an explanation for Sino-Western hostilities from 1839 forward. However, since the late 1960s, some historians of traditional foreign relations have questioned a number of the assertions that make up the tribute system model. For example, Fairbank placed the origin of the system in the Zhou period. Others such as Morris Rossabi favor a Han origin (1975:18-19), while John Wills prefers the Ming period. In the latter case, Wills has built upon the work of Henry Serruys (1966, 1967) to insist that the late imperial tribute system does not predate the fifteenth century. In challenging the usual assumptions, Wills identifies coherent institutional structures, as opposed simply to beliefs or values, as the crucial index of origin (1984:173).

Other scholars have questioned the notion that material benefits flowed only in one direction, from Chinese courts to foreign kingdoms. Studies of Chinese relations with Inner Asia, for example, have moved from a view that these regions were dependent on contact with China to satisfy their needs for certain Chinese commodities to one that sees needs as bidirectional, thus taking issue with the Chinese rhetoric of self-sufficiency. China needed horses, raw materials, and possibly even foodstuffs from the outside, and could provide finished products as well as commodities unique to it (tea stands out in this respect).

Still others have questioned the rigidity and unitary nature of traditional foreign relations that the tribute-system model implies (Rossabi 1983). Among them, Joseph Fletcher found a high degree of flexibility in Qing Inner Asian policy at almost the same moment that the European presence in China had become more pronounced (1968 and 1978a). In noting “an embarrassment of traditions,” rather than a single one defining Chinese foreign relations, Michael Hunt juxtaposed the “unshakeable sinocentrism” of the tribute system to “more extroverted” and open policies of the Han and Tang eras (1984:6). Following upon Hunt, James Polachek has recently taken issue with transhistorical models and argued that one must look closely at specificities and context in order to understand policy making in the Qing period (1992).

22. The tendency to see economic needs as a primary motive for foreign involvement in the tribute system pervades much of the literature on Chinese relations with peoples of East, Central, and Southeast Asia. Underlying this assumption is a view that levels of development create demand for commodities and luxury goods. See, for example, Moses 1976:64.


Both Hunt and Polachek benefited from the revisionism of John Wills, who from the time of his contribution to Fairbank’s *The Chinese World Order* (1968) cautioned against overgeneralizing from the tribute system model. I want to deal with Wills’s arguments in some detail because in many ways they provide a point of departure for this study. As early as his 1968 essay, Wills noted that relations with Europeans, particularly as they were worked out in the Canton system of trade in the eighteenth century and in the few embassies to China over the preceding two centuries, did not fit the rigors of the tribute-system model. In a number of subsequent writings, he has added that the system as such was primarily relevant in the Qing period to relations with Korea, Vietnam, and Liuqiu. Moreover, he has highlighted a number of differences between Ming and Qing policies on the Inner Asian and coastal frontiers, drawing attention to what might be called a pragmatic approach on the part of Chinese bureaucrats to specific historical challenges.

It is this latter argument in particular that has probably been most damaging to the tribute-system model. In close readings from empirical “case studies” (1988), Wills has identified numerous anomalies that disturb the structural integrity of the “comprehensive-tribute-system” approach. More recently, he has called for and begun to formulate ways for fitting these China-based case studies into the larger framework of a Euro-Asian history from 1500 forward (1988, 1993). At the same time, Wills has tended to be skeptical of all theoretical positions that are not compatible with a methodology that combines a positivist historiography with elements from the sociological studies of “high” civilizations.

In some ways, the conclusions that Wills has drawn from empirical
studies are to be expected. Fairbank's tribute system was for all intents and purposes a functional one, and thus shared the weaknesses of classic functional models.25 As many anthropologists have noted, what appears elegant and logically coherent when frozen in a synchronic dimension breaks down under the strain of time and history (Hevia 1990a). Nevertheless, Wills's revisionism is significant. The sources and topics he has chosen to pursue have allowed him to offer an interpretation of "traditional" foreign relations, especially in the Qing period, which transcends the limitations of the tribute system, while neither abandoning its terms or the sociological interpretative framework he prefers. Beginning with the observation that scholars of Qing statecraft "discussed foreign relations not in terms of tribute but in terms of defense," Wills refigured the tribute system as one, and not necessarily the most important, form of that defense.

At the same time, however, Wills retained a critical feature of Fairbank's system when, for example, he drew attention to the fact that tribute missions preserved "the appearances of the ceremonial supremacy of the Son of Heaven in the capital" (1984:188). Put another way, what Wills, and virtually all of those who followed Fairbank, faithfully reproduced was an insistence upon seeing the tribute system as dualistic in nature. Such dualism was maintained through the use of binary oppositions such as tribute and trade, ritual and diplomacy, ideology and pragmatism, culture and practical reason, or, as Wills suggests above, appearances and political realities.

Such distinctions provide a way to separate the ritual or cultural functions of the tribute system from the statecraft tradition of historic China, the latter of which at times allowed officials to respond creatively to historical contingencies (Wills 1984:187). Interestingly enough, it is in those instances where culture gets sidetracked, where the bureaucratic institutions in play do not add up to a comprehensive whole, that Chinese bureaucrats look rational and capable of dealing adaptively with changing conditions. (Indeed, it is precisely within this context that Wills argues against the image of a stagnant China.) There are, however, inherent limits to this flexibility, which Wills variously describes as bureaucratic passivity or defensive-mindedness, both of which might be accounted for by the failure of China's bureaucracy to rationalize beyond a certain point. For Wills, that point is quite clearly where ritual performance and foreign relations remained part of that "peculiar jumble of functions under the Board of Rites" (1968:235).


China is, therefore, not only an empire without neighbors (Eliseeff 1963), but, as Wills seems to construct it, an empire without empire builders. Caught up in illusions, unable to rationalize beyond a certain point, China's bureaucrats can only distinguish between appearances and reality when the two mesh—that is, when outsiders were willing to accept the Chinese definition of the situation. When outsiders did not, Qing officials could do little more than respond defensively and cling to the illusions fostered by ceremonialism, while even the most clear-headed drifted unawares toward an inevitable confrontation with the West (1984:189).

Clearly there are questions that could be raised about these conclusions, particularly for the Qing period. The Manchus may not have been particularly interested in maritime matters, but they understood land warfare, and spent most of the first century and a half in which they occupied China aggressively engaged in it. Second, it is very difficult to understand why Qing bureaucrats are rational with some foreigners at certain times and not others; why were they able to deal with the Dutch and Russians (Mancall 1971) pragmatically, yet resorted to ideology with the British? In addition to these misgivings, there are also good reasons for questioning the distinction between culture and reason that infects the dualisms on which Wills and others rely, particularly when one tries to use a tribute-system logic to understand Qing textual production and imperial practices more broadly. Specifically, my concern is with those texts and practices that are associated with one of the most overdetermined of Chinese words, li, variously translated as ritual, ceremony, or etiquette.

1.4 The Problem of Ritual

Ritual is a thorny subject to address because within the academic division of labor it has long been the special concern of religious studies and anthropology. In these disciplines, it is often associated with the beliefs of premodern peoples and the non-Western world about the sacred or cosmological and their actions in relation to the transcendent. Ritual is also understood in these disciplines as processes by which society is made, legitimated, or transformed through rites of passage that alter the status of members (Van Gennep 1909, Durkheim 1915, and Turner 1969). In a more vernacular usage, ritual might be understood as part of formal, rule-bound, or compulsive behavior as opposed to informal or more natural behavior. For purposes here, these various views of ritual are significant because they
are often appropriated to explain aspects of the tribute system, particularly those involving tribute itself and court audiences before the Chinese emperor.

At the same time, the term 
 has a prominent place in Qing records of the Macartney embassy. In fact it was the Bindi or Guest Ritual, one of five categories of imperial rites involving the constitution of rulership as outlined in The Comprehensive Rites of the Great Qing (Da Qing tongli), through which officials organized this and other embassies to the Qing court. The question that I want to deal with, however, is not whether 
 is important to Qing relations with other kingdoms. It is rather whether the 
 of Qing imperial texts is the same as the 
 discussed in the tribute system. Granting that translation is always a slippery business, if attention is limited to foreign relations and imperial audiences, the answer would have to be no. I say this not because I think ritual is an inappropriate translation for 
, but because writers on this subject have conceptualized ritual far too narrowly.

While many scholars of Chinese history have attempted to reconstruct the meaning of the term 
 from Chinese sources, particularly classical Confucian writings, there has also been a tendency, as suggested above, to conflate 
 with a historical Western understanding of ritual, one that is linked closely to secular/intellectual discussions of religious beliefs and practices. In this configuration, reason and rationality occupy one pole of a continuum, the other of which is ritual and ceremony. From the point of view of a reason-centered secularism that is heavily influenced by the natural sciences, the claims made about rites cannot be possible (consider, for example, transsubstantiation in the Roman Catholic mass); therefore, they must be about something outside themselves. In this sense, the fact that people engage in rituals needs to be accounted for. This accounting usually takes two forms.  

26. For a recent effort see Wechsler, who provides a comprehensive review of the anthropological, sociological, and political science literature that constructs ritual as functional and symbolic (1985:1–36). He also finds in ancient China comparable notions of ritual and symbol (24, 31).

27. For a discussion of this tendency within Euro-American studies of Catholicism in particular see Asad 1993. Also see Zito 1995.

28. Here I follow Hirst and Woolley, who, in their engagement with Evans-Pritchard's work on witchcraft in Africa, succinctly summarized these issues and approaches:

The entities posited by witchcraft beliefs cannot exist because of what is claimed about them. The issue is then to explain why people capable of rationality persist in practices deriving from mystical beliefs about nonexistent entities. They do so, on the one hand, because the structure of their thought does not permit them to discover their error and, on the other, because their beliefs are implicated in social relations which they cannot dispense with. (1982:255)

29. Imperial audience rituals, like other rites in which the emperor was involved, have been treated in much the same way described by Asad for ritual in general—rites are understood to represent or symbolize something that lies temporally prior to or outside the activity proper (1993:60). In this interpretation, ritual is a performance of something else.

American intellectual practices that Said and others have identified as Orientalism; they are also part of more general cultural projects which have served to constitute the "West" as a privileged area of intellectual, political, and economic activity since at least the middle of the last century (see also R. Young 1990 and Herbert 1991).

Among other things, the consequence has been to find ample evidence to confirm truisms about the archaic or traditional character of pre-twentieth century China. So, for example, scholars take rites such as the imperial Grand Sacrifice to Heaven quite seriously because, as real ritual should, these rites address well-articulated cosmologies and may be understood as sharing universal characteristics of religion in archaic or premodern societies. Indeed, it would hardly be controversial to say that it is perhaps here more than anywhere else that the term ritual might be best applied to a Chinese practice.

When, however, such practices appear to defy expectations, to slip out of preordained taxonomies, far less ecumenical judgments of imperial rites are offered. This seems to be especially the case when scholars consider the Qing court's insistence to treat foreign relations as ritual. Insofar as such categorial errors can be excused, they are explained on the grounds that the Chinese emperor (misguidedly) claimed to be a universal ruler. On the other hand, many observers have used the occasion of discussions of foreign relations to highlight major shortcomings of historic China. Mark Mancall, for example, in explaining the "symbolic" value of tribute, argued that in "traditional societies" matters of form held "paramount importance since the distinction between symbol and reality was very vague," and that for Chinese society forms were taken as reality (1971:85). In a similar vein, John Wills has argued that since the Song period, Chinese officials have had a "tendency to focus on ceremonial appearances rather than on the realities of power..." "Ceremonies," he continues, "are, after all, formalizations of appearances..." (1984:21-22). These particular features of ritual or ceremonial thinking, coupled with an insistence, almost (one is given the impression) pathological at times, on maintaining appearances or bending reality to fit appearances, was, in the end, the great Achilles heel of the imperial order. It meant that Chinese officials were prone to dwell in illusion, never confronting the real challenges that faced China in the nineteenth century. In this sense, the Qing government must bear the responsibility not only for its own collapse, but for Western gunboat diplomacy as well.

Similar kinds of logic are discernible in arguments that treat ritual as a legitimating instrument. While it might have provided a sanction for political power, it is supposed to have prevented rationalization beyond a certain point in Chinese civilization. As indicated above, this was particularly the case in the domain of law, which in modern societies (and one cannot emphasize this point too strongly) legitimated the power structure. China produced no disinterested body of law, and hence no rationalized relations between culture, political power structure, society, and the individual. Ritual might have been useful for maintaining internal political order, preserving Chinese civilization and the illusions of imperial power, and orienting policy toward defense (presumably instead of offense or, perhaps, imperialism?), but it was also the great anchor preventing traditional China from responding creatively to the West.

In summary, scholarly treatment of Qing imperial rites and the tribute system has, over the last half-century, rehearsed well-known symbolic and functional-instrumental interpretations of ritual. Rituals refer to things outside themselves; their actual content is, therefore, of less importance than these referents. Rituals are a typical feature of archaic or premodern societies. As such, they indicate an absence of fully conscious rationality, a confusion of categories, and a limited understanding of cause-and-effect relationships. Ritual action cultivates or inculcates shared beliefs (read culture) in order to produce group solidarity, while providing autocratic rulers an instrument for maintaining social control. All these features of ritual are discernible because of the superior analytical tools that scientifically informed modern social theory provides. Like the orientalist construction to which Said drew attention, it matters little what Qing sources have to say on the subject; all such sources can easily be translated into the regulari-

31. For a useful discussion of features imputed to ritual in archaic societies see Masuzawa 1993, especially 26-36.
32. Also see his 1968 where, among other things, he argues that tribute formed contractual arrangements between Chinese society and other groups. In this interpretation, issues of rulership discussed below are inconsequential.
33. In his 1979b, Wills explained that he preferred the term "ceremony" when speaking of court audiences because "ritual" had cosmological connotations (56).
34. For an elaboration of this argument see Parsons 1966 and more recently, Myers 1991.
35. Some have argued that imperial audiences and tribute-system ceremonial were primarily designed for internal consumption in China; see, for example, Wills 1984:178 and Wechsler 1963:96.
ties of the observer’s discourse, producing knowledge which quite clearly claims to be superior to that of historical Chinese subjects who are under the sway of appearances and illusions.

Very little produced in the new China-centered history has called either the symbolic or the instrumental interpretations of ritual into question; nor have there been efforts to confront the implications of this formation for the study of Qing relations with other kingdoms. Most writers still treat tribute and imperial audiences with foreign emissaries as symbolic, and the rites themselves as highly rigid formal appearances that only occasionally mesh with an external “reality.” Few have challenged the assertion that these Qing failures had a direct causal relation to the conflict that developed with the West in the nineteenth century. Presumably, if the Qing imperium had been able to shed ritualized foreign relations, the conflict with the West would either have been avoided, or its outcome would have been quite different.

1.4 Beyond Symbolic and Functional Ritual

The way in which sinologists have tended to treat Qing imperial rites is reminiscent in certain respects of observations Jean Comaroff has made about first-world scholarship of “third-world” others. In her study of bodily regimes in South Africa, Comaroff notes that in the colonial context, practices of the colonized are often categorized by Euro-American social science as “primitive,” “sub-political,” and “ritualized” (1985:351). The effect is to objectify these practices—that is, to place them at a spatial and temporal distance from oneself, to see them as cross-cut with false consciousness and as signs of the failures or inadequacies of the non-Western world adequately to grasp the nature of reality (Fabian 1983 and de Certeau 1988:1–17, 209–243). In this sense, ritual often carries a pejorative connotation, particularly when it involves a bodily regime such as koutou that already bears a negative burden in sources written by men from North Atlantic nation-states. Moreover, when it is not linked directly to “practical” results, like making community or providing psychological relief in times of hardship, ritual is habitually relegated to the vague and inchoate realm of the symbolic. Such constructions on the part of analysts are not merely passive reflections of reality; they participate, as do all representations, in the production of the real.36

Offering an alternative interpretation of the relation between ritual practices and an event like the first British embassy to China is not a simple task, primarily because, as Comaroff suggests, the notions involved are deeply embedded within social science, and, I would add, Euro-American intellectual practices. A brief return to Fairbank’s division between power structure and culture will help to clarify this point. In her recent book on sociological theories of ritual, Catherine Bell finds that since the beginning of this century studies of “sacred kingship” have tied ritual, political power, and legitimation of that power closely together. More often than not the relationship posed is consistent with the instrumental treatment of ritual discussed above: rites are an “artifice” designed to disguise brute power. Building on the work of Geertz, Cannadine, and Bloch, Bell rejects this notion. In its stead, she argues that ritual activities are “themselves the very production and negotiation of power relations.” This insight then allows her to substitute for the authoritarian notion of power one that sees ritualization as “a strategic mode of practice” which “produces nuanced relations of power, relationships characterized by acceptance and resistance, negotiated appropriation, and redemptive reinterpretation of the hegemonic order” (1992:193, 195).

The reorientation that Bell has accomplished serves to dissolve the distinction between power structure and culture so that ritual practices themselves produce power relations. But the relations so produced are no longer unidirectional, nor reliant upon a domain external to them for their rationale. Moreover, by drawing attention to strategies, nuances, acceptance, resistance, and negotiation, Bell takes ritual out of the domain of an acted script, and radically historicizes its practices themselves. Among other things, this suggests that older ritual forms might be appropriated to say or do new things—or might themselves be open to revision. One of the virtues of Bell’s reworking of ritual is to provide some sense that such activities move within a contested space, that harmony and the affirmation of communal affiliations may be only one element of a general sociology of ritual (cf. Taussig 1987). Recent empirical work in China studies demonstrates the appropriateness of Bell’s critical position.

In his study of calligraphy and pulse theory, for example, John Hay demonstrates that terms we might associate with anatomy were widely diffused in other areas such as art theory, kinship relations, topological siting, and literary theory. Hay further suggests that this vocabulary was not neces-

36. See my 1993 and 1995; the latter provides a number of examples of how koutou retains negative connotations both here and in China.

sarily used in a metaphoric sense, in which a primary meaning would be extended to other contexts, but rather in a direct sense, as in a macrocosm-microcosm relationship (1983a and b). One way of thinking about such a relationship is to imagine the macrocosm writ small in the microcosm. Another way is to think in terms of part-whole relationships (synecdoche) or of structural similarities (homology) between things that might have different ontological status (see chapter 5). 38

These insights are, I believe, useful for thinking about Qing imperial ritual in at least two ways. First, we might consider the way li is dispersed and diffused across various domains of practice and through various textual traditions. In the reign of the Qianlong emperor, li was deeply embedded in the Qing imperium's world-ordering processes, in Confucian, Daoist, and Buddhist philosophy and practices, in household rules and management, and in the worship of ancestors, gods, and spirits, as well as in diplomacy. Moreover, as Angela Zito's work has demonstrated, li not only informed imperial practice, but was itself a subject of textual production par excellence. As such, it was emmeshed in rich and variegated discussions, researches, and writings, including those of the kaozheng or empirical research scholars (Zito 1989 and forthcoming). The very multiplicity of discourses on li challenge, therefore, simple definitions, or efforts to organize ritual unproblematically into a category such as culture as opposed to reason.

A second significance of Hay's work is to draw attention to macrocosm-microcosm relationships. The implications of this notion are especially pertinent for reconceptualizing Qing imperial rites. In order to demonstrate this point, let me begin with a review of the five imperial rites (Wuli) as outlined in the Comprehensive Rites of the Great Qing: (1) Auspicious rites (Jili) deal with sacrifices to Heaven and Earth, rites in which the emperor is the Son of Heaven; (2) Felicitous rites (Jiali) are concerned with the south-facing ruler, the ruler addressing his domain, and include the assembly of the entire official domain before the gaze of the emperor, the presentation of memorials to the emperor, and the handing down of imperial edicts (presentation and handing down are designated as hearing [ting] and governing [zheng]); (3) Martial rites (Junli) have to do with the emperor as warrior; (4) Guest rites (Binli), the primary focus of this study, are about the emperor's relations with other lords, and serve as a model for host/guest relations between all peoples in the imperial domain; and (5) Inauspicious or Funerary rites (Xiangli) begin with rituals for the interment of the emperor and end with accounts of funeral rites proper to the common people.

In general, the rites defined the activities of the emperor temporally throughout the year, including both solar and lunar time, and spatially in terms of all beneath, yet embedded in, the Cosmos (Tianxia), meaning the whole world. No absolute outside was acknowledged, only relative degrees of proximity to a center. This center was, in turn, frequently constituted anew through ritual practice. Degrees of proximity of participants to the body of the emperor were both made and displayed in rites. The spatial disposition of participants and things (such as imperial regalia) using principles of cardinal directionality, upper-lower, and closer-farther signified and produced specific states of political relations. By manipulating space, by disposing bodies, the imperial court demonstrated that cosmic change was being appropriately acknowledged, worked on, formed, and included in the emperor's rulership. In this sense, each of the five rites involved macrocosm-microcosm relations. Thus, there is no need for analysis to draw distinctions between rites with cosmological and those with practical import—cosmology and practicality were always already involved in any practice classified as li.

Such an argument gains added weight when the relations between the rituals in the Comprehensive Rites are understood in synecdochic and homologous terms. These kinds of relationships are perhaps best demonstrated in the Grand or Extra-Mural Sacrifices of the Auspicious rites. Grand Sacrifices are the observances discussed first in the ritual text; they address the cycle within the year considered to be the most significant, the solstices and equinoxes that divide the year into four equal parts. As Angela Zito has noted, the Comprehensive Rites provides the fullest narrative for the Winter Solstice sacrifice (1984). The Summer Solstice portion of the text, then, simply refers back to the winter rites when the actions to be taken are the same, indicating that the winter sacrifice is logically superior to the summer, forming its basis, as it were. The equinox sacrifices are, in turn, organized as lesser and only partly varied versions of the solstice sacrifices.

38. In addition, Susan Naquin's study of Miao-feng Mountain (1991) poses a site as a contested space of ritual, while Valerie Hansen (1990) discusses the dynamism of gods and religious worship in Song China.

39. Or other versions of the distinction, for example that some tribute is symbolic, while other tribute is pragmatic.
with spring superior to fall. In addition to their points of similarity, the text also draws attention to processes of differentiation: what is described in the sections following the Winter Solstice sacrifice are chiefly the points that differ from it. Zito concludes, quite correctly I believe, that the relationship between the pairs, normally construed as being of equal significance and proportions, as if they were a kind of harmonious system of eternal oscillation, is actually asymmetrical, with the superior of the pair encompassing and including the inferior through logical signs of presence, absence, and difference.

It is not, therefore, simply a matter of proposing hierarchy as an organizing principle in "traditional" China. Rather the notion of hierarchy to which the Comprehensive Rites appears to refer is materialized via a logic of inclusion or encompassment which simultaneously maintains difference. These adroit uses of macrocosm-microcosm, synecdoche, homology, and differentiation as exemplified in the substance of Auspicious rites strike me as fundamental imperial powers, ones that emanate throughout Qing rulership and indicate the source from which the Qing court constructed its sovereignty and claimed legitimacy.\(^{40}\)

The works I have reviewed in this section offer other ways of approaching Qing imperial ritual—ones, I would argue, which do not demand either totalizing or essentializing the subject of investigation. They also encourage us to reconsider other, taken-for-granted assumptions about Sino-Western relations. Suppose, for example, we hold in suspense for a moment the claim that rather than ritualizing diplomacy, the British, like other Europeans in the late eighteenth century, were busy ritualizing international relations via a body of rules known as the "Law of Nations." The questions that might then be put are these: (1) did ritual play any role at all in British diplomatic practice, and (2) did the British imagining of nation-to-nation relations have cosmopolitan content? While both of these questions will be taken up more comprehensively in chapters 3 and 4, from my understanding of the record of Lord Macartney's embassy to China, the answer to both these questions is yes. In fact, while at times the British ambassador looked askance at the "formal" practices of the Qing court, seeing them perhaps as akin to enlightened reason's critique of the practices of the Roman Catholic church, he also saw ceremony as a crucial means for establishing mutual recognition of sovereignty, thereby enabling diplomatic negotiations to proceed. As for the cosmological aspect of the "Law of Nations," one need hardly go further than to point out the many references to God and Nature found in the letter from George III to the Qianlong emperor. To treat such references as so much hyperbole or formality is to dismiss or marginalize them in much the same manner as has been done with Qing imperial notions of ritual.

1.6 Considerations in the Organization of This Study

It is not my purpose to present a new model of Chinese history, or to offer a new grand narrative to replace that of the tradition-modernity confrontation. I will attempt, however, to bring back into consideration (albeit in somewhat modified form) the political order that dominated the Qing and British imperial formations.\(^{41}\) One way of accomplishing this is to cease interpreting the Macartney embassy as an encounter between civilizations or cultures, but as one between two imperial formations, each with universalistic pretensions and complex metaphysical systems to buttress such claims. Under the sway of area studies exclusionism, twentieth-century Chinese nationalism, and notions of China's uniqueness in the age of European global domination (i.e., China as a semi-colony), commonalities between the Qing and British imperial formations have been ignored or denied, while their differences have been distorted. My subject will be, therefore, the contact between two expansive colonial empires, each organized around principles that were presumably incompatible with those of the other. I will not emphasize the collision of cultures.

Throughout this work, I will treat Qing and British principles of organization as discourses of power, each produced by a ruling bloc for the maintenance of its position and the reconfiguring of its social world. While

\(^{40}\) These notions of hierarchy and sovereignty might be contrasted to what was in Europe at the same time; see chapter 3, section 6.

\(^{41}\) In part, my concern here parallels the concerns of Naquin and Rawski 1987:xxii and the critique of social history found in Skocpol 1984. In bringing the state back in, however, one must be aware of the danger of reproducing a state-society split that the social history movement had in part reacted against. As a way of avoiding such divisions, I use the term "imperial formations," which, as defined by Iden, "refers to a complex agent consisting of overlapping and contending polities that more or less successfully relate themselves to each other in what they consider, or at least concede as constituting, a single way of life, one that its more active proponents seek to represent as potentially universal in extent." Iden adds that politics should be understood as provisional because their ruling agent is continually engaged in the process of making the polity (1990:295).

These particular theoretical insights are, I believe, particularly helpful for discussing and exploring the Qing and British formations of the late eighteenth century.
I will indicate below a number of distinctions between these two modes of power. I want to begin by drawing attention to a few of their similarities. Qing and British imperial discourses were each in their own way absolutist; that is, both strove to contain what were recognized as threats to the methods through which they produced power. Neither was, in other words, egalitarian or democratic; rather they operated to consolidate an imperial formation that placed the users of the discourse at the pinnacle of sets of complex hierarchical relationships. In this sense, power was unquestionably coercive. Peasants, Chinese and Irish peasants for example, suffered and died through the application of imperial power in China and Great Britain. Yet power was also productive. It not only reordered and transformed the social world of the Qing and British empires, it produced particular kinds of agents who operated in those worlds, agents who believed that imperial power, as they understood it, worked for the common good; that “order” was better than other alternatives; and that order should therefore be protected through the judicious application of productive as well as coercive power. I would argue that if any of us are to avoid either seduction or despair in the face of such power, it behooves us to understand its nuances. To do so requires both historical engagement and critical self-reflection: engagement not only with the Macartney embassy as “event,” but with later imaginings of its meaning; and self-reflection which recognizes that the “self” is also a product of that which it seeks to interrogate.

It is also helpful, I believe, to acknowledge that there is more than a minor connection between the subject of this study and European colonialism. “China” was, after all, that most superlative object of European expansionist fantasies from the fifteenth century to the present, and need not be treated in isolation from such global processes. Moreover, Lord Macartney was an exemplary representative of British imperial ambitions. In addition to once having been ambassador to the court of Catherine the Great, he also served as the governor of Grenada, Madras, and Capetown (Roebuck et al. 1983). Many of those on his embassy assisted him in these duties in other places, and at least one of them wrote a comparative analysis of Africans and Chinese (Barrow 1805). For reasons having more to do with the amorphousness of categories such as “tradition” and “modernity,” and the “Orient” and the “Occident,” as well as the tendency to separate the history of Great Britain from the history of the British empire, the implications of these connections between Macartney and empire, and between empire and modes of knowledge production, often go unremarked in the literature. Much the same could be said for the Qing court, with the understanding that its imperial knowledges were informed by a different epistemology (see chapter 5).

Finally, it is also worth bearing in mind that although understandings of events in China in the fall of 1791 have been (and in the absence of evidence to the contrary continue to be) conditioned by a number of modernist assumptions about the meanings of ceremonial behavior, international law and relations, and embassies, there was at the time, and continued to be for some time after the embassy, far from complete agreement in Europe on whether there were or ought to be universal codes of diplomatic exchange. Napoleon Bonaparte argued, for example, that Macartney ought to have complied with local customs in his dealings with the Chinese because each sovereignty had the right to dictate how it was to be approached within its own territories (cited in Peyrefitte 1992:513).

These considerations have led me to a number of conclusions which account both for the way the study is organized and for the particular emphases to be found in it. First, with a number of poststructural critics such as Dovia Haraway, Bruno Latour, and Michael Taussig, I would argue that knowledge is always situated, interested, and hence political. Second, I have worked from the assumption that international relations as defined in part through international law is a naturalized hegemonic discourse that exists today as an artifact of European global expansion from the sixteenth century forward. It is naturalized in the sense that it has become accepted as a commonsense way that nations should engage in relations among themselves. It is hegemonic in a Gramscian sense, in that states where such traditions cannot be found have more or less willingly given their consent to participate in international intercourse under rules defined by alien (in this case Euro-American) others.

Third, I believe it impossible to coherently translate or evaluate Qing imperial behavior in managing relations with other kingdoms by relying on these commonsense principles of international relations. Macartney’s evaluation of his encounter with the imperial court is a prime example of this impossibility. Moreover, most other studies of the embassy start from the position that a Euro-American version of international relations is suf-

42. For a critique and examples of work that bring the empire back into British history, see MacKenzie 1986a and b, and 1992.

43. Dealing with more recent history, J. Farquhar (1987) has elucidated a different kind of epistemology with respect to Chinese medicine in contemporary China.
sufficient for comprehending most other kinds of historical relations. Here the yardstick used is international law, and other situations are evaluated according to the degree to which they correspond with or deviate from these “norms.” Conflict is then often accounted for on the basis of a failure of one party to act normally or reasonably. I will address this issue in more detail in the final chapter when I consider the significance of the Macartney embassy in the history of Sino-Western relations.

Fourth, I will argue that while it may be impossible to translate Qing imperial forms of international relations into international relations, it is not impossible to reconstruct the particulars of those forms in their own terms. By so doing, I believe one can work toward an understanding of the Qing imperial practices that Macartney found confusing. I take up the nature of Macartney’s confusion in chapter 4, and engage Qing practices in chapter 5. In the latter case, I will offer an alternative way of understanding imperial ritual that need not rely on the sorts of interpretations critically reviewed above. In particular, I will consider the challenge Qing sources pose to our commonsense ideas of human agency when, for example, a foundational metaphysics, notions of a universal human nature, and instrumental understandings of thought and action are not involved.

Fifth, since I challenge the view that constructs culture as a realm of primarily beliefs and ideas, I do not think it correct to characterize the encounter between the Qing and British empires as a case of cultural misunderstanding. Rather, I will insist that actors on both sides of the encounter were quite aware that what was at stake were competing and ultimately incompatible views of the meaning of sovereignty and the ways in which relations of power were constructed. Each attempted to impose its views on the other; neither was (at the time) successful.

Finally, a few words on how I have approached the Chinese and English language source materials dealt with here. In general, I have taken both the Chinese and British writings to be far from transparent. In addition to their “factual” content, they are comments on and attempts to organize the world in specific ways. Regardless of the claims they make, they cannot encompass the entire world or account for all phenomena in it any more than any other discourse can. One question I will ask of these texts, therefore, involves their acknowledged and unacknowledged limits, for I believe that it is precisely at the edges of discourses that we may begin to write historical cultural studies.