

# Qianlong Meets Macartney

## *Collision of Two World Views*

*A Dramatization for Middle and High School Students*

John R. Watt, Ph.D.

China Programs Consultant, Primary Source



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Watertown, MA 02472  
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# Qianlong

## Meets

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John R. Watt, Ph.D.  
Director of China Studies, Primary Source  
Associate in Research, The Fairbank Center for East Asian Research,  
Harvard University

Text of play revised by Charles A. Seifert and the Drama Workshop, Salem High School, Salem N.H.

Primary Source  
101 Walnut St., Watertown, MA 02472-4052  
Tel: 617 923-9933 Fax: 617 923-0975  
E-mail: [publications@primarysource.org](mailto:publications@primarysource.org)  
Website: <http://www.primarysource.org>

## Introduction and Study Guide

### The Setting

The Macartney mission of 1792-94 is a defining episode in the modern encounter between China and the West. It is the first major event in which British diplomats well read in the ideas of the European Enlightenment came face to face with the leadership of the world's greatest and most populous land power. Before that time, educated Europeans had learned about China mainly through the writings of French Catholic missions. 18th century European philosophers, with the notable exception of Montesquieu, had rather liked what they perceived as the rationality and beneficence of Chinese Imperial government. In addition, a taste for Chinese art developed among the European aristocracy. Whole rooms in 18th century European palaces and aristocratic estates were given over to chinoiserie. But this was contact at a distance. Outside of Russo-Chinese relations, no major diplomatic or political decision-making had as yet been involved.

The Qing (Ch'ing) dynasty rulers, for their part, had developed an interest in the products of Western culture. The Qianlong (Ch'ienlung) emperor in particular took a fancy to European art and culture. During his long reign (1736-96) Italian artists produced scrolls and paintings depicting court life and ceremonies and trained Chinese court artists to paint using Western-style perspective. Numerous watches, clocks, and scientific utensils with Western art motifs made their way into the Court furnishings. The most notable access of Western style came with the construction for the Qianlong emperor of European-style buildings in the Everlasting Spring Garden outside of Peking (part of the old Summer Palace complex), which reproduced motifs from Versailles on Qing Imperial soil. In addition, several European missionaries resided in Beijing and were available to advise the Emperor on European matters.

But the Qing Court did not normally permit any concession to Western tastes in how it conducted its ritual ceremonies. These ceremonies, carried out in formal settings with casts of hundreds or thousands, represented the Emperor as Son of Heaven or as Chief Ruler, mediating with supra-natural or terrestrial powers to maintain cosmic and political harmony, through a process that the texts refer to as 'centering'. The Emperor himself had to carry out ceremonies mediating with superior authority, such as Heaven, or his forbears, or even his living elders. For example, the Qianlong Emperor was exceedingly devoted to his mother and went to extraordinary lengths to exhibit his filiality. His Chinese subordinates carried out comparable rituals within their spheres of jurisdiction.

For Qing Manchu rulers, this ceremonial role was particularly important to establish their legitimacy with the Confucian bureaucracy as holders of Heaven's mandate. This was how 2-3 million Manchus were able to legitimize control over a population that grew to as much as 100 times that size. In addition, as rulers who had extended their power over non-ethnic Chinese domains of southeast and inner Asia, the Qing rulers functioned as Buddhist redemptive sovereigns and intercessors, responsible for bringing peace to huge regions beyond the traditional Chinese domain. In this function the Qing rulers followed the Tibetan way of Buddhism, and they served as patron-

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protectors of the Dalai Lama in Tibet. The Qianlong emperor studied Tibetan and Sanskrit with a Mongolian representative of the Tibetan Yellow (Gelugs-pa) sect and was depicted in Tibetan sanctuaries as a universal Buddhist peacemaker.

The Qing emperors developed a large imperial domain at Rehe (Jehol), 200 kilometers north of Beijing and replete with Tibetan Buddhist temples, which they could use to greet missions from dependent rulers in their capacity as both Confucian and Buddhist sovereigns. As recently as 1791 (a year before the Macartney mission set out for China) Qing armies successfully defeated a Nepalese invasion of Tibet, once again demonstrating their power over the vast, mountainous and desert regions of Inner Asia. The Qing rulers also maintained a capital in Manchuria, where they could receive delegations from northeastern dependencies.

When missions came from countries beyond the boundaries of the Qing empire, they were expected to fit in with the Confucian ceremonial system by which relations between the Qing emperor and lesser powers were formalised and Qing dynastic power manifested. Thus the role of foreign officials requesting admission to the Court was to come as representatives of lesser rulers seeking grace and favor from the Confucianized overlord presiding over the Qing empire. Most missions were willing to take on this stance, including a Dutch mission which followed on the heels of Macartney's.

On the British side, the Macartney mission came armed with a series of goals appropriate to an industrializing nation that was rapidly developing a world-wide trading system. As Adam Smith had pointed out, the British were a nation of shopkeepers and traders, and trade was becoming the key to their access to power and prosperity. In the 1790s the British government of Pitt and Dundas was busy reconstructing the British mandate in India to reduce the political power of the East India Company and create a less mercantile and more open trading system. Because trade with China had become a significant factor in the development of British power in India, they wanted to cut through the restrictions of the Canton trading system imposed by the Qianlong government on European merchants in 1760 and negotiate a freer trade environment with China as a whole. They also wanted to establish a direct liaison—along European diplomatic lines—with the Qing Court. Because of his erudition, diplomatic experience, and familiarity with British policy in India, Macartney was in principle an ideal person to represent the British government on such a mission.

But beyond these goals, Macartney and his associates came to China with perceptions about trade and national intercourse that were certain to cause friction with their Chinese hosts. As heirs of Galileo, Newton, and Locke, and contemporaries of the French Enlightenment philosophers, they regarded themselves as representatives of a modern, rational and specifically scientific world outlook. Within their lifetimes British technicians had developed chronometers needed to determine longitude, which would greatly increase the power and profitability of British navigation. They lived in a world in which Adam Smith had worked out the advantages of trade, James Watt had harnessed the power of steam, and Captain Cook had explored vast reaches of the Pacific Ocean. Buoyed by such developments, the Macartney mission came to China not just to promote trade and diplomacy but to assess China's status as a rational order and to collect data on matters of interest to scientific as well as political colleagues. These

latter goals were to some extent achieved, although not in a manner favorable to China's reputation in Europe.

Once in China Macartney proved—or appeared to the Qing leadership to prove—unwilling to function within the parameters of Qing “Guest” ritual for ordering relations between the supreme ruler and subordinate dependencies. (Issues over the ‘kowtow’ or three kneelings and nine prostrations are only one of various problems which surfaced). This created a serious challenge for the Empire’s ceremonial managers. Some of them recognized that Macartney was educated, worldly-wise and well-equipped with gifts for the Emperor. Why couldn’t he conform to the vital ceremonials by which peace and harmony were maintained and dependent leaders brought into a fulfilling relationship with the Son of Heaven and Chief Ruler? And how could his dissonant conduct be managed so that it did not disrupt ceremonial order and cast doubt upon the efficacy of the Qing emperor?

This analysis, made possible by recent scholarship, suggests that the problems of the Macartney mission were not determined so much by restrictions in trade policy or by cross cultural misunderstandings. Rather, they resulted from increasingly divergent global interpretive and managerial systems: Imperial Confucianism on the one hand with its theories about the Mandate of Heaven and their exercise by Manchu rulers to attain dominion over China and surrounding regions; and European Enlightenment ideas about law and rationality and their application by British leaders to the reorganization of British power in India and Asia. The encounter is undertaken by human beings who try hard to sort out what is going on. Indeed, few tried harder than Qianlong and Macartney to find ways to achieve their differing objectives. But the systems were, and to a certain extent still are, incompatible. Macartney was trying to introduce to China peaceful changes in trade and diplomatic practice, while at the same time assessing Qing capacity to resist enforced change. But the Manchu-controlled Chinese state system had its own goals for the management and control of foreign power, which Macartney’s mission intentionally sought to change. Thus Qianlong and his aides ended up spending much of their time figuring out how to get Macartney and co. out of China.

## The Play

The play is written to illustrate, and give some human dimension to, the problems set up by the Macartney mission. There were in fact many players on both sides engaged in managing or interpreting what was going on. Our play reduces the cast of characters to three on the British side and three on the Imperial Chinese side, plus an interpreter, Rev. Li (Lee), a.k.a. Mr. Plum, who was living in Rome. Other views are reflected in the four narrators, of whom one and three represent a sort of common man perspective, while two and four represent perceptions about the broader issues. A historian has been added to paint in the background and provide introductions to the scenes. Sir George Staunton, Macartney’s second in command, and Zhengrui (*Chengjuei*)—the unfortunate official delegated to deal with Macartney — are mildly satirized as reflecting perspectives that tended to miss larger issues. Tom was the sharp-eyed kid who later became Britain’s first official China-watcher. Heshen (*Hoshen*) was Qianlong’s favorite and all-powerful minister till the Emperor’s death, after which he was quickly disgraced, divested of his fabulous wealth, and forced to commit suicide.

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Quite a few of the lines are taken from accounts written by some of the British participants, or from memorials and rescripts written on the Chinese side. These are drawn from Peyrefitte's study (see Resources, below). The original text has been revised by Charles Seifert and students of the Salem, NH, High School Drama Workshop to loosen up the dialogue and make it flow more easily from character to character. The students gave a performance of this version at a Primary Source Conference on October 14, 2000. The idea is that this version should now be accessible to any high school world history class that is studying this era of world history and would like an opportunity to dramatize it.

The play draws on Western stereotypes of the Chinese and Chinese stereotypes of Westerners. These stereotypes need careful interpretation in class discussion. It would be helpful if teachers had the opportunity to read in advance from an applicable historical text, e.g. those by Waley-Cohen and Spence, to get a more detailed picture of the historical context, and the functioning of such concepts as the Mandate of Heaven and the so-called Tribute System. The stereotypes derive from incompatibilities in visions of how the world is organized and world order maintained. Such differences in vision still have to be negotiated today; part of successful negotiation consists in understanding and working with them.

Thus one useful classroom exercise would be to discuss whether this mission could have succeeded to any degree with more imaginative or better informed leadership on both sides, or was it doomed from the outset by circumstances beyond the control of the principals? What can we learn about principles of negotiation by studying this famously abortive mission?

With regard to presentation, one obvious problem is that there are no women specifically identified in the named parts. That is because there were no women in the British mission and none among Chinese officialdom. One way to finesse this problem would be by having female students take on the narrator parts. Or one could adopt the conventions of Zhejiang opera and have female students act all the named male parts (leaving narration to male students). Or one could just not worry about gender identity.

### Outcomes for study

The Macartney mission presents a foretaste of a problem with which Qing politicians and educated Chinese would have to wrestle throughout the 19th and 20th centuries. That problem is how to deal with the assertive global system set in motion by the Western enlightenment and expressed through trade, development, war, colonialism, political and economic revolution, and more recently through global institutions such as the UN, the World Trade Organization (WTO), the World Bank, etc. Can China participate in this modern Western concept of an interactive, multinational global society without losing its own rationale, on which it has depended for 3,000 or more years, of how to manage the human condition? The Opium wars, extraterritoriality, the Western missionary movement in China, China's own 20th century revolutions, the wars with Japan, the Korean war, etc, up to the return of Hong Kong to Chinese jurisdiction and China's decade-and-a-half-long application to join the WTO, all represent aspects of this ongoing ideological struggle.

Questions for study: What can we learn that will help us to interpret the clash of ideas, ceremonials, and perceptions? Did the Macartney mission lead inevitably to the Opium wars: what would it have taken to generate different outcomes? What light does the Macartney mission shed on the issues that stand between the West and China? How can we best deal with those issues today, e.g. as they affect trade and development, human rights, competition over strategic resources, and management of strategic problems? At a more immediate and personal level, how can study of such issues help us to deal with ethnic relations within our own communities?

### **Lesson Title: Qianlong Meets Macartney: Collision of Two World Views**

*Grade Level:* 9-12

*Approximate Class Time::* 1 to 1 and 1/2 hrs. (Play takes approx. 20 mts. to read)

*Purpose:* to illustrate in dramatic form the clash of diplomatic objectives and ideological assumptions characterizing the Macartney mission and its reception in China; to lay out the issues dividing the British and the Chinese, and to assess their significance for future interaction between China and the West.

#### *Curricula Contexts*

- introduction to course or section on modern Chinese history
- unit in course or section on global history in the modern era, which deals with the convergence of West and East and the ideas and goals shaping their interaction
- unit in course or section on comparative politics or culture, designed to compare differing political or cultural systems, e.g. Chinese dynastic and revolutionary rule with the politics and culture of modern Western nationalism

#### *Objectives:*

- students will be able to explain the differing political goals motivating the British and Chinese regimes and the ways in which these differences influenced British-Chinese relations up to the First Opium War (1839-42).
- students will be able to account for the long reach of British land and sea-power in the late 18th century and explain why this worried China's Manchu rulers. (Students will have the opportunity to distinguish Britain's failure in colonial America from its successes in Europe and India).
- students will be able to understand the broad ideological differences separating the British and Chinese and explain why so many problems were left unresolved by the Macartney mission.
- looking back on the Macartney mission today, students will be able to discuss to what extent differences manifested at that time continue to influence China's relations with the West (and vice versa).

#### *Props for Play:*

- at least 13 scripts. Those for the 11 roles should be marked up in advance, so that each reader has a script with his part identified with a highlighter. The 12th script

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should be for a stage manager who could identify each scene; the 13th would be for the teacher-director.

- basic costume to distinguish British from Chinese parts.
- large name tags for each role-player-reader, to remind audience who is who
- 8x11 cards with titles of each scene in big print
- nicely decorated casket or box (containing George III's letter), for Macartney to present to Emperor

*Other props:*

- map of China (if possible, map of China during Qing dynasty)
- map of world for showing scope of Macartney mission
- if possible, slides, photographs or prints to demonstrate visual disparities (resources for such visuals are listed in references below)

### Procedure for Carrying out Lesson

(Procedure suggested here could be used as intro unit to modern Chinese history)

- start a discussion going on Chinese dynastic rule. What is a dynasty? How is China governed in the 18th century? Who are the Qing rulers? How powerful are they (how could this be measured)? For example, if the Qing armies could conduct successful military campaigns on the border with India, they must be pretty competent at projecting power. Where else did they carry out far-reaching campaigns? (e.g. in Inner Asia, leading to establishment during Qianlong's reign of Xinjiang—Chinese Turkestan—as a vast “new province”). What about China's economy? What were the major crops? How many people lived there in the late 18th century? How wealthy was China under Qianlong?
- switch to Britain. The same country which couldn't or wouldn't defeat the American forces during 1776-83 is busily extending its power in India and is able to send formal missions all the way to China. What is driving British politics at the end of the 18th century? Why is reorganization of British power in India so crucial to the decision to send the Macartney mission to China? (It has something to do with tea!) How important is China to Britain and British India at that time?
- introduce play. There are 12 roles (plus hangers-on roles as needed). The play is student-friendly. It should be fun to read, and no one has to learn their parts. However, a trial reading would be helpful, to encourage readers to read with style and wit and project their voices and parts. Encourage readers to scout around at home for basic costume ideas. Students who do not want to read in public could be encouraged to take on one of the projects listed below.
- act out play. (Be sure to move reading and scenes along briskly, while not rushing so fast that no one can make out what is being said). If necessary, separate off British and Chinese roles into two groups, so as to underline their divisions.
- commentary on play and mission: what ideas does the play convey? What are the preconceptions on both sides and how do they get in the way of the negotiations? Why are there [at least] two versions of Macartney's encounter with Qianlong? Why do many commentaries conclude that the Macartney mission failed? What did it accomplish? What did the readers learn from their parts? How could they improve the play?
- wrap-up: 1) typically, Western commentators would say that at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century China is on the verge of decline while Britain is on the way to



defeating Napoleonic France, leading the world in industrialization, and creating the Victorian Empire. How could such a small country with so few people reach out round the other side of the globe and defeat the forces of the mighty Qing empire? Why not, if that country is establishing a new style of imperialism and has the military power to put it across? 2) Chinese commentators would point to the corruption developing in Qing politics, the scourge of the opium trade (promoted by Scottish and even some American traders), and the treacherous duplicity of the alien Qing rulers. Discuss with students why there are such differing ways of interpreting the events in China's relations with the West following on from the Macartney mission. Discuss also why these events (Macartney to Opium war) still play such a big part in defining Chinese public attitudes towards the West.

### Projects for Students

- 1) Create a chart of the Macartney voyage, with notes on all the places that he and his ships visited en route to China.
- 2) Imagine you are Tom Staunton. Write down in your diary observations of Chinese customs and practices that have caught your attention.
- 3) Become a ritual specialist. Make a list of some of the rituals you engage in, within your family, school, other social settings (church, athletics, public performances, etc). Contrast what you see to be the critical rituals advocated by Macartney with those governing Qing reception of dependent missions? How did they differ in performance and objectives? What do you think ritual is intended to accomplish? Why specifically is ritual so important to diplomacy?
- 4) Describe some of the sites that Macartney and co. visited, including the Great Wall and the Forbidden City in Beijing, and the Grand Canal down which they traveled on the way home. If you can find a description of the Qing emperors' summer quarters in Jehol (Rehe), describe that. Imagine yourself as an 18th century American visiting these places. (If that is too difficult, imagine visiting them as yourself today).
- 5) Put together a list of gifts to accompany the Macartney mission. What would they bring to demonstrate British accomplishment? What would you bring, if you had been sent to visit the Chinese emperor at the end of the 18th century?
- 6) Prepare an outline of events which occurred between the Macartney mission and the First Opium War (1839-42) affecting British-Chinese relations. Why do you think the British ended up going to war with China? Why did the Qing diplomats feel obliged to negotiate unequal treaties with the Western powers? What was "unequal" about them?
- 7) Find out what you can about the Confucian concept of the "Mandate of Heaven". How does Heaven (and the natural order) interact with human society and government according to this theory? How does this interaction affect the conduct of government in Imperial China as illustrated in this play? See if you can figure out to what extent the Mandate of Heaven still influences government in China?

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**Resources** (\*starred sources are available in the Primary Source Library at 125 Walnut St., Watertown, MA, 02472 and can be loaned out to library members).

### Background Reading

\*Fairbank, John King and Merle Goldman. China: A New History. Enlarged edn. Cambridge, MA: Harvard, Belknap Press, 1998. Broad study drawing on much recent scholarship. Fairbank devoted his life to increasing American understanding and study of modern China. Goldman was a close associate of his and is an expert on modern China's intellectual history. The text has useful passages introducing such concepts as Mandate of Heaven, tribute system, etc. The broad focus is on the Qing dynasty and the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

\*Smith, Richard J. Chinese Maps: Images of 'All Under Heaven.' New York: Oxford UP, 1996. Fascinating, non-technical essay on the evolution of Chinese cartography. According to Smith, the introduction of western cartography by the Jesuits had little influence on Chinese cartographic traditions, which continued to rely on Song dynasty depictions of the Chinese imperium as the world surrounded by seas and islands. (well illustrated, but some maps are hard to read).

\*Sobel, Dava. Longitude: The True Story of a Lone Genius Who Solved the Greatest Scientific Problem of His Time. London: Fourth Estate, 1998. An easy read, it evokes the intense excitement conveyed by the scientific discoveries going on in late 18<sup>th</sup> century Britain and their impact on more mundane matters such as trade and navigation.

\*Spence, Jonathan D. The Search for Modern China. New York: Norton, 1990. Chapter 6, "China and the [Western] Eighteenth-Century World", contains sections on "Aliens and Chinese Law" and "Western Images of China" illustrating differences in perceptions and expectations between the West and China in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century of Western time and the late Qianlong era of Chinese/Qing dynasty time. The author has written widely on the Qing dynasty and modern China and is a leading authority in this field.

\*Wakeman, Frederic Jr. The Fall of Imperial China. New York: The Free Press, 1975. Chapter 7, "The Western Intrusion", gives a clear and concise account of how trade developed between Britain and China and why opium came to figure so prominently. Although this text is over 20 years old, Wakeman is an excellent historian and leading China specialist. O.k. for juniors and seniors.

Waley-Cohen, Joanna. The Sextants of Beijing: Global Currents in Chinese History. New York: Norton, 1999. Useful background information on Chinese cosmopolitanism. The chapter on "Foreign Goods and Foreign Knowledge in the Eighteenth Century" provides background to the Macartney Mission and includes a brief discussion of the mission.

### The Mission

\*Bickers, Robert A. ed. Ritual and Diplomacy: The Macartney Mission to China 1792-1794. London: British Association for Chinese Studies, 1993. Short essays by Chinese and Western authorities giving background to the perceptions of the participants and reasons for problems that arose as negotiators on both sides fumbled.

\*Bishop, Kevin. China's Imperial Way: Retracing an Historical Trade and Communications Route from Beijing to Hong Kong. With additional text by Annabel Roberts. Hong Kong: Odyssey Publications, 1997. This is the route that the Macartney mission took on its way out of China. This source contains some useful information from journals of individuals on the Macartney mission plus 13 illustrations by mission artist William Alexander. Well illustrated and worth acquiring for your school library.

\*Hevia, James L. Cherishing Men from Afar: Qing Guest Ritual and the Macartney Mission of 1793. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995. Sophisticated and broad-based study, drawing on recent historical and theoretical studies and on Chinese as well as English primary sources. Particularly valuable for its discussion of ritual as a means of diplomatic communication and the uses to which it was put by the Qing regime. Too technical for high school purposes, but teachers looking for new ways to interpret and teach about relations between China and the West would find many useful ideas in this book.

Hevia, James L. "Sovereignty and Subject: Constituting Relations of Power in Qing Guest Ritual." In Angela Zito and Tani E. Barlow. Body, Subject and Power in China. Chicago: U. Chicago Press, 1994. Short, useful and not too technical summary of analysis in Hevia's book (see above) on differing views of the relationship and functions of sovereign and subject in Qing Confucian and Western 18<sup>th</sup> century diplomatic practice.

\*Peyrefitte, Alain. The Immobile Empire. New York: Knopf, 1992. 630 pp. Detailed, substantially documented, but non-technical study of the Macartney mission by a retired French diplomat. Some great color illustrations.

## Imperial Sites and Rituals

\*De Verboden Stad / The Forbidden City. Rotterdam: Museum Boymans-van Beuningen, 1990. Good illustrated exhibition catalog of the formalities of Imperial life in and around Beijing. Introduction includes useful summaries on such topics as "Ceremonial Audiences", "The Imperial Wedding Ceremony", "Imperial Banquets", "Inspection and Hunting Trips", "Daily Life in the Palace", etc. There are also chapters on The Qing as a Dynasty of Conquest, Emperors in China, Court Painting, and Symbolic Motifs. A very informative source.

Holdsworth, May and Caroline Courtault. The Forbidden City: The Great Within. Hong Kong: Odyssey Publications, 1995. Distributed in the US by W.W. Norton. Excellently illustrated account of Ming and Qing court life. Includes a chapter summarizing the Macartney mission. This would be a great acquisition for a high school library.

\*Holdsworth, May. The Forbidden City. New York: Oxford University Press, 1998. Describes the public and private worlds inhabiting the famous imperial palace buildings

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in the center of Beijing. Modestly illustrated compared to the previous entry, but a good source of information on imperial life.

\*Imperial Resort at Chengde. Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1998. Designed for tourists rather than students, but has some good illustrations showing the influence of Tibetan Buddhism in the construction of some of the buildings. (What is needed is a study of Chengde which describes some of the great events, rituals, government practices, and hunts carried on at Chengde). Qing emperors, especially Qianlong, tried to project themselves as Buddhist enlightened sovereigns; Chengde was a place where they could really play out this role.

\*The Summer Palace. Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1997. Illustrations for tourists of the favorite retreat of the Empress Dowager. The European-style Summer Palace which Macartney visited was destroyed by the British and French in 1860. Only the ruins remain. The Empress Dowager built another one, which was damaged by the great power army in 1900 but restored. The grounds are one of the great beauty spots around Beijing.

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A One Act Play

By John R. Watt

Revised by Charles A. Seifert and the Drama Workshop of  
Salem High School, Salem, N.H.

## *Dramatis Personae*

### English Side:

The Right Honorable George Lord Macartney  
Sir George Staunton  
Thomas Staunton, his son (aged 12)  
Father Jacobus Li (Mr. Plum)  
First Narrator/Robert  
Second Narrator/William

### Chinese Side:

His Supreme Majesty, the Qianlong Emperor  
Heshen (Chief Minister)  
Zhengrui (Imperial Legate)  
(see note at end on pronunciation of names)  
Third Narrator/Wang  
Fourth Narrator/Zhang

Historian

## **Prologue**

*Historian:* Imagine a time when people in Europe and America knew very little about China, except that it was the place to buy tea and silk—and maybe sell a little opium. In the late 18th century the British were already in India and buying more and more Chinese tea.

*First Narrator:* We Brits needed outlets to sell our industrial manufactures. China would have been just right—except for the antiquated trade system at Canton.

*Third Narrator:* What antiquated trade system?

*Fourth Narrator:* These Western barbarians never get it right. We've had an empire going for 2,000 years.

*Third Narrator:* Most of the time it works fine. We provide order and stability, and a center around which things can revolve.

*Fourth Narrator:* We've also got the culture that makes it all worth while. The barbarians bring tribute, and that's right, since they need our culture to transform themselves.

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*Third Narrator:* That's the way it goes. They bring their stuff, come here humbly, and we shape them up.

*First Narrator: (Rolls his eyes).* See what I mean? It's going to be hard to crack this nut. It's like the irresistible force and the immovable object. But, as you'll see, *we're* irresistible!

*Third Narrator:* Irresistible my foot. Turtles' eggs, if you ask me!

### Scene One: The Voyage Begins

*Historian:* It is 1792. Eager to promote trade, and dissatisfied with the Canton trading system, the British Government appoints an Embassy to negotiate with the Chinese sovereign. The Embassy seeks to open new ports for trade, arrange for a place where British merchants can live year round, and establish a permanent mission in Beijing, the Chinese Empire's Northern Capital. The Embassy is to be led by Lord Macartney.

*Macartney:* That's me. (*Harrumphs*) I'm the Ambassador. I speak Latin, Greek, French and Italian. If I may say so, I'm very well read. I've traveled all over Europe, then I led a mission to Russia. I've been governor general of the British West Indies and governor of Madras. I survived a duel with a major general. I'm an Irish baron but married well and expect to become an English Lord! [*Dusts off clothing*]

*Second Narrator:* Yes, your Lordship. We set off in late September with three ships and almost 700 men. The Ambassador was accompanied by his right hand man, Sir George Leonard Staunton.

*Staunton: (clears throat).* Ah, yes.... I'm a doctor of medicine and doctor of law, and a literary type, don't you know. I was in Grenada when his Lordship showed up. We met, and here I am, a sort of right hand man, I suppose. I wrote a book about our travels, which the great Hegel studied. [*To Narrators*] Carry on.

*First Narrator:* Thank you, Sir George.

*Second Narrator:* Staunton was accompanied by his twelve year old son, George Thomas. Everyone calls him Tom.

*First Narrator:* Tom served as his Lordship's page.

*Tom:* It's a lot of fun going to China. I'm learning Chinese on the trip from some really cool Chinese priests who have been living in Italy and speak Latin. My father got them to come with us. My main teacher is Mr. Plum, because his name is Li, meaning Plum. That's him over there. (*Points to Mr. Li*). He doesn't speak English, so we talk in Latin. I'm learning to write those weird characters. I'm keeping a journal of the trip and putting in all the things the grown-ups don't talk about.

*Mr. Plum:* (aside) He's a good boy. Very clever. Much smarter than his dad.

*Second Narrator:* His Lordship and Sir George spent the voyage reading up everything they could about China. When he was in Russia, Macartney met a man who had worked on border problems with the Chinese. He said the Chinese had a superiority complex. If you weren't Chinese you were a barbarian.

*Macartney:* Right. Bratschev was pretty uncomplimentary about those people. Said they were ignorant as hell. Quite right, too. They don't know a damn thing about England. Or science. Thought the earth was square and China in the middle of it. Ye gods!

*Staunton:* But it was Montesquieu who got our attention. Called China a despotic state whose principle is fear. According to him they're obsessed with ritual. Spend their time bowing and scraping. Haven't caught up with the times.

*Macartney:* We'll have to look into that, George.

*First Narrator:* And his Lordship was the man to do it.

*Historian:* In March 1793 the embassy arrived in Batavia, in the Dutch East Indies.

*Macartney:* What a hell hole!

*Staunton:* Full of dysentery...

*Tom:* And pirates!

*Historian:* The embassy lost a few men but pressed on, and arrived at Macao on June 20th with four ships.

## **Scene Two: Up the Coast to Tianjin**

*Historian:* The British embassy is now, at long last, off the coast of China. The Imperial government already knows about it, because the East India Company had sent a letter telling them that His Majesty King George would be sending an envoy.

*Third Narrator:* Thanks to our efficient postal system we heard about this embassy within five days of their arrival off the south coast.

*Fourth Narrator:* We have to explain things, or you won't know what's really going on. These red-haired barbarians from the Great West Ocean keep wanting to send envoys. Fine. They can send who they like.

*Third Narrator:* But what a bother for us. Have you ever seen anything as wild as a red-haired barbarian? Their talk sounds like dogs barking...

*Fourth Narrator:* And they haven't any idea how to behave.

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*Third Narrator:* And boy, do they smell weird.

*Fourth Narrator:* We heard from the governor of Guangdong that this red-haired king was planning to send a mission to pay tribute on the occasion of our emperor's birthday.

*Third Narrator:* They missed our emperor's 80th birthday by two years. Such ignorant people.

*Fourth Narrator:* Still, at least they understand the need to transform themselves.

*Third Narrator:* Their leader has this strange name: MA-GA-ER-NI. What a mouthful. Can you say it?

*Fourth Narrator:* Certainly. MA-GA-ER-NI(*stresses each syllable*)..

*Emperor :* (*stage center, on throne, but speaking from behind narrators*). The British ruler appears to be sincere, therefore his Tribute Mission may proceed up the coast. But since their contacts have been informal and their education limited, we must be constantly informed about their progress. Our officials must be ready to deal with them wherever they land.

*Heshen :* The local officials have been instructed to keep us fully informed.

*First Narrator:* We fobbed the locals off with some lists of gifts that made their eyes pop, then set off up the coast.

*Staunton:* I got off at some islands to look around. Found that the farmers manure their fields with—can you believe it?—human droppings.

*Second Narrator:* Oh my God!

*First Narrator:* The stench!

*Staunton:* Still, they're pretty industrious. But when we saw the bound feet on the women—oh dear, oh dear. What a preposterous practice!

*Macartney:* Come on, George. Look what we do with our women. It's a sexual fetish, old boy.

*Third Narrator: (to Fourth Narrator)* Can you beat these Europeans? Look at all the grease and powder on their hair.

*Fourth Narrator:* And all that ridiculous tight white clothing.

*Third Narrator:* They look like ghosts and demons!

*Fourth Narrator:* Maybe that's what they are.



*Macartney:* The important thing is, George, they've got nothing to compare with our ships. Can we get some pilots to take us into the Yellow sea?

*Staunton:* I'll see what I can do, Sir. But don't count on it. Their pilots are an ignorant, scurvy bunch. We may have to navigate on our own.

### **Scene Three: The Forces Converge**

*Historian:* The English embassy has made unexpectedly swift progress. Any day now they will land off Tianjin. Their tribute gifts have to be unloaded. The Imperial Chief Minister, Heshen, has appointed officials to take care of this.

*First Narrator:* Now that we're about to land, His Lordship has to give the troops their marching orders.

*Macartney:* Gentlemen, you must conduct yourselves with peculiar caution and mildness, so as to enhance the renown of the English name. If there is any misconduct, I shall consider it my duty to punish the offender—and, if need be, let Chinese justice take its course.

*First Narrator:* Chinese justice? Better watch out.

*Third Narrator:* While these ridiculous foreign devils strut around, our Imperial Court is going to great care and expense to see that they are properly treated.

*Fourth Narrator:* Our Sage Emperor himself is supervising the plans.

*Emperor: (To Heshen)* Not too much ceremony, not too little. Since the red-haired envoy is coming from afar, we must display our kindness and instruct these people appropriately to assure their sincerity. We must also find out what gifts they have sent. The envoy and his associates can be invited to a banquet or two and receive some gifts from us. Then they should be sent home.

*Heshen:* Your servant has appointed officials to supervise the task.

*Emperor:* Appoint that junior salt commissioner Zhengrui as Imperial Legate to supervise the English and instruct them in etiquette. We must ensure that they understand their place and are transformed by our virtue.

*Zhengrui:* What a dreadful assignment. These English dogs are unbelievably arrogant. They can't stop boasting about their wonderful gifts! But how could I refuse to obey our Sage Ruler? It took hours to unload their stuff and 35 junks to carry it. Now we've got to attend to their daily needs. And I have to teach them basic manners. Oh, dear, oh, dear....

*Third Narrator:* we arranged for MA-GA-ER-NI and his aides to meet with our Governor General. They were instructed to report to the Emperor at his summer retreat in Rehe (Jehol).

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*Fourth Narrator:* MA-GA-ER-NI seemed a bit upset.

*Third Narrator:* Apparently he thought he would be received in Beijing. What cheek!

*Fourth Narrator:* Our Governor General overlooked their vulgar behavior. He sent them his visiting card, then we proceeded upriver.

*First Narrator:* Yes, we're sailing up past all these hordes of people standing on the banks gawking at us.

*Second Narrator:* We've just learned that the banners on their ships are calling this a tribute mission.

*First Narrator:* Our incredible gifts tribute! His Lordship was ready to blow up.

*Macartney:* You can imagine my consternation. Of course I kept our larger goals in sight.

*Staunton:* We pretended not to notice their derogatory signs.

*Second Narrator:* But there was worse to come.

*Zhengruì: (approaching Macartney for first time, with Chinese narrators beside him)* It is our solemn duty to discuss with you the ceremony of the three kneelings and nine prostrations. *(Gets down on knees and demonstrates how to do kowtow).*

*Macartney:* I cannot and will not represent His Majesty in that manner.

*Staunton:* It's quite out of the question.

*Macartney:* Quite so.

*Zhengruì:* This is a matter of Court Etiquette and ritual integrity. This is how we all greet our Sage Emperor. We are not treating you any differently from ourselves.

*Second Narrator:* Their attitude is stiffening. They keep saying it is essential for us to do it.

*Zhengruì (turning around and speaking to Chinese narrators):* The English barbarians have no idea that they should dress up and respectfully kneel and bow to the Emperor's documents, his meals, every expression of his authority. They don't understand he's the Son of Heaven and Supreme Ruler over all subject peoples! It's a privilege to kneel before him!

*Third Narrator:* What turtles' eggs they are.

*Fourth Narrator:* They even can't eat with chopsticks.

*Zhengrui:* I am trying to teach them as best I can. I've reported to the Emperor that they are deeply ashamed of their loutish behavior and are practicing the kneelings and prostrations—well, sort of.

*Fourth Narrator:* The Chief Minister said they wouldn't get an audience till they did it.

*Third Narrator:* Up to now MA-GA-ER-NI merely takes off his hat. What a stiff!

*Fourth Narrator:* Maybe his knees don't bend. These far off people have all kinds of handicaps.

*Zhengrui:* If he goes on like that, I'm in big trouble. What on earth am I going to do? (*Wrings his hands*).

*Historian:* Chinese orderlies have unloaded all the English goods from ships onto caravans and escorted them to the Northern Capital, Beijing. The English are being treated with great kindness and entertained with numerous banquets.

*Third Narrator:* Yup. It's spectacular.

*Fourth Narrator:* People pressing all around, just stupefied at the sight of all these foreign devils.

*Third Narrator:* You should've seen them eating. What a hoot.

*Fourth Narrator:* We laughed till our sides split.

*Both Narrators:* Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha.

*First Narrator:* Where the hell do all these Chinese people come from? You can't get away from them.

*Second Narrator:* No privacy. Have you ever had 100 people watch you swallow every bite?

*Tom: (to Mr Plum)* Isn't it fun eating with chopsticks! Do you eat like that in Rome?

*Mr Plum:* No, lad. In Rome we do as the Romans do.

*Macartney:* Chopsticks are an invention of the devil.

*Tom:* Papa. Papa. When are we going to see the Emperor?

*Mr. Plum:* Hush, boy. Your father's busy with his memoirs.

*Staunton: (writing in diary)* Hm..., ah, yes. We observed the agricultural practices, and the labor required of peasant women. Notwithstanding their merit, the husbands arrogate an extraordinary dominion over them....

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*Macartney:* And the mandarins are trying to do the same with us, George. More of their foppish court ceremonial. They can't seem to get it that we have our proprieties too. English dignity is at stake! They may rule the land, but we rule the seas. I'll have to write a letter.

### Scene Four: Final Preparations

*Historian:* After the embassy arrived in Beijing, it was time to unpack the gifts. The English technicians began the laborious task of assembling the planetarium.

*First Narrator:* It took the poor devils 18 days.

*Staunton:* Since their notions of astronomy are quite antiquated, we're hoping that our scientific equipment will help to get them up-to-date.

*Second Narrator:* Meanwhile His Lordship wrote a letter.

*Macartney:* I informed the officials that I would perform the kneeling ceremonies to their Emperor if a Chinese official of my seniority did the same to a picture of His Majesty. That'll cook their goose, don't you think?

*Tom:* It had to be translated from English to Latin to Chinese to Court Chinese. I wrote out the characters, because nobody else dared to. Mr. Plum thought it was pretty cock-eyed. Said we just didn't understand what the ceremonies were all about.

*Mr. Plum:* (*looking perturbed, and whispering*) Be careful, lad. Things are not looking too good. Deus vobiscum, per Christum Dominum nostrum.

*Historian* Meanwhile, in Rehe, distrust is growing.

*Emperor:* (*to Heshen*) The English envoy is vain and pretentious. He is not to be trusted. Zhengrui has misinformed us. His ideas are a muddle. He is contemptible and ridiculous.

*Heshen:* (*reassuring*) Your servant has informed the responsible officials that they are unworthy and odious. Should we proceed with this business?

*Emperor:* Yes. Let the English delegates come, then send them away, quickly.

\*\*\*\*\*(*brief pause*)\*\*\*\*\*

*Historian:* It is ten days later. The Barbarian mission has arrived at Rehe.

*Zhengrui:* MA-GA-ER-NI pretended to be indisposed, so SI-TAN-TON presented their letters to our Chief Minister. More evidence of their fickle behavior.

*Heshen: (to Emperor)* The English object to our court ritual. It is said that their leg clothes are too tight to enable them to kneel down and bow their heads.

*Emperor: (angry)* The ignorant fools! Let them kneel and bow once. Reduce their supplies, and degrade that idiot Zhengrui.

*Zhengrui: (aside)* Of course. I get blamed for everything. As if I started this mess! What's a man to do with ignorant barbarians? *(shakes his head)*.

*Heshen:* Your servant has learned that they greet their king by kneeling on one knee and kissing his hand.

*Emperor: (startled)* Kissing? How revolting. Let them kneel on one knee. But no kissing! *(shudders)*.

*Heshen:* Their boorish behavior must not be allowed to disrupt our ceremonies.

*Emperor:* Let it be recorded that they were respectful but ignorant. Send them away as soon as the birthday ceremonies are completed.

## Scene Five: The Climax

*Second Narrator:* It's three o'clock in the morning and pitch dark. And now we must leave for the Emperor's court.

*First Narrator:* I've already tripped over a bunch of bloody pigs and dogs. I got my breeches torn.

*Second Narrator:* Now we have to wait three hours till the Emperor's cortege arrives.

*Tom:* Oh, look! Here he comes! Everybody's kneeling and prostrating themselves. Mr Plum! What *are* you doing?

*Mr Plum:* Just do as you're told, lad. Kneel and bow your head a bit.

*Tom:* We knelt and bowed our heads a bit.

*Second Narrator:* The Emperor went in to his tent. Then we approached.

*Fourth Narrator:* When MA-GA-ER-NI ascended the platform to the throne and saw the Son of Heaven, his legs trembled so much that he fell flat on his face.

*Third Narrator:* Clumsy oaf! Still, he prostrated himself.

*Fourth Narrator:* That's for sure. It's in our records. *(As narrators report this scenario, Macartney approaches the Emperor, kneels down and clumsily prostrates his head three times. Then he proffers a jeweled box with the king's letter inside it. An attendant steps forward and*

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*takes the box. Then Macartney returns humbly to his place, never turning his back on the Emperor).*

*Third Narrator:* Naturally we made sure he didn't talk directly to our Sage Emperor or hand Him anything in person.

*Fourth Narrator:* That would have been a breach of protocol. It would have upset everything.

*Tom:* It was actually like this. Lord Macartney, my father, Mr. Plum, and I went to the edge of the platform. Lord Macartney climbed up, kneeled on one knee before the Emperor, presented His Majesty's letter in the jeweled box and some small presents, then came down. *(As Tom speaks, Macartney, Staunton, Mr Li and Tom mimic this scenario)*

*Tom:* Then my papa and I go up and make the ceremony.

*Staunton:* The Emperor invites the Ambassador's page up to his throne and desires him to speak Chinese. Then he takes from his girdle a purse and presents it to him. Quite an honor for the lad, don't you think? *(Tom and Emperor mimic this action)*

*First Narrator:* From what I hear, more likely a little bit of you know what!

*Second Narrator:* Eighty two years old, and still a randy old geezer!

*Macartney:* George, do you see those ambassadors from Pegu and the Kalmucks? Their appearance is not very splendid, is it.

*Staunton:* No, Sir. Strange company, if you ask me.

*First Narrator:* A banquet followed for all the high-ups. Then we were escorted back to our residence. And that was that.

*Macartney:* I was, to be sure, shown around the Imperial domain.

*Staunton:* It appears, Sir, that the Emperor already possesses many fine European artifacts.

*Macartney:* Yes. I fear, George, that the Emperor may not think so much of our presents after all.

*Staunton:* And our impressions of his Court are not too flattering, are they.

*Macartney:* Well, you have to admire the organization and the numbers. But I think they're distinctly frayed around the edges.

*First Narrator:* We encountered the Emperor one more time, at an entertainment.

*Second Narrator:* Technically it was twice. At the first, gifts were exchanged, the usual stuff. All pure formality.

*First Narrator:* Oh, yes. At the second we got up as usual at 3:00, waited for hours with all the Court, then knelt as the Emperor went by.

*Second Narrator:* Now it's back to Beijing. His Lordship looks pretty grim!

## Scene Six: Departure

*Historian:* Back in Beijing Lord Macartney attempted to explain to the Chief Minister the purposes of his mission. But the response, while polite, was unenthusiastic.

*He Shen:* MA-GA-ER-NI has been assailing me with his useless ideas. I had to find ways to divert his chatter.

*Zhengru:* Excellent, excellent. Can we tell him it's time to leave?

*He Shen:* Yes. Since we have presented our Imperial rescript, there is now nothing left for him to do but depart.

*Emperor:* I explained, as graciously as possible, that it was nice of these English subjects to bring their tribute, but we didn't actually need any of it. As for their proposals, these were simply out of order and could not be countenanced. Now we order them to return safely home.

*Mr Plum:* The Emperor thanks you all for coming and wishes you bon voyage.

*First Narrator:* That's what he says! The fact is, the condescending old dodo has really let us have it.

*Tom:* The Court missionaries toned down the translation, so that his Lordship wouldn't get too angry.

*Macartney:* So the matter is now settled. Dammit. How frustrating. But we can't give up.

*First Narrator:* (*aside, with hand to mouth*) Can't we? We enter Beijing like paupers. We remain like prisoners. We quit like vagrants. I say let's go home.

*Macartney:* On the way south I will discuss our concerns with the Imperial viceroys accompanying us. Some of them seem to take an interest. Perhaps we may achieve something after all.

*Mr. Plum:* (*to audience*) I know better. They'll just humor the old boy. I've seen it all before.

*Fourth Narrator:* We must escort them back to Canton, making sure that none of them disobey our commands.

*Zhengru:* The route will be lined with military, to make sure they stay in line.

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*Third Narrator:* Then they set sail from Canton and that'll be that.

*Fourth Narrator:* Unless, of course, they return with more tribute.

*Zhengrui:* Heaven forbid.

## Afterwords

*First Narrator:* The news of our embassy's churlish treatment caused some inconvenience to his Lordship on our return to England.

*Second Narrator:* But after their accounts were published, European people began to realize the problems of dealing with China. Praise gave way to disparagement.

*First Narrator:* And anger. They couldn't go on treating our embassies like that. For one thing, their navy was a joke. We could blow them sky high—and when the war came we did!

*Staunton::* But what was worse, they were way behind the times and didn't know it.

*Second Narrator:* The day would come when they would find out.

*Tom:* How ironic that it came because of the opium trade.

*Fourth Narrator: (musing)* After they went to war with us, the British foreigners got everything that MA-GA-ER-NI asked for, and more. And for 150 years they kept it all.

*Third Narrator:* We had to be very patient.

*Fourth Narrator:* But we didn't forget. And now it's a new era.

*Third Narrator:* No more foreigners to boss us around.

*Fourth Narrator:* We've got the world's fastest growing economy,

*Third Narrator:* The world's biggest army,

*Fourth Narrator:* The world's best cuisine,

*Third Narrator:* The smartest businessmen.

*Fourth Narrator:* And Hong Kong and Macau are back in our hands.

*Both Narrators:* We get the last laugh! Ha-ha-ha!

\*\*\*The End\*\*\*



Data and some verbatim lines from the study by Peyrefitte, with some adjustment to the analysis by Hevia. (For references, see study notes)

Note on pronunciation of Chinese names:

There are no foolproof rules for getting these names right, but it will help the play to get them somewhat right. "Q" in the Chinese pinyin system is pronounced like a very syllant "ch". Thus Qing becomes something like "tching", and Qianlong becomes something like "tchienlung". "Zh" has the same sound as English "J" (*not* French J), thus Zhengrui should be pronounced something like "Jerngruey". Heshen is easier. Pronounce "He" as in english "Per" or "Her" but without 'r' sound, and "shen" as in "Attention!" Thus, "Hershen". Tones are another matter. If you have a Chinese language teacher in your school, ask for help!