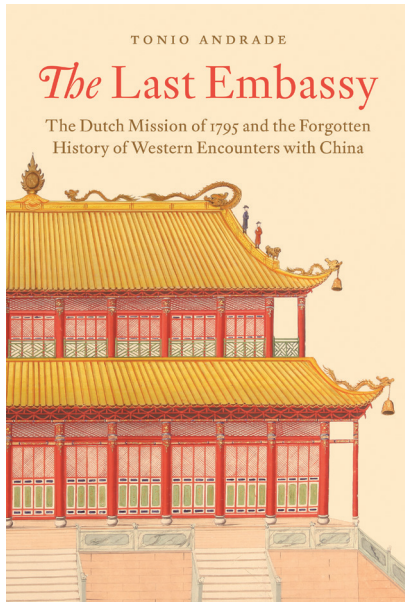


Review

Tonio Andrade, *The Dutch Mission of 1795 and the Forgotten History of Western Encounters with China*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2021, 424 pp. ISBN 9780691177113.



In 1795, the two Dutchmen Isaac Titsingh and Andreas van Braam Houckgeest travelled to the imperial court in Beijing, with their translator Chrétien-Louis-Joseph de Guignes in tow. They undertook this long and arduous journey to congratulate the Qianlong Emperor with his diamond jubilee after he had spent sixty years as the head of the Qing dynasty. At the end of the eighteenth century, China was a prosperous and powerful empire and an important trading partner of Europe. Yet various European countries were looking to increase trade with the Celestial Empire even further, and to this end the British had sent an embassy in 1793 led by George Macartney. However, this mission failed in almost all its objectives, largely because the British had a reputation in China as an aggressive people that could not be trusted.

While the current historical debate is in large part shaped by this failed 1793 mission, with Macartney's famous refusal to kowtow as an overstated but vivid example, not all European encounters with China have been equally disastrous, as Tonio Andrade demonstrates in his account of the Dutch 1795 mission. Due to their respect for Chinese customs and ceremony, Titsingh and Van Braam won over the Qianlong Emperor, who showered them with favours and gifts. Tonio Andrade describes Titsingh, Van Braam, and Guignes's harsh journey overland from Guangzhou (Canton) to Beijing in the dead of winter, the royal reception upon their arrival in the Forbidden City, and their visit to the Old Summer Palace (Yuanmingyuan), which Europeans only rarely had access to. As a specialist of Chinese and global history – he previously published monographs on the early modern Dutch, Spanish, and Chinese colonization of Taiwan; the Sino-Dutch war of 1661-1668; and gunpowder's revolutionary impact on China's role in global history – Andrade deftly lays bare the richly documented but little-known Dutch embassy to the Qing court of the

Qianlong Emperor, emphasizing the commonalities and connections between these two vastly different cultures.

The Last Embassy builds on an impressive wealth of previously neglected materials, in a variety of languages, including Chinese, Dutch, English, French, and Spanish, but Korean as well. Taken together, these sources paint a lively picture of the Dutch mission, in which its characters come to life as if they were inhabiting a novel. The Koreans, for example, note how oddly the Westerners dress: ‘They don’t braid their hair or put it up in a bun but rather just tie it crookedly behind the head with strips of satin. They wear black felt hats shaped like lotus leaves, with strange white feathers. [...] They also wear tight shirts and pants, which restrict their movement, so they’re unable to bend their four limbs’ (136). Moreover, through this multilingual lens, Andrade lays bare how different people – both in Europe and Asia – viewed the arrival of a group of Dutch ambassadors in China, presenting a refined understanding of Sino-Dutch relations at the end of the eighteenth century.

With his account of the Dutch embassy, Andrade wants to nuance the traditional view that Sino-Western diplomatic relations by the end of the eighteenth century and within view of the Opium wars (1839-1860) had turned into a clash of cultures. As he acknowledges, the British encounter with China was ultimately a clash, yet the historical view has been skewed by the fact that the literature on Sino-European relations is – and was – dominated by the British experience (4). This situation has not only to do with the fact that the British misrepresented and misconstrued the accomplishments of the Dutch mission in light of their own failures two years earlier, but also with those strange coincidences of history. For one, Titsingh and Van Braam returned to a different country: in early 1795 the Batavian Republic was proclaimed, but when they left it was still the Dutch Republic. This change meant that the Dutch were now at war with Great Britain, who began seizing Dutch ships and territories, which left the emissaries in China with little funds to even buy daily supplies. Moreover, the Dutch East India Company itself was soon abolished and few publishers in Europe would consider making the Dutch embassy of 1795 a big publication project. At the same time China was overrun by rebels, while the Qianlong Emperor, who had been so welcoming to the Dutch, gave up the throne to his son, whose main concern was restoring order. Therefore, as Andrade succinctly sums up: ‘We’ll never know if the mission would have helped improve trading conditions in the long run, because there was no long run’ (298).

As a result, it took until 2021 to bring about what Titsingh, Van Braam, and Guignes’s accounts of their journey had tried to achieve in 1795: to present a nonjudgmental view of Dutch interactions with Chinese imperial officials, the receptions they received in Beijing, the parties, temple tours, and visits to the emperor’s own living quarters to a broad readership. Andrade does so by offering an ‘immersive narrative’ of the mission, writing in the present tense to ‘provide a sense of immediacy and intimacy’ (7). He thus carries on the legacy of his mentor and PhD supervisor, the sinologist Jonathan Spence († 2021), who often took the narrative as a point of departure. Andrade succeeds brilliantly, presenting a rich and thought-provoking account ‘full of encounters’ and ‘glimpses of humans’ (9). His easily accessible style of writing, combined with his focus on human interactions and experiences, makes *The Last Embassy* a book for both academics and the general public,

be they interested in Sino-Western diplomatic relations, the history of travel, intercultural encounters, or simply want to immerse themselves in the fates and fortunes of a group of western Europeans first encountering the bewildering splendour of the Chinese imperial court.

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