TEA AND OPIUM:
SOME FURTHER NOTES ON MACARTNEY'S ROLE

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Macartney's audience with the Emperor Qianlong recorded in the journal which the former wrote actually took place on 14th September 1793 (not on the 30th) at Jehol (Chengde) which is now about five hours journey by 'bus from Beijing. It took the Embassy six days. Macartney himself travelled in a *post chaise* which he had taken to China especially to ride about in, 'drawn by four little Tartar ponies.' His cavalcade amounted to seventy people of which forty composed the guard. He says that about two hundred porters were required to carry their baggage.

The great circular yurt where the audience subsequently took place is described in the journal as follows:

*The Emperor’s tented pavilion which is circular I should calculate to be about twenty or twenty five yards in diameter and is supported by a number of pillars, either gilded or damasked according to their disposition....*

Macartney then gives a colourful account of the audience.

*He was seated in an open palanquin carried by sixteen bearers attended by numbers of officers bearing flags, standards and umbrellas, and as he passed we paid him our compliments by kneeling on one knee, whilst all the Chinese made their usual prostrations. As soon as he had ascended his throne I came to the entrance of the tent, and, holding in both my hands a large box enriched with diamonds in which was enclosed the King’s letter, I walked deliberately up, and ascending the sidesteps of the throne, delivered it into the Emperor’s own hands, who, having received it, passed it on to the Minister, by whom it was placed on the cushion. He then gave me as the first present from him to his Majesty the ju-eu-jou or giou-giou (a white jade sceptre) as the symbol of peace and prosperity, and expressed his hopes that my Sovereign
and he should always live in good correspondence and amity. It is a whitish, agate-looking stone about a foot and a half long, curiously carved and highly prized by the Chinese, but to me it does not appear to be of any great value....

The Emperor then presented me with a ju-eu-jou of greenish-coloured stone of the same emblematic character; at the same time he very graciously received from me a pair of beautiful enamelled watches set with diamonds, which I had prepared in consequence of the information given me, and which, having looked at, he passed to the Minister.

After delivering the King’s letter there followed a sumptuous banquet at which the Emperor sent Macartney and Sir George Staunton several dishes from his table and after an interval, he, the Emperor, sent for Macartney and Sir George and gave them each a cup of warm wince to drink in his presence. Members of the party then spent the whole of the week sightseeing in Jehol, visiting the Potala, attending an opera and going to the Emperor’s birthday party:

The Emperor did not show himself, but remained concealed behind a screen, from whence, I presume, he could see and enjoy the ceremonies without inconvenience or interruption. All eyes were turned towards the place where His Majesty was imagined to be enthroned, and seemed to express an impatience to begin the devotions of the day. Slow, solemn music, muffled drums, and deep-toned bells were heard at a distance. On a sudden the sound ceased and all was still; again it was renewed and then intermitted with short pauses, during which several persons passed backwards and forwards, in the proscenium or foreground of the tent, as if engaged in preparing some grand coup de théâtre.

At length the great band both vocal and instrumental struck up with all their powers of harmony, and instantly the whole Court fell flat upon their faces before this invisible Nebuchadnezzar.
There was plenty of time apart from these formal occasions to look around Jehol. Macartney is full of admiration for the parks and countryside. He describes the West Park in the following words:

It is one of the finest forest scenes in the world, wild, woody, mountainous and rocky, abounding with stags and deer of different species, and most of the other beasts of chase not dangerous to man. In many places immense woods, chiefly oaks, pines and chestnuts grow upon perpendicular steeps and force their sturdy roots through every resistance of surface, and of soil, where vegetation would seem almost impossible. These woods often clamber over the loftiest pinnacles of the stony hills, or gathering on the skirts of them, descend with a rapid sweep, and bury themselves in the deepest valleys. There, at proper distances, you find palaces, banqueting houses and monasteries (but without bonzes) adapted to the situation and peculiar circumstances of the place, sometimes with a rivulet on one hand gentling stealing through the glade, at others with a cataract rumbling from above, raging with foam, and rebounding with a thousand echoes from below or silently engulfed in a gloomy pool or yawning chasm. The roads by which we approached these romantic scenes are often hewn out of the living rock, and conducted round the hills in a kind of rugged staircase and yet no accident occurred in our progress, not a false step disturbed the regularity of our cavalcade, though the horses are spirited, and all of them unshod.

Although Lord Macartney was unable to establish a close rapport with the first Minister who accompanied them, the journal, nevertheless paints a picture of them having an enjoyable and interesting time, in contrast to the usual descriptions of the visit which concentrate on the refusal to perform the kowtow and instead to go down on bended knee, an alternative which, after some discussion, was accepted amicably when it was agreed that it was sufficient to go down on one knee, but not to kiss hands.

Finally the Embassy party left for ‘Pekin’ on 20th September and arrived on the 26th after an arduous journey, Macartney himself being
considerably out of sorts and suffering from gout. During the journey Jeremy Reid, one of the guards belonging to the Royal Regiment of Artillery, died:

His disorder was occasioned by a surfeit of fruits, the man having eaten no less than forty apples at breakfast!

On reaching ‘Pekin’ Macartney received letters informing him that Lion and other ships were leaving Chusan and that only Hindostan was remaining (Chusan being an island in the bay between Shanghai and Hangzhou, which was preferred, over Hong Kong, as a base by the British Government). Hearing that the ships had left Chusan upset the Chinese officials who wished, now the visit was over, for the Embassy to leave the coast of China as soon as possible, the limit of forty days prescribed for visits from without the Kingdom having been reached. Because of this the Embassy was then more or less directed to start on their return journey and left ‘Pekin’ on 7th October 1793 for Chusan travelling down the Grand Canal from Tientsin to Hangzhou. In Tientsin they were treated to a sumptuous banquet:

...excellent mutton, pork, venison and poultry of all kinds, fruits in great variety - peaches, plums, apples, pears, grapes, chestnuts and walnuts and several others new to them.

The journal describes in some detail the construction and working of the system of sluices on the Grand Canal. These were unlike the locks on British canals but consisted of a single sluice which was raised by windlass, in fairly flat country, through which the boats were hauled when the sluice was raised.

At Hangzhou it was confirmed that Lion and the other ships had left for Canton being urgently in need of medicine for the men on board. Hindostan was quite incapable of accommodating the entourage and all its heavy baggage and it was agreed, as though it was simply a matter of course, that the party would continue the long journey by river and with some trekking overland on ponies between the north and south flowing rivers, and so to make their way to Canton. They left Hangzhou on ponies on 14th November and reached Canton on 19th December. This was an extraordinary and intrepid journey. Macartney’s
descriptions of it paint a vivid picture in inland China, of towns, villages, farming and husbandry at the end of the eighteenth century and put life to the many pictures and engravings of that period.

It was on this inland journey that Macartney was able collect his tea plants. He says in his own words:

_I must not omit that the Viceroy (they had been joined by the Viceroy from Canton) observing our curiosity about everything relative to natural history, allowed us to collect seeds and fossils as we came along, and to take up several tea plants in a growing state with large balls of earth adhering to them, which tea plants I flatter myself I shall be able to transmit to Bengal, where I have no doubt that by the spirit of patriotism of its Government an effective cultivation of this valuable shrub will be undertaken and pursued with success._

No doubt the hard balls of earth were wrapped in the same casings of matting in which plants arrive from China to this day.

So far as opium is concerned, rather oddly, I cannot find that it came up in conversation at all although by then the illicit trade was well established and its use had been banned by Imperial edict some sixty years before.

Dr. Dinwiddie, who had accompanied the Embassy to 'Pekin,' took the plants to India on Jackall, together with tallow and varnish plants as well as some silkworm eggs, all of which were delivered to Dr. Roxburgh, superintendent of the East India Company’s botanical gardens in Calcutta. Some years later indigenous tea plants were discovered growing in Assam and it is tea from these which seems more like the tea that we are now accustomed to drink. Whether there was any hybridisation between the two species I cannot say. Certainly Chinese tea retains its distinctive characteristics.

The journal of the Embassy's adventures in China is a fascinating and extraordinarily detailed account and description of a way of life and scenery which has largely disappeared. Present day Chengde is a shadow of the Jehol described by McCartney with pagodas, temples
and pavilions at every turn. Now the summer residence of the Emperor consists of a series of grey-roofed and grey-walled pavilions connected by roofed corridors reaching down to the same willow-fringed lake seen by Macartney. In one of its chambers, on a brass plaque, is the following admonitory message for visitors: NOT FORGETTING THE NATIONAL HUMILIATION THE EMPEROR SIGNED THE BEIJING TREATY HERE ON OCTOBER 28 1860 (15TH September by the Lunar Calendar). It was in the West Warm Chamber that the Emperor was forced to sign the Beijing Treaty with Britain, France and Russia which ceded Kowloon to Britain.

At various places in his journal Macartney refers to differences arising between Manchu and Chinese officials and predicts the eventual demise of a regime which was observing the status quo and terrified of the change which foreigners would bring. The attitude to his Embassy by various officials and, indeed, the Emperor is therefore a mixture of showing the Embassy every courtesy commensurate with not letting good manners develop in friendly and warm relations. Not to let the British to presume too much.

REFERENCE


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