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Tools of Measurement for European Travelers – George Staunton’s *An Authentic Account of an Embassy from the King of Great Britain to the Emperor of China* (1797)

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The embassy from the king of Great Britain to the Chinese emperor (1797)

On the 26th of September 1792 Lord George Macartney (1737-1806) and an embassy of around 700 people set sail from England to Canton in China for a journey that would take more than two years and that would bring back the most influential account on China that Europe will get for years to come; an account that will for a long time determine the European’s perception of China and its people. On order of King George III of Great Britain, Macartney and his legation were sent as diplomats, given the task to reduce trading restrictions imposed by Emperor Qianlong of China between the two empires and to ask permission to the emperor to establish a permanent embassy in Beijing. In order to give good impression to the emperor, Macartney brought along his embassy basically all the riches of Western cultures, to show off their advances in any kind of arts and sciences, be it

Western technology or medicine or music. Those advances, especially those in science and technology, were strictly linked to the European and modern belief in progress. However, when the embassy returned to England in 1794 they brought back no diplomatic success. What they brought back was a great amount of information on China, observations made and written down by many of the crew. All these accounts are later edited and compiled by the embassy's second in command, Sir George Staunton (1737-1801) and were published as *An authentic account of an embassy from the King of Great Britain to the emperor of China; including cursory observations made, and Information obtained, in travelling through that ancient Empire and a small part of Chinese Tartary in 1797.*

As of today, this book serves as a brilliant example in many disciplines and fields of study, such as the study of Sino-European relations, the study of Western dominance, colonialism, Sinology and anthropology. Furthermore, it also serves as a brilliant example of the study of science and technology in the Age of Enlightenment. Staunton's book quickly achieved great popularity and has had – since its release – a great influence on Europe's perspective on China and its people. In that sense it is nowadays a historically highly significant source, understating the failure of the embassy's primary objectives. For a long time the failure was thought to be found in the minor incident that marked Lord Macartney's refusal to kowtow (a demonstration of respect by kneeling down on the floor) in front of the Chinese emperor. In 1792, during the time when Enlightenment ideals culminated, Europeans viewed other civilizations with a deterministic and linear attitude, believing that if a civilization is different to 'ours', it is merely because it is at a different stage in its development (usually less developed), devaluing the possibility of two extremely and fundamentally different, incompatible cultures that made negotiations difficult; a more modern and relativistic approach to the failure of the embassy. For French politician and scholar Alain Peyrefitte (1925 – 1999) for example the embassy was highlighted by the vast extent of differences between the British and the Chinese civilizations:

“The encounter of 1793 was truly a collision of planets. This was not a case of explorers arriving in a land of head-hunting savages, but the mutual discovery of two refined yet incompatible cultures, one celestial and lunar; the other with its feet firmly on the ground – mercantile, scientific and industrial.” (Peyrefitte, 1993, p. 1).

Today the Macartney mission and the account of it written down by George Staunton is being widely regarded as a milestone in the way how the west viewed China and its people. However, such a travel report did not necessarily give an 'objective' account on another country or culture. Therefore it is important to consider the mindset of the

travelers. The Europeans had specific knowledge about China already prior to their departure and especially what they believed to know about the attitude of the Chinese towards science and technology was important. The travelers of the embassy *othered* the Chinese, based on assumptions made by Enlightenment thinkers and philosophers who wrote extensively about China. This chapter will analyze the way that the Europeans *othered* the Chinese in that context.

Two hundred years after the embassy, in 1992, the *British Association for Chinese Studies* presented several papers on the Macartney embassy. While the travel account has been object of studies in many different fields and papers from many disciplines were presented, none of them focuses on the underlying agenda of the Europeans; that is their approach towards science and technology. The embassy is correctly considered a collision of fundamentally different civilizations and ideologies. However, the question of in how far the approach towards science, technology and the relation that they share towards progress is responsible for this collision remains unanswered. In fact many science and technology studies focused on the advances of the sciences within a culture; the attitude of a culture towards science in general was on the other hand rarely an object of study.

This chapter will in its first half introduce the two volumes, written down by Staunton. It will describe the setting and background of the embassy itself and then later elaborate on the author and the ambassador. After, the chapter focuses on the time of the writing, the production and the publications of the volumes, to conclude the first half of the chapter with a brief summary of the content of the volumes. The second half of this chapter then will primarily focus on how China and its people are represented in the travel account, based on the Enlightenment background of the Europeans. I will put the *representation of the other* in the scope that the European (enlightened) approach towards science and technology sees China as an unprogressive entity, due to their, in the European sense, primitive approach towards science and technology.

The context, background and setting of the travel

The 1792 embassy around Lord George Macartney was the first official embassy from Great Britain to China and can therefore be seen as the starting point of a complicated and violent history. “In the proper spirit of a commercial nation” (Staunton, 1797, Vol. 1, p. 1). Macartney’s attempts were of economic and political nature, as they were trying to ease the trade regulations for the British Empire with the Chinese and to reduce taxes for British traders. Moreover, they were sent to ask permission from Emperor Qianlong

to establish a permanent British embassy in Beijing and to possess a small island near *Chusan*, in order to establish a British harbor that would allow residence for British traders and to stock cargos, as well as to equip ships with goods; similar to Macau for the Portuguese. For the British, back then a nation of eight million, this would on the one hand enormously help to establish themselves as the most powerful nation on the globe. On the other hand it was also an attempt to manifest the Kingdom of Great Britain's imperial powers, since King George had to cede his American colonies to George Washington only a few years earlier and was now eager to establish new colonies in Asia. The Chinese empire however was comprised of roughly 330 million; far bigger and far more ancient than the British Kingdom and Europeans shared a great curiosity for it, as they regarded it as the only other civilization that was on a similar developmental point as their own. For that reason Europeans were not only interested in the economic potential of China, as the embassy might imply, but China in general, as it served as a great example for the study of culture and society, science and politics, but also as a source for myths and romanticism. Its culture and society, was on everyone's lips. There was a widespread interest in China and at the time of departure Europeans have had already a specific image of China, based on earlier travel reports particularly by the Jesuits.

During the Enlightenment that image became a rather rational one, understating the mythical accounts that were made earlier, and later in reaction to the Enlightenment. Intellectuals, most notably the *philosophes*, picked up China as a select topic and, even though they themselves have never visited China, they further popularized it. With a deterministic attitude Enlightenment philosophers searched for major differences and similarities between the two cultures and while they were generally favorable of Chinese philosophy. They saw China as an unprogressive Entity, an Immobile Empire, with primitive sciences and technologies. In 1792 Enlightenment ideals culminated in Europe and were brought along on travels over the world, not necessarily impacting other cultures, but definitively impacting the European's perception of other cultures. While Macartney and Staunton were both highly influenced by Enlightenment thinking in general and especially on China, the Macartney embassy was under no circumstances in its objectives one that tried to spread European enlightened ideals across the globe. It was therefore neither a successor of travels with religious motives (like travels from the Jesuits), nor of travels that had a purely scientific background. It was in its core, in its intentions, purely economic and political. However, Staunton's travel account sheds light on many aspects of China and goes far beyond only economic and political observations. While probably unintentional, the Enlightenment background is not always invisible in the writing of the account and the observations made in China, shelter a distinctly European mindset, 'enlightened' and

deterministic towards science and technology in relation to progress.

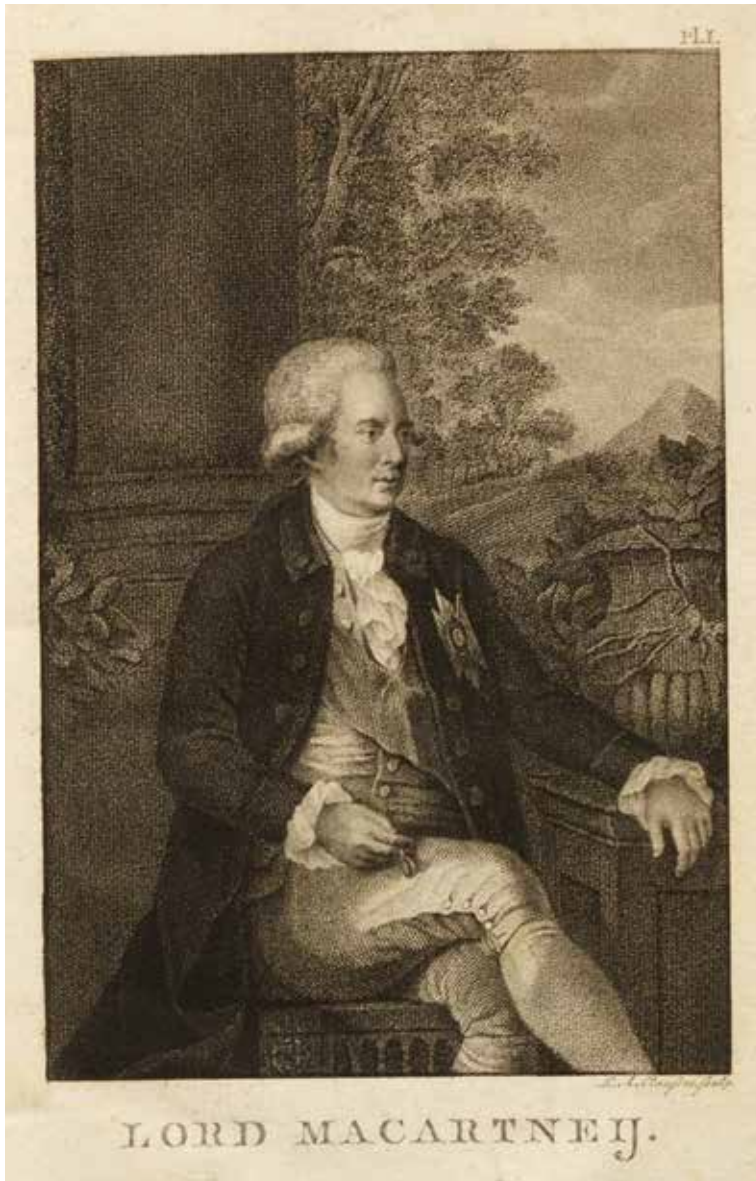
The embassy set out of Portsmouth in the end of September 1792 with three ships and a 700 men crew. Among them were, apart from many sailors, men in position and “scions of the British aristocracy” (Peyrefitte, 1993, p. 3). The embassy was not only comprised of diplomats, physicians and technicians, scholars and scientists, but also of painters and musicians; these men were supposed to give the Chinese emperor a good picture of the British’s endowment in the arts and sciences.¹ Most notably were, apart from Staunton and Macartney themselves, Sir Erasmus Gower, the Chief commander of the voyage and chief captain of the three ships, as well as William Alexander, a painter, engraver and illustrator, who is responsible for most illustrations of the account.

George Staunton & Lord Macartney

Sir George Leonard Staunton, 1st Baronet was the deputy of the embassy and second in command to Lord Macartney. Staunton was born in 1737 in Ireland and after his education at the Jesuit College in Toulouse he was trained as a physician in Montpellier. This profession he initially practiced in the British West Indies in the Caribbean, but soon shifted towards law and became Attorney General and secretary to governor Macartney in Grenada. Later he received a doctorate of Civil Law from Oxford University. It was in the West Indies when Staunton first met and befriended Lord George Macartney and from then on he accompanied his friend on several of his travels, among others to Madras, India, in order to negotiate peace with the Mysore Kingdom and of course to China in 1792. Staunton had a son, George Thomas Staunton (1781 – 1859) who also took part in the embassy and who would in his later life also become a traveler and diplomat to the British crown. In a later embassy to China, now ruled by Qianlong’s son and successor Jiaqing, Thomas Staunton succeeded his father as deputy and second in command. Both father and son were employees of the British East India Company. While his son published quite some books in the nineteenth century on China, Leonard Staunton merely published this one book on the Macartney embassy. He died in 1801 in London. Whereas George Staunton was the author of the travel account, he quoted extensively from the ambassador himself and he drew a lot of information from Macartney’s observations. Therefore, it is important that he will be introduced too. Lord George 1st Earl Macartney was born in Ireland on the

¹ Very notable publication on the role of music: Lindorff, J. (2012). *Burney, Macartney and the Qianlong Emperor: the role of music in the British embassy to China, 1792 – 1794*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

14th of May 1737, as a descendant of an old Scottish family. He received his education first at the Trinity College in Dublin and later at the Inns of Court in London. After this he was sent as an envoy to Saint Petersburg to negotiate an alliance between Great Britain and Russia, which he successfully accomplished. Later, Macartney became Chief Secretary of Ireland, for which he was knighted. Macartney was as a governor and an ambassador in different British colonies and other places a good representative of the ubiquity of the powerful British Empire. He became governor of the British West Indies in 1775 and of Madras in 1781 and it was under his command that Madras flourished as it did not before. Macartney was an important figure in the colonial history of India, as it was he who negotiated a peace treaty between the British East India Company and the Kingdom of Mysore in today's south India. In the 1790's Macartney was appointed first ambassador to China by King George III. He was later also held responsible for the failure of the embassy, for his 'national pride' did not allow him to kowtow. However, that this actually led to the failure is now regarded as a myth. After the return from China, Macartney was once again appointed governor, this time of the new British Cape colony, today's South Africa. He died in England in 1806.



Source: Staunton, G.L. (1798-1801). *Reis van Macartney, naar China / door George Staunton; uit het Engelsch; met plaaten en kaarten*. Vol. 1-7. Te Amsterdam: bij Johannes Allart. Vol. 1.

The writing, production and publication

An authentic account of an embassy from the King of Great Britain to the emperor of China was written and edited by George Staunton in the years after the return of the embassy. In doing this, Staunton drew heavily on the notes and papers written by himself and most notably by George Macartney and by Sir Erasmus Gower. But also “other gentlemen in the several departments of the embassy” were quoted in this official account, including young Thomas Staunton’s diary. In 1797 Staunton’s account was finally printed by William Bulmer and published by George Nicol, the official bookseller to King George III, that which undermines the high political and official character of the Macartney embassy. Nicol was also famous for publishing other travel literature, such as James Cook’s third journey to the American pacific, as well as many accounts, reports and catalogues of the East India Company. The official account of the Macartney embassy was first published in English, consisting of three volumes, while the third volume was a large folio atlas with plates, maps and charts; engravings selected and arranged by famous English botanist Joseph Banks, who did not accompany the embassy, but relied primarily on the paintings of William Alexander. Also in 1797 Bulmer and Nicol published a four-volume version of the account, while this time three volumes contained text and the fourth is the folio atlas. References in this chapter however refer to the three-volume edition. Besides that, the Maastricht University Library accommodates a later Dutch translation of the account, published in seven volumes (the illustrations in the Dutch version are in between the text) from 1798 until 1801 by Johannes Allart in Amsterdam. In 1800 a German translation was published by Baude und Spener in Berlin, in three volumes. Those are held in a quite small format (12 cm) and unfortunately do not leave much space for illustrations. The Maastricht University library is in possession of only the third Volume. In 1798 a French version of five Volumes was published by F. Buisson in Paris. The German version is the only version that acknowledges and admits that it is freely translated from the English original and that it is in that sense possibly quite different to it. I also found some major differences between the English and the Dutch version, and therefore assume that also this has not been translated with extreme fidelity. Now my analysis is based only on the English original, as it serves best for my purpose to investigate the way the travelers themselves *othered* the Chinese. Staunton’s account is still today of such importance, because it shaped the Chinese in European’s eyes and because it determined for a long time, how Europeans, and not only the British, perceive China. Therefore I suppose, in order to give a better representation of China in the eyes of Europeans, it would be important to also find the differences of *representing the other* in the different translations and to perhaps study the background of the translator.

Short summary

The travel account follows a strictly chronological order. Many times however, in between the text, it loses itself in thoughts and expectations. This is probably due to the fact that the account is heavily adapted from notes and papers and diaries that the members of the embassy wrote during the journey. Volume one focuses in the beginning on the background and the occasion of the embassy, where Chapter one is highlighted by a historical account on diplomatic relations between the West and China. Chapter two then focuses on the preparations made for the embassy. After this, the volume describes the nine-month journey to China. The account provides one chapter for each stop that the embassy made and each chapter gives notices of those places. Those are the Canary Islands, Cape Verde, Rio de Janeiro, the Islands of Java and Sumatra. In the end of volume one, the embassy has finally reached Canton in China. Generally the first volume attempts to be very objective on the progress of the journey, however, sometimes the travelers lose themselves in judgmental assumptions on China and the Chinese, even before the arrival there.

Volume two follows with detailed descriptions of China and the first seven chapters highlight the travels of the embassy within China, for example to the northern border of the empire, to the great wall or to the emperor's summer residence in Tartary. They also illustrate in detail the reception of the British embassy by the Qianlong emperor, the exchange of gifts, but also of knowledge and the mutual demonstration of progress in the arts and sciences, within each culture. The last and eighth chapter then focuses on the return back to England. While volume one plays a lot with the expectations that the authors had of China, volume two displays eager attempts to find those expectations in reality and many times they are found to interpret occasions based on their previous expectations.

Science, technology and representing 'the Other'

The travelers that were part of the Macartney embassy were to a great extent influenced by Enlightenment thought and ideas that were culminating during that time in Europe. Macartney himself had read Voltaire and Leibniz and even George Thomas Staunton, son of George Leonhard Staunton, who also accompanied the embassy and was on its departure only twelve years old, read *Candide* by Voltaire. Consequently the Europeans had a very distinct (enlightened) approach towards the meaning of science and technology in society. In Enlightenment thought, the role of science and technology is closely tied to the idea of

progress and benefit for a society. Furthermore, all cultures were by Europeans regarded from that perspective, meaning that, if a culture was 'less developed' than their own, the introduction of Western science and technology would bring them the same benefits as they had brought to Europe before. According to Michael Adas in his book *Machines as the measure of men*, the Western ideology to judge other cultures was mainly based on their approach towards science. Be it the *philosophes* or the travelers, they all saw science and technology as tools the measurement of different peoples and civilizations (Adas, 1989, p. 71).

When Staunton introduced the physician of the embassy, doctor Gillan, he not only mentioned him as helpful to the members of the embassy, but also as an advantage, helpful to display the West's advances in medicine and in all kinds of sciences. Staunton believed that "the successful exercise of his profession among a people supposed to be far behind Europeans in every kind of science might excite their admiration as well as gratitude and thus contribute to advance the general purposes of the mission" (Staunton, 1797, Volume 1, p. 36). Staunton was also quite proud of Gillan's knowledge about chemistry, that for him is "the foundation of many of the arts most useful in society" and that helps in the proper deterministic European spirit to establish how far a society in general and a certain branch of society is developed, because the knowledge of chemistry "capacitates for judging and comparing to what degree of perfection they are carried in the different countries where they are attempted" (Staunton, 1797, Volume 1, p. 36).

The embassy under Lord Macartney was in no way discovering a blank territory when it arrived in China; the 700 men have had already knowledge about China from earlier literature and travel reports. Travel reports were becoming high in request, only "theological works were in greater demand" (Adas, 1989, p. 69). China was for Europeans no longer a place that preserved new wonders that only waited to be uncovered, but at the time of arrival China had already been popular subject of discourse, debate and writing. For the great majority of Enlightenment thinkers China resembled "a dormouse in its winter sleep" that "has remained for some thousand years at the same point" (Herder, 1800, p. 296). This image was shared from the earlier Enlightenment thinkers, such as Leibniz and carried on by later *philosophes*, such as Montesquieu and Voltaire. In fact, already when it came to the selection of presents that the embassy brought to China, King George was "careful to select only such articles as might denote the progress of science and of the arts in Europe and which might convey some kind of information to the exalted mind of his Imperial Majesty or such other articles as might be practically useful" (Staunton, 1797, Volume 1, p. 492).

Despite its attempt to write in an 'objective' way, the travel writing in Staunton's book had some underlying agenda based on those Enlightenment principles. Staunton, Macartney,

Gower and the others, maybe not intentionally, but definitively *othered* the Chinese culture, people, language etc. according to those enlightenment principles. In general the European travelers thought that Chinese sciences were primitive compared to the European. This attitude can be traced throughout the whole account: “It was sufficiently apparent how much the Chinese, tho skillful and dexterous in particular arts were behind the Western nations in many philosophical and useful branches of science” (Staunton, 1797, Volume 2, p. 533). The Chinese’s limitations in the sciences were, in the eyes of the Europeans, also the cause for their unprogressive and static nature. Staunton exemplified this, as he did many other times, by juxtaposing a virtue that he granted the Chinese with the limitations that their virtues carried along: “There were indeed, among the Chinese, constant and patient observers; but they did not seem to possess the science of calculation necessary to arrive at the solution of any intricate problems” (Staunton, 1797, Volume 2, p. 95).

Staunton also saw the Chinese medicine as inferior to the Europeans, because the education of medicine in China was not institutionalized in public universities but based on apprenticeship. Apprenticeships were / are in Europe a symbol of pre modern occupations, such as craftsmanship. Institutionalization however had its great share in the modernization process of Europe and achieved therefore increasing recognition during the Enlightenment. Most scientific disciplines, which are in the eyes of the ‘enlightened’ Europeans the only disciplines that can uncover real truths, have become institutionalized by the eighteenth century. This serves as another example, how Staunton *others* the Chinese as inferior, because of his enlightened ideology on science. The Europeans believed that the introduction of Western science and technology would bring to China the same kind of progress that it had brought to Europe earlier. In the course of the embassy Macartney and the others tried to promote Western science and technology to the Chinese, in the hope that they would be thankful for the progress that they would bring along. Staunton described how Macartney showed the Chinese the benefits that the advances in the sciences have brought to them, in easy and persuasive examples, such as air balloon flights, or in examples that feed the necessity of any civilization, such as optics which brought about glasses as seeing aids, and which he endorsed as “giving sight to the blind” (Staunton, 1797, Volume 2, p. 534). For the Europeans travelers, it was naturally supposed that advances in the sciences would automatically bring about advances in society and it was further naturally supposed that this was desirable by anyone. According to Staunton “it was thought that whatever tended to illustrate science or promote the arts would give more solid and permanent satisfaction to a prince whose time of life would naturally lead him to seek in every object the utility of which it was susceptible” (Volume 1, p. 43). Seen from a postcolonial perspective, the reasons why Staunton’s account in

particular, but also other travel writing during the Enlightenment produced an image of the Other, which licensed “a sense of cultural superiority in both traveler and audience”, seems more apparent (Thompson, 2011, p. 133). According to postcolonial scholar Edward Said, ‘*the Orient*’, that is all places and cultures for Northern Africa, stretching until those in East Asia, is a Western creation, a “European invention” (Said, 2003, p. 1) that generalizes the prevailing endless variety of different cultures, places and peoples of that area. Further generalizations were triggered by the discourses that the Western culture provided on the orient (Thompson, 2011, p. 149) and in fact, as we have established, in the Enlightenment there was a great abundance of knowledge and imagery available on the orient, creating images of the orient as “a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes” (Said, 2003, p. 1). Carl Thompson sees many underlying factors involved in this biased representation. According to him, judgmental representations of others are deeply rooted within ideological stances of the explorers. In postcolonial writing, reasons for this are found not in arbitrary racism, or simply ignorance, but rather see those as a result of greater ideological and especially colonial interests.

Those ideological stances might not have been evident to the travelers themselves, or to many contemporaries, who wrote about China, either. Instead, the motivation behind this judgmental form of *othering* can often be found in “legitimizing the conduct of the traveller’s culture” (Thompson, 2011, p. 133). Therefore it is the culture that has rooted deep within itself, within its conduct, an ideology that is responsible for *othering* the Chinese as inferiors to themselves. Those ideologies see the possibilities for Britain in China, but also in the rest of the world and motivate this judgmental way of *othering*, in order to “justify and encourage a particular policy or course of action towards those others” (Thompson, 2011, p. 133). In fact, in postcolonial writing such a strong and judgmental form of *othering* “ultimately seems to suggest the desirability of European intervention in another region’s affairs” (Thompson, 2011, p. 144). The British attempted great influence in China and had great colonial interests in it, which later history (the Opium wars and the colonization of Hong Kong in the nineteenth century) evidently proves. Britain’s ideology, at the end of the eighteenth century, was primarily colonial. Following the resignation of the American colonies just a few years earlier, King George was now looking east for new colonial possibilities, in his attempt to manifest Britain’s imperial power. The British of course saw the difficulties of achieving total colonial control over the Chinese and sent the Macartney embassy, first as “an investigation into the natural resources and the lucrative opportunities for trade” (Thompson, 2011, p. 138). Given the objectives to reduce the trading restrictions between the two empires and to ask permission for the establishment of a British embassy in Beijing and the possession of an island near *Chusan*, the British

were convinced to bring their Enlightened goods, that is Western science, technology and consequently progress, but also, as another quite British trait, commerce, to China, for the benefit of both, the Chinese and the British. The British were committed to the idea that the world was in the desperate “need of a ‘band of philanthropic capitalists’” (Thompson, 2011, p. 144), and saw their colonial politics concerning tribes in Africa, but also concerning great civilizations as the Chinese “as a means of providing the indigenous population with humanitarian assistance and a civilizing influence” (Thompson, 2011, p. 144).

Discussion and conclusion

As we can see in the end, with Hong Kong as a colony and the Opium Wars in the nineteenth century, Britain gained great influence on China. Western science and technology were in the end introduced to China and brought along - only later and in a very deterministic sense – the same consequences as it had brought in the West; that is industrialization, rationalization and in a broader and non-political sense modernization. The Macartney embassy was Great Britain’s first official attempt to gain power over the Chinese empire and its failure resulted in much more drastic measures of the British. A successful outcome of the embassy might have changed history to a great extent. But the European belief and conviction of science and technology and their causation of progress in society was so strong – and completely strange to the Chinese – that they believed it their obligation to introduce those to China. The travel account from George Staunton is a brilliant example of how the British express their belief in science and technology and how they indirectly impose it in their thinking and writing on the Chinese.

When the protagonist of Jonathan Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels* (1726) ends up in *Brobdingnag*, a land inhabited by ‘enlightened’ giants, the king of the giants observes Gulliver and analyses him according to scientific standards. Rationality and reason were the giant’s tools to understand their world. “They all agreed that I could not be produced according to the regular Laws of Nature”, Gulliver wrote. As he did not fit any category of what they had known, and because Gulliver’s small stature would go beyond their imagination, they concluded that Gulliver must be a ‘*Lusus Naturae*’, a freak of nature. In this case it was the traveler that was *othered*, but in a very similar way the European travelers *othered* the Chinese; based on rational and scientific principles.

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Military station near the city of Cho-Kien.

Source: Pellé, C. and Allom, T. (1845). *L'Empire Chinois, illustré d'après des dessins pris sur les lieux; avec les descriptions des mœurs, des coutumes, de l'architecture, de l'industrie & du peuple Chinois depuis les temps les plus reculés jusqu'à nos jours.* Londres-Paris: Fisher.