

Forging Romantic China: Sino-British Cultural Exchange, 1760-1840.

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In his extensive survey, *Forging Romantic China: Sino-British Cultural Exchange, 1760-1840*, Peter Kitson spends considerable time on the social and cultural significance of the *kowtow* incident of 1793 (also on the cover illustration) in which Lord Macartney, on an ambassadorial mission, famously refused to perform the full ceremonial bow to the Qianlong emperor. Instead, he knelt on one knee and bowed his head as he would to the British sovereign. The refusal to prostrate before the Chinese emperor in his court had always been read as a symbol of resistance against the arrogance of China and the exemplification of England's "masculine British firmness and rectitude" (155). However, Kitson complicates this notion by teasing out multiple discourses in this political moment of contact; in particular, the cultural notion of "gifting" which allows for a misreading of the reciprocity between the two "global" empires and the fact that Macartney would have indeed performed the *kowtow* had a Chinese official also agreed to perform the full ceremony before an image of the British king. Implicit in the representation of this encounter is the "forging" or the "fabrication" of an East/West collision or the "Great Divide," one that elides each side's quest for parity and mutual recognition, rather than domination. Thus, Kitson proceeds to forge another layer of revisionist historical and cultural criticism in this growing field of Sino-British relations, one that builds on previous scholarly works by David Porter, Robert Markley, Chi-ming Yang, and Elizabeth Chang. Nonetheless, Kitson distinguishes his study by shifting back the growing interest in Romantic Sinology to the 1760s, beginning with Thomas Percy's alternative Protestant imagining of China, up to the outbreak of the First Opium War, a period that has not sustained enough critical attention.

Kitson's objective is also to move away from the flow of material and aesthetic ideas of China – largely captured in the European fetishisation of chinoiserie – to look at Anglophone writing about China that counters the hegemonic narrative of China as a debased, despotic and "stationary" culture. To this end, he begins by recounting more recuperative ideas of China, beginning with the eighteenth-century missionary and Orientalist works of Thomas Percy, William Jones, and Robert Morrison, whose writings reveal an "ambivalent" attitude towards China but paved the way for the transmission of Chinese culture in various cosmopolitan centres including Canton, Calcutta, and Bengal, where missionaries, merchants, and government servants relied, and attempted to capitalise, on their knowledge of the great Eastern empire. On the British side, various texts on Chinese language, manners and religion, as well as translations of Chinese poetry and Confucian teachings led to the development of Chinese departments at universities, placing Sinology as a firm discipline in academic institutions. From his significant archival research, Kitson brings to life some of the lesser-known translators and "co-authors" of Chinese culture, including Canton trader Huang Ya Dong, who came to England to disseminate information about Chinese horticulture and medicinal plants, all while rearranging Chinese books at St John's College, Oxford, and being urged by William Morrison to translate the three hundred Confucian odes of *Shijing* (a tall order which Huang gracefully declined). Still, his presence speaks of a cross-cultural exchange, a "nexus involving global flows of people, ideas, commerce, and commodities, be they 'sing-songs,' tea shipments, or commissioned translations" (52).

The British quest for knowledge about China is also exemplified through the attempts to transport Chinese botanical specimens, including tea, into the British domain, with successful attempts embodied in the Anglo-Chinois influence at the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew.

Also significant was the transplantation of *Camellia sinensis* to Assam, which would later shift the balance of trade and make tea the quintessential English commodity. Against the backdrop of such exchanges, Kitson then raises the question of why so many Romantic writers chose to elide the topic of China, in what Porter terms an “instrumental amnesia,” in their understanding of the East. Here, Kitson admittedly stands on more contentious ground, as he engages in the monumental task of searching for allusions to China in Romantic literature, even in its most fleeting forms. He connects the Macartney’s *kowtow* affair with Jane Austen’s *Mansfield Park* (1814), as Austen communicated with her brother, who was then in the Royal Navy at Canton. Kitson suggests that the depiction of Fanny Price reading about the Macartney incident in the novel informs her refusal to yield to Henry Crawford’s marriage proposal or authoritative demands from Aunt Norris and Sir Thomas Bertram. There is a more sustained analysis of Wordsworth’s *The Prelude*, in which Kitson links the completion of the poem in 1805 with the death of the poet’s brother John Wordsworth, who had made financial investments in China on behalf of the family so that his brother could pursue his poetry and “do something in the world” (191). In the poem, more specifically in book 5, an image of China emerges that compares the child prodigy to a bonsai: “Monst’rous as China’s vegetable Dwarfs / Where nature is subjected to such freaks / Of human care...” (196). This reference critiques an education system that inhibits a child’s natural and spontaneous imagination, which belies the commonly held view by the British that the Chinese education relied too much on rote memorisation and was thus “stagnant.”

Furthermore, in book 8, Grasmere is compared to “Gehol’s famous gardens,” representing “an orientalist false paradise of artifice and excess” (200) in contrast to the natural English landscape. This, argues Kitson, further suggests that the backdrop of China was central to Wordsworth’s poetic imagination through familial ties that kept the East at the forefront of his consciousness. However, other writers, including Charles Lamb, Robert Southey, Lord Byron, and Leigh Hunt were only to examine China cursorily or subsume the empire under a larger depiction of Eastern otherness. Coleridge’s “Kubla Khan” is the only potentially politically-charged poem in relation to China; however, this represents another moment, like Coleridge’s decision to convalesce in Malta instead of Canton, which reveals what Kitson denotes “a missed opportunity” (198) for more fruitful literary contributions to Romantic Sinology.

In his final, and arguably the most interesting chapter, Kitson concludes with what might offer the ultimate “stage” for East/West encounters, translations, and “cultural transmission.” Examining popular plays about China – in particular, Arthur Murphy’s *The Orphan of China* (1759), an adaptation of the thirteenth-century play *Zhao shi guer*, which is considered “the Chinese *Hamlet*” – Kitson reveals how the production, in its interplay of comedy and tragedy, displaces domestic political drama onto a foreign context, thereby allowing for cross-cultural comparisons of selfhood and nationhood to large popular audiences. Theatre, although also rife with questions of representation and authenticity, can then perhaps best dramatise the encounter between East and West, by using comedy as a form of communion to negotiate the possibilities of collaboration and “co-constitution” in the complex relationship between the two cultures. Although at times, Kitson relies considerably on the imagined possibilities and encounters between Britain and China in the Romantic era, his work sheds great light on the subtler connections and details that illuminate the ongoing debate about the influence of the East on British Romanticism. He covers a vast amount of research material in his eight chapters, but specific sections would be of great interest not only to scholars of the Romantic period, but also to those in the fields of history, comparative literature, and cross-cultural studies.

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