

## CHAPTER EIGHT

### *Beijing. Peking and the Years of Humiliation*

#### *1. The origins of a cliché: disingenuousness and half-truth*

The death of Qianlong and the rise to power of his successor Jiaqin herald one of the most painful and wrenching periods in Chinese history. A period which rocked the country as no one could have imagined and whose consequences can still be felt now. Peking itself was not to alter in this period: the history of the city seemed to stand still at the death of its great champion Qianlong. There were few new monuments and those that were built were of minor importance. The city survived virtually intact until the early 20th century and the dawn of the Republic. There would therefore seem to be every reason to bring this survey to a close, or to reopen it following the success of the revolution which brought the Chinese Communist Party to power, under which Beijing was to experience a new phase of profound change, for better or for worse.

However, the dramatic events that marked the period gave rise to “the Chinese question” and heralded the arrival of a new image of Peking which was to last through the years and into the 20th century. It can be said that the changes that took place at the more general historical level are so important that they dwarf those involving the city alone, or vice versa, that nothing happened in Peking important enough to separate it, in terms of image and role, from the vicissitudes of the late Qing Dynasty. Everything – empire, capital and ruling dynasty – was cloaked in a feeling of impending doom, as if China had reached the end of a thousand-year journey and had nothing left to say or to set before mankind, in thrall to a technologically superior and militarily aggressive West.

There is not a diary, not a remark of the period which does not reflect this changed attitude towards a country which remained unknown, but which for a series of complex reasons, some of which will be examined, was no longer be object of the admiring curiosity of the 17th and 18th centuries, but instead eyed with the arrogance of those who believe themselves superior and look on everything around them as part of a quaint ancient backdrop that is falling apart. Peking (and China itself) is described in Westerners’ travel journals and diaries as if the splendour of the Qianlong period had never existed or belonged to some distant, legendary past. Everything seems to be in ruins, crumbling, grimy and decayed. Apart from the walls, in Peking there was nothing left to see, except for the heart-rending death throes of an empire which had given much to mankind but which had shown itself unable to

survive its own adoration of the past. This culture was so firmly bound to what was already over that it had taken only shove to send it toppling over. Indeed, so far gone was it, they said, that it had already begun to die a natural death.

Decadent and decayed, dirty and dusty, Peking became a metaphor for the whole country and its death throes. Its courtyards and palaces echoed – so it was said – to the sounds of a past by then dead and buried for ever. The city was no longer the capital of an empire, but the decomposing body of a world that no longer existed. Historical procedure requires that the full panoply of Western literature on Peking, diplomatic relations and the activities of businessmen, soldiers and adventurers be perused. However, it will be appreciated that all this is only marginally relevant to the capital of China, whereas it plays a key role in another cultural field: *Orientalism*, the passion for the exotic and the lure of other cultures, which was spreading throughout Europe along with the deployment of gunboats and merchantmen.

Nevertheless, the fact that this image of Peking has endured to the present day prompts a number of considerations. Rather than being a recapitulation of the diaries of Westerners present in Peking, the following sections will provide a sort of distillation of the problems which Chinese and foreign historians have to face in tackling the history of this city and of China in general during the dramatic, bloody and turbulent 19th and 20th centuries.

## *2. The rhythms of history*

As is well known, the long period of Manchu rule under the Qing Dynasty was by no means uniform. Only by stretching the definition and adopting Chinese historiographic conventions can this phase be considered a single period. Nominally, the Qing Dynasty came to power in 1644 and was deposed in 1911 with Sun Yat-sen's proclamation of the Republic. But this long period of almost three centuries should be divided into at least four separate stages, with distinct political, military and economic features. We have already dealt with the first two – the Manchu occupation of China (1644-62) and the rule of the great emperors Kangxi (1662-1723), Yongzheng (1723-36) and Qianlong (1736-96).

A third phase opened with Lord Macartney's diplomatic mission to the court of Qianlong (1793-94) or alternatively, with the death of Qianlong (1799) and the accession of his son Jiaquin. This period is marked by the growing presence of Westerners demanding that China be opened up to international trade and evangelization. The build-up of tension between a still strong Chinese government and the growing European threat came to a head in the Opium War (1840-42), the outcome of which enabled the Western powers to imposed the opium trade (banned

in Europe) on the country. The ensuing profits were then used by European traders to buy pottery, silk, tea and other Chinese products which had a market in Europe.

A fourth stage takes up the last years of the century and encompasses the Opium War, the Anglo-French punitive expedition of 1860, the Boxer Rebellion and the consequent renewed involvement of Western forces (siege and liberation of the legations). This period of great suffering and degrading humiliation for China ostensibly ended in 1911 with the establishment of the Republic. In fact, the situation gradually and inexorably evolved from a generic and violent aversion to Westerners into the first organized armed resistance. Supported by nationalists and communists, this reaction was eventually to lead first to the defeat of Japan and then final communist victory and the proclamation of the Peoples' Republic (1949).

Obviously, the four historical periods flow into one another seamlessly and without any apparent dramatic break. However, the awareness that the period of China's greatest splendour (the 18th century) stands so close to the time of China's most stinging humiliation (the 19th century) has led historians to take an extremely prudent approach. The question naturally springs to mind as to how much of the subsequent weakness was already apparent in the years of splendour under the rule of Emperor Qianlong.

Historians' research has produced a number of important findings: the first inklings of philosophical, literary, economic and military weakness have been identified in the 18th century. Wide-ranging investigations into the causes of the Chinese Empire's loss of vitality and authority have thus focused on the rule of Qianlong, transformed in recent studies into a dictator with his fair share of serious personal problems, among which were megalomania and graphomania. He stands accused of having led his country to ruin without having the slightest notion of what was happening in the international arena.

Stung by this condemnation, Chinese historians have naturally rushed to Qianlong's defence by stressing the extraordinary intellectual achievements of the period, rather than dwelling on the Emperor's failings or those of the country as a whole. But owing partly to the inevitable tendency to stretch what the evidence will bear typical of every literary and academic discussion, and partly to a greater familiarity with artistic, linguistic and philosophical topics than with historical matters, neither one side nor the other has disputed that there are clear signs of decline in the Qianlong period. Whether attacked as a megalomaniac book burner or defended as a refined intellectual who perhaps lost his grip on State bureaucracy, at all events the question sidestepped the patent decadence of the Qianlong period. In this way, the sorry figure which China cut in the 19th century, knocked about and humiliated by colonial powers, has imperceptibly spread to the 18th century and its ruler at the time, the (still) great Qianlong.

All this would have nothing to do with Peking and its history if the figure of Qianlong, placed in the dock by modern historians, were not also responsible for the great feat of the building of Peking. As we have seen, Qianlong was not merely the builder of Peking, *Qianlong was himself Peking*. Little can be understood of this city without referring back to its designer and builder, who had the same intimate relationship with the layout of the capital and its world as a painter has with his brush and canvas, a novelist a pen and paper and an architect his drawing-board. We therefore have to rehearse once again the most frequent criticisms of Qianlong and examine the allegation that he led China to the brink of the modern world without any appreciation of the seriousness and repercussions of the clash that was awaiting it.

### 3. *The Macartney mission*

Many historians have turned to this famous diplomatic episode as the best evidence of the spellbinding greatness and desperate recklessness of an empire and its emperor, the ageing, but still powerful Qianlong. For this reason it deserves a brief summary. The details of this mission<sup>1</sup> are well known now and further historical research seems unlikely to provide any big surprises. The embassy was organized in London by the British Government and in 1793 it reached China, where the head of the mission Lord Macartney managed to have himself received by Qianlong in the summer capital, the present-day Chengde. This expedition represented a considerable effort for the England of the time. Hundreds of people were involved in the attempt to approach China in a culturally aware and diplomatically astute manner. The purpose of the mission was to obtain favourable trading concessions for England. However, this was only England's first approach to China, and in spite of the commendable efforts that had gone into preparing the project, from the very start errors of etiquette were made, diplomatic faux-pas committed and Chinese conventions resisted, an inexplicable attitude in view of what the mission stood to gain<sup>2</sup>. They were unable to read the diplomatic language of the Chinese replies, or formulate queries in the formal style suitable to the Manchu court and they – still – lacked the prudence and wisdom to turn to the many Jesuits who were living in China at the time and were well acquainted with the subtleties of the language employed in government offices, at

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<sup>1</sup> On the Macartney mission, see A. Peyrefitte, *L'impero immobile ovvero lo scontro dei mondi*, Milan, Garzanti, 1992. See also Cranmer-Byng, *An Embassy to China. The Journal Kept by Lord Macartney during His Embassy to the Emperor Ch'ien-lung, 1793-94*, London, Longman, 1962.

<sup>2</sup> This attitude is well illustrated by the debate on how to avoid making the ten bows at palace receptions required by court etiquette (*kow-tow*), considered an insulting humiliation for a subject of George III, while it was actually normal procedure at the court of Qianlong.

court and during audiences. Given these shortcomings the mission was doomed to total failure, tersely summed up by Lord Macartney's own fiercely forthright words on China<sup>3</sup> and the extraordinary and no less harsh riposte from Qianlong's chancellery addressed to George III. In this letter, the Emperor's good wishes were expressed in a manner rightly interpreted by the British envoy as being humiliating and designed to cause the utmost offence.

*Nonetheless, I do not forget the forlorn remoteness of your island, cut off from the world by intervening expanses of sea, nor do I take little account of your excusable ignorance of the customs of our Celestial Empire. In consequence, I have ordered my ministers to enlighten your ambassador in this regard and ordered the mission to leave<sup>4</sup>.*

This reply to Lord Macartney had momentous repercussions for the historical interpretation of the period. Not a single author has missed seeing such arrogance as the proof of the inability of Qianlong's court to come to terms with the advent of European colonial power. At times the emperor's advanced age has been put forward as an explanation, at others the weight of tradition and the influence of the chancellery, but it has never been disputed that to react to British overtures in this way at that time was a manifest display of political irresponsibility.

With his arrogant and presumptuous reply Qianlong is thus taken to have placed himself first in the long line of Indian maharajas, Indo-Chinese princes, Oriental and Islamic potentates, and men from Africa or anywhere else in the world, who in their ignorance and dazzled by a sort of gratified provincialism, challenged England without realizing its extraordinary commercial and military strength, and in so doing paved the way to their own destruction. The notion is attractive, but it is vague to a fault. It does not take any account of the chronological order which must lie behind any historical reconstruction and the dates of the Macartney mission at the end of the 18th century suggest a markedly different scenario.

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<sup>3</sup> «The Empire of China is an old, crazy first rate man-of-war, which a fortunate succession of able and vigilant officers has contrived to keep afloat for these one hundred and fifty years past, and to overawe their neighbors merely by her bulk and appearance, but whenever an insufficient man happens to have the command upon the deck, adieu to the discipline and safety of the ship. She may perhaps not sink outright; she may drift some time as a wreck, and will then be dashed to pieces on the shore; but she can never be rebuilt on the old bottom. ». This quotation is one of the most popular in the whole of the ample correspondence from Lord Macartney's embassy. It is taken from the embassy's diary and was republished by Cranmer-Byng, op. cit., among many others.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. *Imperatore Ch'ien Lung, Un decreto*, in F. Schurmann and O. Schell, *Cina 3000 anni*, Rome, Casini, 1968, p. 108.

In the first place, in Qianlong's day the West's unrivalled superiority over China in astronomical matters had been recognized and accepted. Although Christianity did not enjoy official authorization within the Empire, Catholic missionaries were present at court especially in their capacity as astronomers. The best known among these was the Italian Giuseppe Castiglione, the Emperor's architect, painter and confidant encountered earlier. In Qianlong's Peking, army officers and administrative staff dealing with Western and northern regions were trained in military academies, which taught Mongolian, Tibetan, Uighur and Russian. Moreover, many of the most important edicts in the Empire were published in the four major languages: Chinese, Tibetan, Mongolian and Manchurian. We can be sure that even French and English – if necessary – would have been taught if there had been any need for them. This meaning has to be sought in the years of Qianlong's rule, not in those that followed: Qianlong lived and acted in his own time, not in some other period...

In his day, in the late-18th century, when Lord Macartney requested arrangements favouring British trade, England might have been a great power in Europe, but in the Far East it was small beer.

Of course, in far off 1790 the Industrial Revolution had already taken its first crucial steps, but its effects were far from being perceptible in England itself – in the overbearing sense normally associated with an industrial revolution. The steam-powered engine had already been invented, for example, but only much later did it find a practical application and acquire a stable industrial application. The first steamship, plying the route from Greenock to Belfast across the Irish Sea, was introduced only in 1818. Up till then all sea voyages had been effected by sailing vessels and in the East, they had to submit to the will of the monsoons. The months of enforced isolation in a foreign and hostile land, awaiting a change in the wind and the arrival of help from home, had already proved lethal for any scheme which was not merely a trading venture or the establishment of a fortified outpost. Only the introduction of a regular means of transporting troops and goods could enable a European power to entertain hopes of a more ambitious nature. Steamships were the first stage, but even they were not decisive. The introduction of steam did not mean British ships of the line could automatically be converted into a steam-powered gunboat. There were serious problems of reliability on the more important intercontinental routes. Moreover, fast as development of the technology had been, until 1835 there remained the problem of how to supply these ships with fuel. The ships were available but the African ports did not have any coal. How and where

were they to refuel? It took almost twenty years for sufficient stocks of coal to be built up in the various African ports<sup>5</sup>.

When the Far East came within range of the first European gunboats and colonial expansion got underway in Indo-China, Indonesia and China, Emperor Qianlong had been dead for at least thirty years. Without the steamship even England's great adventure in India could never have taken place. Or rather, it would have remained what it was at the close of the 18th century – a stage in the colonial experience of a certain importance, but not the springboard to a colonial empire that it became. And the war, the tragic Opium War and the establishment of an British settlement in Hong Kong could go ahead only at the end of the first half of the 19th century thanks to the support of British gunboats.

When the British mission reached China, it was not just Qianlong who had no inkling what would change on the trade routes as a result of the introduction of the steam-powered engine, Macartney himself could not foresee the impact the changes would make. Scholars of the Industrial Revolution in England are well aware of these aspects, but perhaps it is not appropriate to rebuke them. It was not China that remained immobile, nor did Qianlong force it into a disdainful international isolation. It was England that changed more in twenty years than it had changed in centuries. Over this span, first England and later a part of mainland Europe moulted at a speed unknown in any other period. What is more, the process was wholly unforeseeable and unforeseen.

In the eyes of history Qianlong may stand guilty of several serious shortcomings, but none of these can be imputed to a defective political mentality or imagination as they emerge from the correspondence and records of the British embassy. Lord Macartney was seeking preferential trading rights without having anything to offer in return. He had no goods to sell; he was only intent on buying while lacking an army to enforce his will. England and George III were taken at face value in Qianlong's China. Thus Qianlong's quip about "the forlorn remoteness of your island, cut off from the world by intervening expanses of sea" cannot be taken uncritically as illustrating the shortsighted policy of Qianlong and his court. What it does show up is the weakness of the British fleet, which at that time was in no position to strike terror into the heart of China or its emperor. We know how quickly things were to change: thirty years is a twinkling of an eye for an epoch-making revolution. But in a historical analysis what happens thirty years after a person's death seems an age away. Qianlong had no way of anticipating the invention and development of steam technology. To condemn

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<sup>5</sup> On this topic, which is one of the most overlooked in the whole complex question of relations between China and the West, see L. Girard, *Transport*, in *Cambridge Economic History, VI: The Industrial Revolution and its Developments*, Cambridge, 1965, pp 230-292.

him or put his whole period on trial on the strength of what was later to take place is not acceptable.

#### 4. *Chinese sources*

A second factor making an interpretation of the Qianlong years difficult is connected with the nature of the Chinese sources and the pressure which Qianlong and other Chinese emperors exerted over the literary and cultural worlds of their times. There is no doubt that this was straightforward censorship, all the more despicable because it was not confined to books, but also included the physical destruction of the printing blocks, the authors themselves and their families. Qing Dynasty documents are often celebratory and misleading. On the other hand that had always been the way in China. The job of establishing historical truth, however one chooses to define it, has traditionally been left to the historians of the following dynasty. Unfortunately, this invaluable balance between celebration (contemporaries) and criticism (following dynasty), which lay at the heart of historical inquiry in Chinese culture, came to a halt in the Qing Dynasty. As the last imperial dynasty, the Qing did not have the good fortune to have their story told by the historians of another dynasty. Indeed, Chinese historians have by and large ignored the Qing Dynasty altogether. The fate of the Qing Dynasty has continued to be a matter of interest chiefly among Western historians working in the field of Chinese history. The critical reappraisal of the past, which had always served in China to restore a more balanced historical perspective by at least partly resisting the promptings of the regime, was thus, in the case of the Qing Dynasty, left to Western culture, which brought different values to bear on the question, mistrusted Chinese sources and tended to rely more on the accounts of travellers or residents, if only because of linguistic problems.

#### 5. *Western sources*

The use of Western sources is no less fraught with difficulties. One problem has to be resolved right at the outset: who are the authors providing the first-hand information? The forced opening up of China to trade, whether in the name or on behalf of a declared freedom of trade and the spread of Christianity, changed the situation considerably. The Europeans arriving in Peking in those years were no longer members of the sophisticated and cosmopolitan Jesuit intellectual elite<sup>6</sup>. They did not

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<sup>6</sup> “These clashes were made worse by the fact that the Portuguese, Spanish and French clerics rarely managed to free themselves of nationalistic sentiments and place the interests of their missionary

share a “universal” ideal like Roman Catholicism, which has much in common with its Chinese equivalent. They were not the bearers of an invaluable cultural heritage to be offered to China in exchange for a residence permit, often accepted in the hope it might turn into an authorization to evangelize the country. The Westerners who now recorded their impressions of Peking were adventurers and men of very little learning. Many of them came to China in search of a social standing denied to them back home. Some of them struck it rich in China, others became powerful, but several were reduced to theft, murder and rape. They were not the cream of Europe, quite the opposite. In the name of “universal” values they landed in a strange country of which they knew nothing and proceeded to cross it protected by cannons and gunboats. At times they joined military expeditions and rarely looked about them with the curiosity of those who wish to understand. The men who came to China often had no interest in either understanding or recording. They set off motivated by the desire for worldly success and personal enrichment, which then acted as a lens through which to interpret China. The occasional undoubtedly educated man with aesthetic leanings, such as Pierre Loti or the first non-Latin sinologists, in no way redeems the gang of thieves which raped the country and whose barbaric coarseness was denounced by Victor Hugo himself in a famous open letter to France published in newspapers after the sack of the Summer Palace (Yuanmingyuan). The newcomers were poorly educated, with little grounding in the humanities, and were more likely to come out of military academies and stock exchanges rather than don’s studies. Often their education had hardly gone beyond the elementary stage and they were unable to appreciate anything more than their own violence and others’ riches. Everything they saw was too subtle and too sophisticated for them to understand. The uncouthness of the Europeans who went to China in the 19th century was cause to look back with regret on the high-mindedness of the Jesuits and the respectful petitioning of the Chinese administration of these 18th-century European reformers. Even Hernan Cortéz, the conqueror of Mexico, acquires intellectual dignity compared with the Europeans present in China in 1800. The symbol of Europe in Peking in the 16th century was Father Matteo Ricci. Two centuries later it was Lord Elgin. In the juxtaposition of these two names lies the profound, appalling, change in the standard of Western sources.

The point of course is not to condemn or acquit, but to understand that almost all the Western sources on China of this period belong to a world which cannot see, and if it

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activity before those of their respective countries. [...] That left the Italians, who were [...] more conscious of the fact that they were representing the sway of the Church of Rome in China. They therefore seemed to be the best suited to work in China and Valignano was well aware of this when he directed that the first missionaries to be sent in China should be Italians”, cf. Bertuccioli and Masini, *Italia e Cina*, op. cit. p. 55.

sees, cannot understand, and if it understands, cannot accept. A world swarming over China with the arrogant certainty of those convinced of being the harbingers of History and Progress.

The mirror they held up to China, its Qing emperor and the city of Peking revealed an image of a fascinating and dying civilization. Saturated with decadent aestheticism and the affectedly picturesque, their impressions are a good reflection of the culture which spawned them, but have little to do with the reality of life in China. That Chinese civilization appeared old, static and doomed to a band of people united by their faith in the future and the fortunes to be made through trade, is not in question. But this was nonetheless an encounter between two worlds which could not communicate, even had they wanted to. For example, the assumed backwardness of Qianlong's China is condemned even though there is no economic or military gap between China and England. It would be another thirty years before it would make itself felt. This sort of criticism, unsubstantiated by any demonstrated European superiority in military, commercial or economic matters at the time, smacks of pandering to prejudices rather than being the pondered fruit of a profound understanding of the Chinese world. The incredible comments of Lord Macartney, who breezily proffers judgments and condemnations as if he had lived in China for years and was a veteran China hand, are more redolent of a prickly Englishman leaving some Italian government office in a huff over the forest of red tape to be hacked through, convinced it proves the country is out of date, if not actually inferior. The problem today lies not in the conclusions Lord Macartney may have reached, but in the fact that they are turned to in historical research as the authoritative evidence of an expert on the country who is witnessing the collapse of an empire and a dynasty.

What the Westerners living in Peking at that time and in the subsequent decades could not see or understand is interestingly illustrated by the events connected with the destruction of the Yuanmingyuan. The destroyers of Peking in 1860 saw one of the great marvels of oriental architecture, the Summer Palace (Yuanmingyuan), built to the north-west of Qianlong's capital. As we have seen, this was a huge park in which various aspects of physical China (landscapes) and mental China (landscapes in painting and poetry) were arranged by a cultivated and extremely wealthy emperor in a sophisticated play of wooden pavilions, ponds, lakes, rock gardens and willows. The French and British soldiers destroyed everything in an appalling act of vandalism. This is quite normal in war and the Chinese themselves were no gentler with their enemies. But the important point here is that both the bandits (the French and British soldiers) and their accusers (Victor Hugo) mentioned only the Western-style buildings within the Yuanmingyuan. The rock and water garden they destroyed and which sublimated a scenic path 2000 years old was not mentioned because it was not even seen. It was regarded as a sort of backdrop of no importance, a theatre set.

Nor could it be otherwise: what did European soldiers know of the art of rock gardens, the subtleties of calligraphic variations in paintings and the careful juxtaposition of the smooth, shaded lines of the horizon with the sharp “axe” strokes for the rocks in the foreground?<sup>7</sup>.

So it is only to be expected that these marines and young bucks, who were often failures in the rich bourgeois European society of the period, would show scant interest in a world they did not know and instead concentrated their attention on precious stones, gold and splendid Western-style buildings occupying just a tiny part of the park.

Even so, it is clear that there is no question of putting an entire period and its colonial ignorance on trial. What is required is care in making use of the sources that emerge from this world. It is not the Breton infantryman, the French dandy or the English lord on his first trip to China who are in error; the historian who uses their journals without due care is. As he is if he gives them an importance out of proportion to the reliability of their reports. Reading the opinions on China of a Pierre Loti or a Lord Macartney of the time may perhaps be picturesque and entertaining. Any other use seems inadvisable and should be considered virtually unusable for scientific purposes. The history of the Macartney embassy to China is full of such serious misapprehensions that Macartney’s remarks on the Chinese government or the health of the empire can aspire to no more than colourful asides. To give these sources the same status as the official records of the Chinese imperial registries is closer to being a late-colonial gibe than simple casualness, from the point of view of historical accuracy.

## 6. “*China adrift*”...

It will be appreciated that the complex problem of establishing when China and its capital started to go adrift is thus inevitably muddled by the events occurring in the following decades. Since at a later stage the country did indeed go adrift, it becomes easy by sleight of hand to pretend that everything took place before the Anglo-French colonial coercion. As if the Opium Wars were no more than an unfortunate incident to be added to the many other tragedies for which Westerners were certainly not to blame. In this way a generic decadence of the Qing Dynasty is identified which is said to have become apparent (in a way that has never been fully explained,

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<sup>7</sup> However, it seems that a number of 17th-century Jesuits lacked any particular feeling for gardens. In the view of the Austrian Jesuit J. Grüber (1623-1680) “...they are entirely ordinary, being no more than just enclosed fields to be used for ball games...”. Cf. Bertuccioli and Masini, *Italia e Cina*, op. cit. p. 172.

unsurprisingly) in an 18th century dominated by the figure of the Emperor, stressing his absolute power and the decadence of the final years of his reign. Qianlong's extraordinary and commendable achievements in literature and the arts are then sometimes used to show up a political absolutism fraught with contradictions (military conquests, the power of his adviser Heshen, etc) and an empire already rushing headlong towards ruin, well before George III sent his envoys.

In this way the political and military strength of China, which in fact reached its apogee at this time, ends up being presented without due conviction when not overlooked, as is the fact that the State coffers were full to the brim and there was no sign as yet of any financial crisis. Or again, nothing is made of Qianlong having so much cash at his disposal that he was able to afford what any European sovereign of the time could scarcely imagine. No importance is given to the point that the censorship of Qianlong and the Manchus was not the only thing that Chinese culture was experiencing: the period also witnessed a philosophical renaissance and a boom in philological studies; the first libraries were set up and the first art collections founded. All this is of no, or very little, consequence.

It seems fair to suggest that the cliché of China being adrift well before becoming the target of French and British colonial broadsides survived as part of an imperialistic and colonial culture which had to come to terms with its own morality and its not inconsiderable sense of guilt. Regardless of whether it was made up or set in the wrong period, this cliché has proved hugely resistant. It is to be found in the pages of travel books and in supposedly well-informed tourist guides. There is no avoiding the subject in attempting a forthright assessment of Qianlong's rule and the 18th century as a whole. Those who know China and its literature are well aware that the words attributed to Lord Macartney were only the start of an archetypal colonial literature on China and the Chinese Empire which has had an extraordinary success in literature, politics and in the cinema. Since then no Westerner who has been in China three months and is due to leave in another three has failed to pontificate in like manner, with the confidence that typifies colonialists the world over.

Decadent China "dying its own death" is found in the travel journals of blameless European ladies resident in Peking, in diplomatic reports, in unassuming novels and learned tomes. It survives in the mid-20th century in the arrogant confidence of the Japanese on the eve of their invasion of China. It continues in a sort of prejudiced haughtiness which has also spread to the attitudes typical of Western business practices, culminating in the brazen and extraordinary economic coups of the present day. It persists in reports in much of the popular press by the "fly in and fly out" variety of correspondents and in television features which wallow in the refrain on a culture on the verge of disappearing, "you'd better go and see it quick before it vanishes for ever".

Lord Macartney's prophecy is still there basking in undeserved limelight. The Japanese thought they were dealing with a country in its last throes and suffered the most crushing of their defeats. Western companies, which were sure of swallowing up China and its riches in the eighties, now find they are struggling to survive, often with minority stakes, at the edge of an economic boom they thought was in their hands. Perhaps Lord Macartney would lose some of his optimism, or maybe he would find the courage to recognize that if there was one empire destined to disappear, it was not – alas – the Chinese but the British, which plundered Athens and Peking, exported tons of drugs to a country where their use was forbidden and complacently pronounced verdicts on its level of modernity, progress and democracy.

### 7. ... and its capital Peking

Perhaps the most surprising thing to emerge from the analysis of many Europeans' travel journals is that they did not like Peking. There is little to see and what there is is unbearably enveloped by stinks, dirt and ordure. Long thirsted after because forbidden to all, Peking was reached at last only to be met by

*... endless bursts of laughter. It must be admitted that our procession did not convey the importance of a mission which had come to impose and lay claim to privileges that no nation had been strong enough to obtain until then... After amusing themselves for a while, everyone went back to their duties.*<sup>8</sup>

The long-anticipated encounter with the capital proves disappointing:

*... at last we were in sight of the walls of Peking. We had felt sure that on spying the walls and entering into this fabulous city, where few novel-writers – as far as we know – have ever been, we would be seized by a joy which in fact we never experienced. But is this not true of all the anticipated joys of travel – even without deceiving oneself? The truly beautiful things are unexpected, dreams never come true without disillusionment. It is not so much that these walls dating from the 16th century are not majestic, with their massive earthworks rising up fifteen metres and faced with bricks. They have quite an impressive, rather feudal appearance, with their square platform as wide as the bastions are high: with square towers along the sides every two hundred metres... But our exhaustion, the unbearable heat, and the press of the crowd through which we tried to make our way could not put us in the*

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<sup>8</sup> Cf. Peyrefitte *L'impero immobile*, op. cit.. The quotation is from G. L. Staunton, *An Authentic Account of an Embassy from the King of Great Britain to the Emperor of China*, London, 1797.

*right mood to appreciate, either Chinese neglect, which lets the drains pour unchecked and mountains of rubbish pile up in the moats encircling these walls, which are sure to collapse due to lack of maintenance, or the filthy suburbs, which lean their pathetic and disgusting hovels against them in groups*<sup>9</sup>.

The Europeans enter Peking not knowing its history – nor could they. They do not know that the Chinese or outer city is not particularly impressive and that the monuments are chiefly concentrated in the Tartar city. Once they have passed through the walls they think they will witness the pomp and urban display characteristic of any European city, if not perhaps of a capital. The disappointment is enormous:

*The interior of Peking was not in a position to make up for its external appearance. For over an hour we proceeded by walking by the banks of streams full of mud and dust, crossing uncultivated fields, not seeing anything of the city other than stretches of unmetalled roads without pavements, lined with little shops. We do not believe there is a dirtier city in the world. The layer of dust which covers the ground unevenly to unimaginable depths makes one feel one is walking through a chalk deposit. If one adds to this the appalling glare of the sun above and the sudden gusts of wind, it will be readily understood that in Peking a stroll is an undertaking, nay a torment*<sup>10</sup>.

Once the Chinese city has been crossed, hope springs up again of seeing the “real” city, the emperor’s city. Sir George Staunton notes with curiosity that the houses “are surmounted by large terraces with balustrades, holding vases of flowers and dwarf trees. Before the doors are horn or silk lanterns”<sup>11</sup>. Others do not hide their disappointment: Peking does not seem to be a city at all, but rather “a huge encampment...a thousand tiny, low, arched houses looking like rows of tents”<sup>12</sup>. What did John Barrow, who was to help found the Royal Geographical Society in 1830 and a little later found his way into history through the window – those same windows he did not find in Peking – publishing *Mutiny on the Bounty* (1831), expect to find? Maybe the city is beautiful, maybe it isn’t; one must wait and see. But once again great is the disappointment. The members of the Macartney mission have an inkling there is something more. They can see yellow roofs glittering in the distance, which they suspect must be the imperial residence. So China does have cities worthy of the

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<sup>9</sup> Cf. P. Bonnetain, *L’Extrême Orient*, Paris, Maison Qiantin, 1887, p. 374.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.* p. 376.

<sup>11</sup> Peyrefitte, *L’impero immobile*, op. cit. p. 154. *passim*

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

name!<sup>13</sup> But the procession wheels to the west and leads them to a rural site far from everyone and everything. The officers insult the mandarins and their escorts and demand to enter the city. They are at the gates of the Yuanmingyuan. They could hardly be nearer to the seat of imperial power, but naturally they are not aware of it. How could they be?

So the members of the Macartney mission never got to see the Forbidden City. They were urged to visit the Yuanmingyuan and, given the Emperor's absence from Peking (Qianlong was in Jehol, or Chengde, at the time) being let into the Yuanmingyuan was in diplomatic terms a considerable honour. They were thus able to see Peking's most splendid and most important building, as well as the one most closely associated with Qianlong and his personal background. The pavilions where they were lodged have already been described. Staunton records that those where they were accommodated were decorated with paintings. Which works from Qianlong's vast collection were they given the honour of viewing? We shall never know, but although some from the mission appreciated them, the general attitude is one of superciliousness: "If a lake is surrounded by houses and trees, the painted does not show the reflection on the water"<sup>14</sup>. "Distant landscapes seem larger than a house in the foreground and they do not touch the ground"<sup>15</sup>.

Macartney and his men wandered through the courtyard where Giuseppe Castiglione and Qianlong had enjoyed their light-hearted, sophisticated sparring a few decades earlier and where were conceived paintings hovering between allusion and narrative, token and truth, metaphor and taunt. The newcomers had the coarseness of the ignorant and the conceitedness of the powerful. There is no sense in finding excuses for them – even supposing there were any point – by going into the difference between European and Chinese culture. Castiglione was Italian; he came from the Po basin. He was neither of noble birth nor rich, but he would probably have been less uncouth in his assessments and taken more care how he expressed them. It was not Europe which was far removed from China, but the vulgarity and arrogance of the colonial Europeans representing it. They were far removed not from Chinese culture, but from any culture.

More or less at the same time as Lord Macartney and Staunton were making their arrival in Peking, a figure of altogether different distinction – Chrétien-Louis de Guignes, son of the 'Académicien' and Orientalist Joseph de Guignes – reached the

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<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*, p. 183.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid* p. 155.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*.

capital together with a Dutch mission<sup>16</sup>. His account reveals a considerable knowledge of travel literature on China, presumably gleaned during a period of over ten years as French consul in Canton. He too was unimpressed by the city, complaining of its low and unaligned houses, sometimes modest and sometimes ornate, but always without any architectural merit. He notes that the situation changed considerably on entering the Hoang-tching (Wangcheng, Imperial City), where the walls of the houses “are fifteen to eighteen feet high; and are red and covered with yellow-tiled roofs”. Guignes remarks that the city must once have been the residence of the ruling family exclusively, perhaps including its closest advisers, but that it now also contained a large number of tradesmen, who are allowed to ply their trades there<sup>17</sup>. Unlike Macartney, he was led to the Imperial Palace (Kong-tching, Forbidden City) and became one of the first Westerners to set eyes on one of the most secret and alluring places on earth. Guignes is not overwhelmed, but he appreciates and notices, not without perspicacity, how the palace is arranged so as to discriminate to the benefit of exterior rather than interior spaces:

*When the foreigner who finds himself transported from the far corner of the universe to the vast courtyards of the palace casts his eyes over this expanse of galleries, porticos and enormous halls, arranged in a precise and regular order and crosses these thick walls and considers these doors which are kept permanently closed and are opened only for the Emperor, this foreigner – I say – cannot defend himself against a certain feeling of admiration... But although the exterior of the palace is pleasing and seduces, the interior excites an entirely different reaction, the allure disappears in an instant: the walls and beams are as richly embellished with painted decorations and gilding externally as the interior is plain and free of ornament... in a word, the architecture of the palace is in line with the character of the nation, everything is on the outside, and nothing inside<sup>18</sup>.*

These were the last European visitors of a certain rank before the great crisis of the mid-19th century and the tragedy of the punitive expedition which led to the sacking of the Summer Palace by French and British soldiers (October 1860). In his

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<sup>16</sup> Ch.-L. de Guignes, *Voyage a Péking, Manille e l’Ile de France, faits dans l’intervalle des années 1784 à 1801*, Paris, Impr. Impérial, 1808. The quotations are from Boothroyd and Détrie, *Le voyage en Chine*, op. cit., pp.370-376.

<sup>17</sup> In this regard, see Naquin, *Peking. Temples and City Life*, op. cit. *passim*, on the gradual breakdown of the ethnic divisions at the close of the Qianlong period and on the gradual occupation of the Tartar and Imperial city by Chinese tradesmen.

<sup>18</sup> Quoted in Boothroyd and Détrie, *Le voyage en Chine*, op. cit. pp. 372.

memoires<sup>19</sup>, the commander of the French force General Cousin de Montauban would later lend credit to the idea that the pillage was not the work of Europeans, but was the result of the state of neglect in which the palace found itself following the battle of Palikao (Baliqiao), in which the Anglo-French expeditionary force had put to flight the Manchu army sent to defend the capital. But after casually remarking on the existence of twenty palaces since destroyed (“There were twenty palaces in this place, used for the most diverse purposes”), he cannot help mentioning the huge amount of silk of exceptional quality found in one of these pavilions, which was used by the soldiers to tie up their horses and pack “the objects we found in the palace; the rest was left to the Chinese who were following the expeditionary force”. A reluctant confession, all the fault of the supporting Chinese? Armand Lucy, an officer in the expedition’s train, was not awarded a title and had no name to defend, but above all he was not writing for posterity but to his father:

*Indeed how could we have come so far without bringing home even a memento? These objets d’art have a contagious power, so I decide to put my hands on – without consequences – first a book, whose binding is adorned with precious stones, then some delightful flashing cloisonné vases which might add lustre to your collection... But then I suffer a disappointment: an English interpreter noticed that a piece of paper I had found was nothing less than a sample of writing by the ‘red brush’, that is in the hand of the Emperor himself. The pieces were divided up and I kept a fragment, a precious signature, which I put into a box of China ink [author’s note: which is solid]. It has gone missing! (I put it thus so as not to humiliate the good Philippe, my attendant)<sup>20</sup>.*

No, let’s not humiliate the good Philippe: he doesn’t deserve it. Because the next day he was to help the worthy Armand plunder othe palaces, gathering even more splendid pieces. So with a plunder here and a pillage there, a grab this while I snaffle that, the worthy Armand also let slip that this place truly was the eighth wonder of the world:

*I can add that we also went for a ride to a pagoda wonderfully carved in marble situated on an artificial hill with a superb view of several castles, lakes with*

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<sup>19</sup> Cousin de Montauban, *L’expédition de Chine de 1860, Souvenirs du général Cousin de Montauban, comte de Palikao*, published by his grandson, the Count of Palikao, Paris, Plon, 1932. in Boothroyd and Détrie, *Le voyage en Chine*, op. cit., passim.

<sup>20</sup> A. Lucy, *Lettres intimes sur la campagne de Chine en 1860*, Marseilles, 1861. Quotation from Boothroyd and Détrie, *Le voyage en Chine*, op. cit., p.576.

*particoloured decorated junks and an island on which stands a palace which is a serraglio*<sup>21</sup>.

After the sack, Georges de Kéroulée, attaché at the French diplomatic mission led by Baron Gros, arrived in Peking and on 7th November he managed to obtain permission to visit the palace (Forbidden City). He too notices how in the Imperial Palace a mass of shops have taken the place of the quarters where once, he surmises, there passed “princes of royal blood and the chief ministers of the crown, followed by processions in all their pomp”<sup>22</sup>. However, he is not impressed by the entrance to the palace and he wonders why on earth everything is so run down, because everything he sees “looks like a necropolis”. The mandarin who acts as his guide, and who had enabled the group of horsemen to pass unchallenged through checkpoints where soldiers were ready to offer resistance, tells him of the war begun by the Europeans and the terror which spread through the city. But this reply does not convince our diplomat:

*The cannons of Chang-kia-ouan and Pa-li-kiao did not have the same qualities as the trumpets at Jericho. It cannot have been they which made the sections of wall collapse that we now saw here and there on the ground*<sup>23</sup>.

The arrival of Europeans in Peking, whether cultivated or ignorant, noble or plebeian, essentially followed a similar pattern in this first phase, running from the end of the 18th century to just before the Boxer Rebellion and the siege of the legations (1900). The beauty seen is not perceived, the yearned-for mirage is just that: a mirage. Peking is a disappointment, it does not impress. Its fame has been usurped, or, as in the passage quoted from Paul Bonnetain, it lies all in the anticipation. In the sort of fantasy which comes before experiencing a great event and which now characterizes the tourist’s outlook. Only rarely do we find comments that are useful (the decay of the Forbidden City) or vaguely revealing (the beauty of the Yuanmingyuan). More often the stress is put on the extraordinary dirtiness of the place, the dust and the irreverent demeanour of the Chinese, who, after their initial curiosity, uninterestedly watch the arrival of the Europeans.

What shocked them above all was the neglect of the city and the poor state of the streets. In 1844, Madame de Saurigny remarked that she considered this was due to the instability of the country and to the fact “...that the orders given by one emperor

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<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.* p. 578.

<sup>22</sup> Georges de Kéroulée, *Souvenir de l’expédition de Chine. Un voyage à Pékin*, Paris, Brunet, 1861. Quotation from Boothroyd and Détrie, *Le voyage en Chine*, op. cit., p.576.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.* p. 590

in no way bind his successor: so the nation's prosperity is not in the least stable, as it does not rest on the authority of the law, but on the whim of a single individual"<sup>24</sup>. These thoughts were expressed only forty-six years after Qianlong's death. China and its capital seem to have been plunged into a night without end, which has dragged on since time immemorial and threatens to consign them to oblivion forever.

The accounts quoted are those of men of little learning, often thieves or adventurers. This basic inability to understand would partly explain the attitude of the Europeans in Peking in the 19th century. But the fact is that even the most callow British or French soldier could not be unaware of the conditions imposed on China after the First Opium War (Treaty of Nanking, 1842). In what became famous as the first "unequal treaty", Humen and Hong Kong were ceded to Great Britain, but worst of all it guaranteed free trade in British goods and opium, which increased from fifty thousand cases a year in 1850 to eighty thousand in 1853. An indemnity of six million *tael* of silver was imposed to cover the opium smuggled into China and destroyed by the Chinese. A further twelve million *tael* were imposed as war reparations, three as an indemnity for British citizens, six to redeem Canton. After the second Opium War and the punitive expedition mentioned earlier, other territory was ceded to the colonial powers and more war costs charged to China. In 1861, the foreign consuls resident in Shanghai went from merely collecting local customs duty to controlling the entire organization of the imperial customs (Imperial Customs Inspectorate), which in the space of under ten years was to control 25% of all imperial income and would be run by an Englishman, R. Hart.

It is not the aim of this work to discuss the history of colonial China and its destruction by the European powers, which has been admirably covered by others<sup>25</sup>. It is a history made of suffering and humiliation forced on China by strangling it economically and defeating it militarily. Taking away even 5% of a State's income – actually far more – would alone explain the general neglect, the urban squalor and poverty. But perhaps only the Europeans who travelled to Peking were fully aware of the nature of the problem. If they were resident in Peking it was because they had won a war and forced a quarter of the city to be given over to Europeans (legations). So they were in the perfect position to appreciate where the line lay between induced and preexisting urban decay. Some of them felt guilty, others seemed not to care, but all, absolutely all of them confirmed this view of a decadent, dead, almost putrescent city living on a splendour which cannot be grasped or approached. It is in the air everyone breathes, yet it is never encountered.

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<sup>24</sup> Madame de Saurigny, *Histoire de la Chine*, Paris, B ethune et Plon, 1844, p. 61.

<sup>25</sup> For a full bibliography on this subject, see E. Collotti Pischel (ed.), *Storia dell'Asia*, Florence, La Nuova Italia, 1980.

*Visiting it, one realizes what Peking must have been before the last two or three rulers, in other words a magnificent capital, and what it could still be if only the present ruler wished it. Because all public works depend on the Emperor and on him alone... another century of neglect and the monuments we have seen... are bound to turn into ruins...<sup>26</sup>.*

Then people began to travel and the tourists arrived. But Peking continued to be a legend which disappointed and seemed to offer only dust, dust and more dust<sup>27</sup>. By the time the *Nouvelle Géographie Universelle* was published by Hachette in 1882<sup>28</sup>, Peking was irreparably identified with its “well-preserved and hugely proportioned” walls, but the city itself was not up to much.

*This Chinese city is not the most populous, but it is the most active in trade and industry; in fact it looks more like the encampment of a travelling fair than a real city. The irregular squares are crammed with carts and tents, the uneven cobbles of the streets which carts chaotically negotiate are flanked by empty paths that act as pavements, ready to turn into quagmires after the rain and piles of dust during the dry season; the crowd collects in front of modest little shops decorated with canopies and signs, which follow one another down the road in the utmost disarray; behind these shacks lie the little houses where the shopkeepers live; here and there can be seen the trees that grow in the gardens in the middle of these blocks. The quarter is crossed by some sewers and the nauseating water is used to wash the streets... As for the Tartar city, it is better organized but no more beautiful than the Chinese city, apart from the area of the foreign legations and the triumphal avenues or marble bridges, embellished with symbolic animals, which cross the canals<sup>29</sup>.*

Mortifying words, although later mitigated by a few comments of appreciation for the occasional monument. The city’s image at the end of the century had been fixed. After being briefly accessible in 1860, the Forbidden City was again closed to the public along with all the chief imperial monuments. It would be reopened only several years later with the establishment of the Republic, and Osval Sirén would be one of the first to see it and have it photographed, revealing both its beauty and decay<sup>30</sup>. Peking was locked within its most important monuments, its urban layout

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<sup>26</sup> P. Bonnetain, *L’Extrême Orient*, Paris, 1887, p. 379.

<sup>27</sup> See M. A. Tissandier, *Voyage autour du monde*, Paris, Masson, 1892, *passim*.

<sup>28</sup> *Nouvelle Géographie Universelle. La Terre et les Hommes*, ed. by Elisée Reclus, VII: *L’Asie Orientale*, Paris, Hachette, 1882, pp. 321-322.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p.322.

<sup>30</sup> Sirén, *les Palais impériaux de Péking*, op. cit.

incomprehensible to Europeans, a “ghastly” place where crowds swarmed in uncommon filth and poverty. There was no sign of any beauty, which must have existed who knew how long before. Or perhaps it was always a myth, a legend nurtured by the Chinese and swelled by being kept hidden from foreigner’s gaze for centuries.

The seal was placed on this mental attitude and these disastrous political conditions by the conclusion of the Boxer Rebellion, which saw the siege of the legations and the “liberation” of the embassies by an expeditionary force organized by the Eight Powers. On the heels of this army, which went on to visit further wanton destruction on the country, came the celebrated dandy Pierre Loti, an affected French intellectual who drifted through Peking with the air of someone who had come from a place light years away and, borne away on the wings of his zestful emotion, he proceeded to hold forth on literary, cultural and aesthetic topics. Written in purple prose, his observations are inevitably banal.

*The immense scene reflected by the waters, conjuring up palaces and pagodas, their overlapping roofs tipped with pointed corners, is always outlined by reddish strips of fire on this night whose moon is obscured by heavy clouds. And the tower on the Jade Island, which rises above everything, continues to erupt its shower of sparks onto its base strewn with rocks and old black cedars. Beyond the great serpents, accompanied by metallic tapping and the cracked sound of Tartar cymbals, the Marble Bridge continues to gush a flood of people at the foot of our palace, but this is a more fitful flow, which presses tumultuously and produces an extraordinary din. And with it the rest of our troops, the soldiers on leave following the retreat, they too carrying lanterns, clusters of swinging lanterns, and lustily bellowing the Marseillaise, or Sambre-et-Meuse. Arm in arm with them is a group of German soldiers swelling this youthful and impressive flood and they sing along, adding with all their breath to the swelling choruses of our old French songs... Unbelievable, this Babel of a supper, these toasts with Chinese princes, this German Marseillaise! The myriad little lanterns are burning down, on the mouldings of the ancient palaces and desolate pagodas and on the edges of enamelled roofs. Little by little, on the lake and in the faraway distance of the imperial woods, between the trees and the ruins, the customary darkness and quiet have returned. The Chinese princes have melted away discretely, followed by their sumptuous cortèges, quickly spirited away far from here in their sedan chairs, towards their dwellings, through the city filled with shadows...<sup>31</sup>.*

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<sup>31</sup> P. Loti, *Gli ultimi giorni di Pechino*, Padova, Muzzio, 1997, p. 244

There's a war on and this ghastly procession of soldiers crosses Beihai Park singing the Marseillaise. Few images leave such a powerful impression of the worst excesses of European colonialism and militarism of any period and involving any nation. Photos of the time, now reproduced in a plethora of different publications, show groups of European women celebrating in front of the American legation, where they sought shelter. Shaking off their fear, military advisers also stand proudly in front of the ruined embassy. And there are heads, piles of heads lopped off young Boxers who believed in the dream of freeing their land of the foreigner. All around are walls torn open by shelling and broken bodies litter the ground, with legs here and heads there. Expressions of terror redolent of Nazi reprisals are stamped on the faces of the Chinese, forced to pose with their European masters before what remains of the decapitated bodies of the Boxers. All this drifts past Loti and his observations with weightless inconsequence. For him none of this impinges; it does not even exist. And in a sense he is right. French armies have done far worse in Indochina, the British in India, in Africa and throughout the world. What is the massacre of Chinese in their own capital compared to this sensation, so new and soaked in intellectual values? A profound feeling, full of a sense of history's mystery.

*But there is also another feeling, a sensation we both experience and which each communicates to the other, almost without words, while the sound of our heels on marble slabs rings out sharply in a silence that becomes more and more solemn by the minute. It seems to us that this evening has irreversibly consecrated the collapse of Peking and the dissolution of a world. Whatever happens, even if the astonishing Asian court should reappear in this very same place, something which is in any case highly improbable, Peking is finished, its standing has been undermined and its mystery dragged out into the light of day. And yet the "Imperial City" was one of the last retreats on earth of the unknown and the marvellous, one of the final bulwarks of the ancient world, to us unknowable and cloaked in fables<sup>32</sup>.*

So cherished and desired by Europeans, so "forbidden" and denied, Peking seemed a spectre fit for the worst production of a Shakespeare tragedy. A stage set without actors, scarred by silence and the void.

And a void is what it had become, as the first scholars (E. Bretschneider) and the first kindky and responsive English ladies (Juliet Bredon) discovered. Peking really was a void. Just as Qianlong and the Manchu emperors before him had wanted. It was a perfect, empty backdrop to be filled out with the art and culture of a country like China, too big and too spread out to accommodate only one, whether one people, one idea or one ideology. Peking was an empty, enticing mirror, reflecting and refracting

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<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p.247.

two thousand years of Chinese culture. Here the poor man could find wealth, the soldier power, the administrator bureaucracy, the man of letters paintings and the worshipper a temple. Here too the Westerner who knew nothing and cared less saw reflected only the painful shadow of his own ignorance. Peking had withdrawn into its courtyards. It had neither avenues nor squares: its natural stance was not outward-looking but one of intimately domestic intimacy of a kind sometimes associated with government and officialdom. In any case, the focus was always on an area of limited size, a *hutong*, a temple or a park. This was Peking, whose nature Westerners never seemed to grasp, but which was so clear to the Chinese.

*Its charm lies both in the opulence of the imperial palaces and in the quiet, sometimes incredibly rural, life of its family households. This is a city where one can be enchanted by the art, the architecture and the colourful festivals, while at the same time enjoying the peace and quiet of life in the country*<sup>33</sup>.

Like a frame made of red stones and walls, Peking had nothing to say to those who had nothing to ask of it, or of themselves. It held nothing for those who peered at it as if into a mirror and could make out in the reflection nothing more than themselves, their own world and their own culture.

Just the great Qianlong, the emperor who took it to the edge of the modern world, Peking remains elusive. It defies definition: at times ghastly, probably dirty and dusty, but always re-emerging unexpectedly in a temple courtyard, in the colour of a red wall at sunset, in the enamelled tiles of certain pavilions and in the elegant interweaving of the green of bamboo and pines. It is there in the shadow of trees skilfully placed in order to be reflected in the water, in the play of the roofs and in the whiteness of the Baita Pagoda on the island of Qionghua.

Peking is nothing without its history and that of its country. It is a husk without the figures who designed and enlarged it, without the awareness of an ambiguous and uncertain past gradually bent by men and the passage of centuries to the will of its historic destiny: to be the mirror and capital of China. Peking's is not a natural beauty, although there are plenty of fine views. There are no works of breathtaking artistic accomplishment, although it contains a considerable number of them. It does not have the kind of picturesque folklore typical of tourist attractions, which appeals to sightseers and is manna for shopkeepers. In some respects Peking seems to be the exact opposite of Venice. While the latter is happy to be crossed and explored and seems (but only seems!) to give itself entirely, Peking draws back and hides, it is not at home.

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<sup>33</sup> Lin Yutang, *Pechino Imperiale*, op. cit., p. 12.

Like a painting by a man of letters, like certain great novels or some pieces of music, Peking expects those wishing to make its acquaintance to meet it halfway by stripping off what they think they know and approaching what they hope to find. In this spirit did J. Bredon wander with responsive fellow-feeling through the temples between 1910 and 1920 questioning monks, caretakers, soldiers and porters, letting herself be taken in by their endless yarns, anecdotes and stories, so that in the end they themselves became the web, the mesh which held the city and its cultural domain together. Complex and elusive, like a cup of green tea or a good painting, it needs calmness, concentration and silence. Gradually she discovered, as we do, that Peking was a container like the one familiar to Taoism, whose emptiness has to be perfect in order to contain everything. It turned into a theatre set veering from shabby to magnificent, where the actors were always missing. Because what Peking asks, and with literary disdain denies to those who do not know or do not want to know, is the humility to understand that certain views, certain angles, certain places and certain images are only stage scenery, the setting for a drama which summons its actors indirectly. It evokes them by proxy. It quotes without naming them, refers to them without showing them and introduces while concealing them. Bredon, Bretschneider and certainly many others were aware of this secret, which was well known to Chinese literati, and they had the humility to acknowledge that the stage was empty. But, they must have thought, if the stage was empty it did not necessarily mean there was no drama. Perhaps it was over, perhaps it was still to start. Maybe it was already taking place before their very eyes and they were unable to see it. So with the humility of the wise they agreed to ask those who knew more than they did. They began talking to people and their acquaintances, until they came to realize that Peking in fact remembered and held fast to everything, turning it into a literary quotation, a subtle and learned echo. But it remained open to everyone, to ordinary people and men of letters, rich and weak alike.

This theatre without actors, like a painting by Velazquez or a still life by Morandi, had become a theatre where all the actors were present simultaneously. Each had his part, each a role and a subplot. They intertwined, overlapped and swapped parts and names, like the city itself, which has had so many names that it no longer knows what it should be called. The Yan princes, General An Lushan, Emperor Yongle, the Duke of Zhou, Emperor Minhuang, the Liao commanders, the heroic Jin, the hordes of Genghis Khan and Kublai Khan. Then there was Marco Polo, Matteo Ricci, the Jesuits of the 18th century... until that moment in history when “all” had been said and done and the rest was silence.

And a man with several weaknesses but an equal number of strengths, Qianlong, appreciated that the time to take centre stage had passed and that it was wiser to retire, leaving the Forbidden City to speak of the Ming, Beihai Park to remember

Kublai Khan, the Jade Hill Spring to celebrate the Jin and the Tianningsi Pagoda to muse over the Liao.

In the end what is there of Qianlong in Peking? There is nothing. Only this respectful and fearful silence. There is a trembling wait and a love for the pulse of history, the great figures of the past and the eras that have succeeded one another. There is also the conviction that the ruler or his capital should not impose his beliefs and celebrate his own power, but vanish into a courageous and ethereal void, as an offering to the nation so that it may express itself and become self-aware. In essence, so that it may be great and united in its diversity.