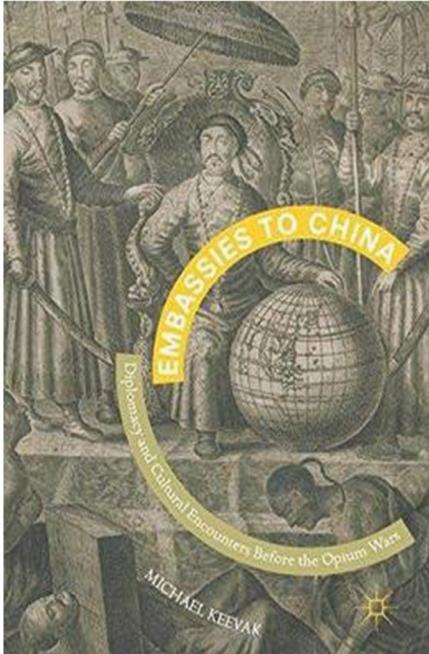


## Review

Michael Kevak, *Embassies to China. Diplomacy and Cultural Encounters Before the Opium Wars*, Singapore, Palgrave Macmillan, 2017, 162 pp. ISBN: 978-981-10-3971-3.



The story and history of the interactions between China and Europe before the nineteenth century was never bound to lead to the European domination of South-East Asia, although it is regularly presented in that light. Perhaps more so than any other country during the premodern period, China's Middle Kingdom not only rebuffed the often proclaimed European hegemony, but rejected it with a fair amount of indifference. The many successes recounted in Michael Kevak's *Embassies to China. Diplomacy and cultural encounters before the Opium Wars* are therefore not necessarily European ones. In a little over 160 pages, Kevak relates how different European countries encountered China through official embassies between 1248 and 1720, and how notions of global modernity developed through intercultural contacts between China and the West. He focusses on how different normative notions of for instance war and peace, trade, religion, and diplomacy shaped the relations

between China and Europe, in which ideas about the (im)possibility of reciprocity are of specific importance. Surprisingly, Michael Kevak is the first to devote a monograph to the subject of political and cultural embassies sent from Europe to China before the Opium Wars of the early nineteenth century. As such, it certainly provides a recommendable first introduction to this highly interesting and important subject of early modern cultural interaction.

The book consists of seven chapters, of which the first and last provide well-written and clear book-ends to the main sections which themselves focus on the individual embassies

sent by the pope in Rome, and the respective rulers of Portugal, the Dutch Republic, France and Russia. In the introduction, Keevak sets out his main arguments, focussing on how 'Westerners soon discovered [...] that China's ideas about international relations were just as complicated and full of tradition as their own, and that in so many respects the two systems seemed to be in direct conflict' (p. 2). As professor in the Department of Foreign Languages at National Taiwan University, Keevak is well suited to present in one publication both the European and the Chinese perspective on the intercultural contacts and conflict between the regions discussed. He has previously written on the history of racial thinking in his *Becoming Yellow* (2011), and is the author of various articles concerning the early encounters between East Asia and Europe. In many ways, Keevak succeeds in providing a multi-faceted point of view, in which the acknowledgement of China's unmistakable political, economic, and cultural superiority is of great value. For 'this was not simply a clash of cultures in which the two sides could only speak at cross purposes. For in each of these encounters, China managed to force its point of view upon the West far more than the other way around' (p. 2), and it is this superiority of China that resonates in the following five chapters.

This is first made clear when the papal embassy of 1248 is discussed. Pope Innocent IV (1243-1254) and the king of France understood that some sort of agreement should be reached between the Christian West and the Mongol ruler of China of the late thirteenth century. To prevent any invasion, the Pope sent a Franciscan envoy to the Great Khan on a mission of peace 'asking them to stop their territorial expansion and [...] convert to Christianity' (p. 3). In this chapter, the concept of "peace" plays a leading role, the meaning of which did not translate well between China and Europe. This first chapter echoes the fifth, in which pope Clement XI (1700-1721) sent another religious embassy, but this time addressed to the Kangxi emperor (1662-1722) in Beijing. The emperor, like the Khan in the thirteenth century, understood very well what the delegation was requesting but chose not to grant the visitors's appeal on the basis of structures of beliefs held in China itself. The Portuguese embassy of 1515, discussed in the third chapter, focusses on how the Portuguese's aim of monopolising trade would soon prove disastrous in part because of a difference in understanding over what the concept of 'empire' entailed. Chapter Four turns to Holland, which sent its first official embassy in 1655, requesting a 'free trade' agreement. Here again, mutual understanding was thwarted by Chinese superiority as well as mutual miscomprehension over the Dutch assumption that commerce was 'a divinely inspired means by which one part of the globe might acquire what it lacked from another' (p. 6).

Keevak concludes his book with the account of the Russian embassies of the late seventeenth, and early eighteenth centuries. The interactions between Russia and China are markedly different from those between the Middle Kingdom and the other countries discussed within this work for the simple fact that 'Russia was not [...] categorized as a "western ocean" country' (p. 8). China chose to give Russia certain rights of trade in exchange for the latter's noninterference in central Asia, which was necessary to maintain the power balance in this region. In these exchanges, it was still China who remained firmly in control since its actions were dictated not by a notion of equality but simply to provide a solution to a domestic problem. In the end, Keevak maintains that all the

embassies discussed in his book were failures for the Westerners. Both sides remained at least somewhat ignorant about the other's motives and points of view, whereby 'two versions of peace, empire, trade, religion, and diplomacy collided' (p. 9). China, however, always came out on top and the West's desires 'could be rendered completely superfluous' (p. 9).

Michael Keevak's contribution to our understanding of early modern intercultural exchange between China and the West primarily lies in his analysis of how both sides perceived *each other* during their often brief but noteworthy interactions. This dual approach is fairly innovative, since research on the subject tends to focus on only one perspective. In this day and age, Keevak's more global outlook should be the norm. His focus on the thirteenth to eighteenth centuries provides much needed insights into a period of crucial (inter)cultural development, which is often overshadowed by the Opium Wars of the early nineteenth century. This being said, his bibliography appears to be somewhat limited and even dated. In recent years much research has been done on the subject of contact between Asia and the West during the early modern period which Keevak does not mention.

This somewhat limited perspective is also apparent in the epilogue in which one would perhaps have hoped for insights into the changing position of China during the eighteenth and nineteenth century. Our general view concerning China is to such a high degree determined by the excesses of perception – on the one hand China as all-mighty ruler of Asia, on the other as submissive to the English and European economic interests – that a more nuanced image would have been welcome.

Besides these minor points of criticism, Keevak's *Embassies to China* provides a much needed foray into the clearly wondrous world of cultural and political embassies sent by Western powers to the Middle Kingdom. By studying these in concord instead of in isolation he reaches new insights into the pressing question of how the two regions related to each other. And while this rather concise book cannot be expected to provide the definitive word on the subject, it certainly a highly recommendable introduction for anyone engaged with intercultural contact in the early modern period.

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