



University
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Department
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Why did Macartney fail? The historiography of Britain's 1793 embassy to China

Public Lecture by

Prof. Dr. Henrietta Harrison (University of Oxford)



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The Macartney Embassy of 1793 is famous as the start of Anglo-Chinese diplomatic relations. Lord Macartney failed to achieve any of his negotiating aims, and a long tradition of historians have used it to illustrate the failures of the Qing dynasty to acknowledge the rising power of the West: Demanding that Lord Macartney kowtow to the emperor and rejecting the gifts that would have demonstrated the importance of the European scientific revolution. In this lecture I will look at how this interpretation came into being and why it has been so popular, showing that it reflects both British justifications for imperial expansion in China in the nineteenth century and early twentieth-century Chinese revolutionary critiques of Confucianism.

Henrietta Harrison is Professor of Chinese History at the University of Oxford. Her research uses micro-history and oral history approaches to explore the lives of ordinary people in China from the Qing dynasty until today. Her most recent book is the award-winning monograph [*"The Perils of Interpreting: The Extraordinary Lives of Two Translators between Qing China and the British Empire"*](#) (Princeton University Press, 2021).

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