

BARBARIANS AND MANDARINS

*Overleaf.* LORD ELGIN SIGNING THE TREATY OF TIENSIN, June 26, 1858. Chinese resistance to ratifying this treaty was to lead, two years later, to the allied capture and sack of Peking. This was one of the series of treaties forced on China by the West that led to China's virtual loss of sovereignty and the end of empire. (From the *Illustrated London News*, 1858)

# BARBARIANS

*Thirteen Centuries*

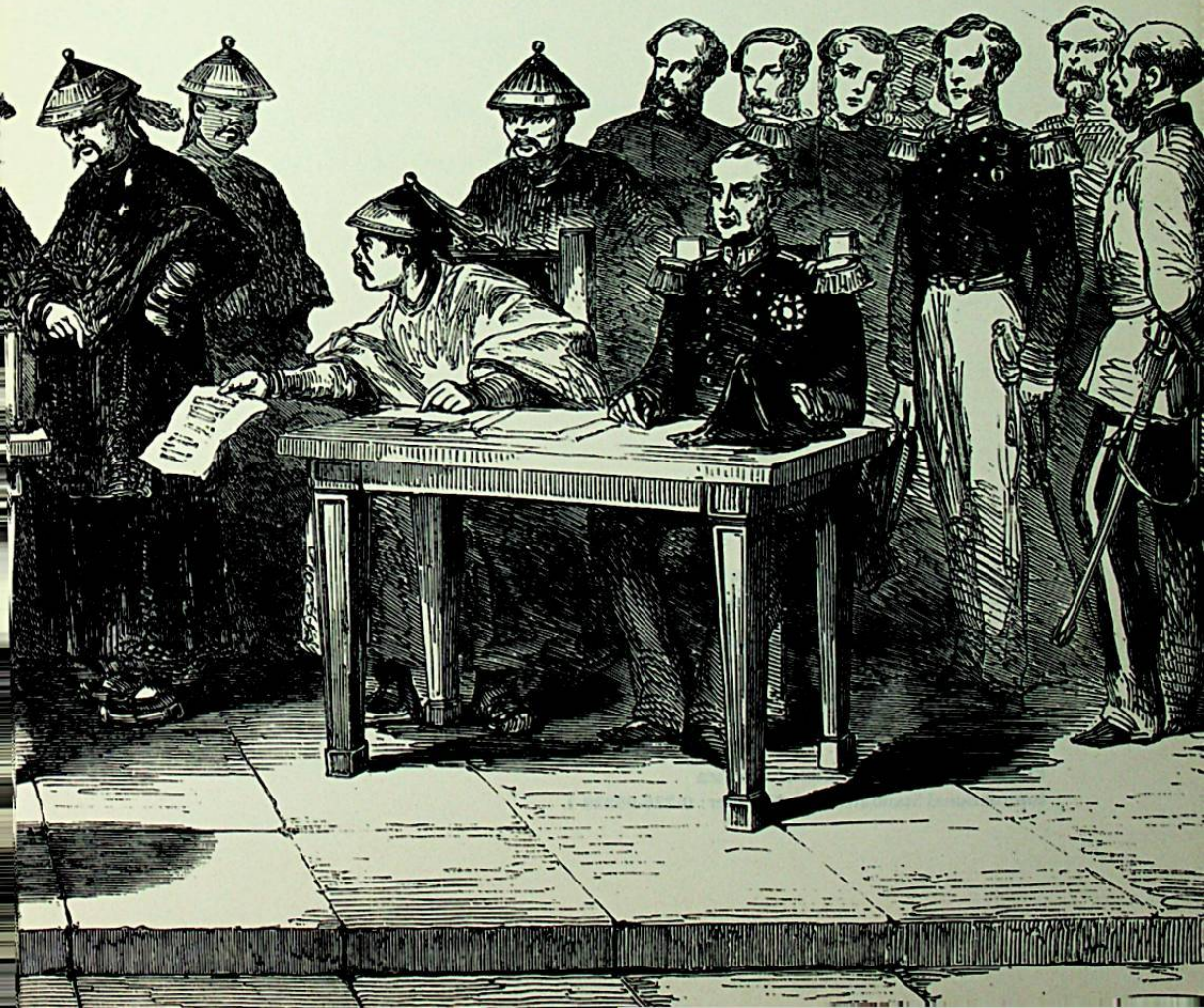


NIGEL CAMERON

AND MANDARINS  
*of Western Travelers in China*

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## PREFACE

FIRST AND FOREMOST, this is a book about people, about travelers and their motives and their adventures—and about their reluctant hosts at journey's end. Diplomatic and political histories, filled as they are with broad sweeps and heavy laden with grand significances, often seem to lose sight of the fact that history is made by people and, when written, must be read by people, that but for the farmer in his field there would be no governments and no prime ministers to govern them, that but for early travelers making their ways into unknown lands there would be no ambassadors extraordinary and plenipotentiary—for there would be no contacts between country and country, people and people, for them to maintain. History then, if we look at it in this way, is, in the words of Carlyle, "the essence of innumerable biographies." Here in this book we are dealing with the prime stuff of history—the people in whose actions its essence resides—in the belief that along the way we shall follow for so many centuries from Europe and America to the Middle Kingdom there is a significance that leaps the gulf of time and bears on the present day.

There is adventure enough in these travelers' tales. In most of them I have allowed the travelers to speak for themselves so far as possible, drawing upon many disparate and obscure and often out-of-print sources in the attempt to reveal a meaningful pattern of adventures—one that at the same time would be clear enough to follow and would also be representative. Here in this pattern we can enjoy the vantage point of time and look over the strange man-made edifices of the centuries with a perspective that was denied the travelers themselves, caught up as they were in an immediate and often hazardous present.

Writing in 1922, Bertrand Russell, one of the latter-day travelers, said: "A European lately arrived in China, if he is of a receptive and reflective disposition, finds himself confronted with a number of very puzzling questions. . . . Chinese problems, even if they affected no one outside China, would be of vast importance, since the Chinese are estimated to constitute about a quarter of the human race. In fact, however, all the world will be

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vitality affected by the development of Chinese affairs, which may well prove a decisive factor, for good or evil, during the next two centuries. This makes it important, to Europe and America almost as much as to Asia, that there should be an intelligent understanding of the questions raised by China, even if, as yet, definite answers are difficult to give. . . .”

Prophetic words indeed. The puzzling questions of China are even more acute today than they were in 1922—and still more difficult to answer. And, as events have turned out, their decisive nature seems to be much more imminent than those two centuries Lord Russell imagined. In this book I have attempted what is perhaps a new approach to the questions and their answers, an attempt to fill what writers of prefaces are wont to call a long-felt need.

In plain words, perhaps the reader “of a receptive and reflective disposition” may here be able to trace—without excessive expenditure of time and without the bafflement that would be occasioned by reading in full the often contradictory literature on the subject—the course of the Western wooing and assault (for it was both in varying degrees) of China. The East-West relationship is still far from workable. How to make it work?—this is a question to which possibly there may be answers as the picture unrolls down the years in the manner of a Chinese scroll—but an untypical scroll in that conflict rather than serenity, “barbarians” as well as Chinese, fill the scene.

I have purposely said almost nothing about the personalities involved in Sino-Western relations under the Republic, nor after the rise of the Communists. Important as these later developments are, they do not really form part of our story. The fundamental pattern of relations between the Western powers and China had clearly emerged in all its essentials by the time of the Boxer Rebellion in 1900. Events since that time have largely tended to be variations on the already enunciated theme. (We may note, as a simple example, the close likeness between Chinese Communist attitudes to the West, now inclusive of Russia, and the attitudes of the early Ming dynasty so long ago.) Tentatively it might be said that the attitudes displayed in the encounters between West and East which we shall examine have turned out to be essentially similar to those producing the same or similar problems that face us—and face the Chinese too—today.

This book is not intended to be a history of China, so the reader will find in it no more than the minimum of formal history necessary for the comprehension of the events with which we are dealing.<sup>1</sup> But perhaps the bare outline of the succession of dynasties, the character of a handful of representative high-ranking Chinese, and the press of Chinese event that is given in relation to our Western travelers will suffice for background. The reader

1. The better histories of China are included in the Bibliography. And the story of Peking—where much of the East-West dialogue took place—has already been treated at some length in my and Brian Brake's *Peking: A Tale of Three Cities*.

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may take comfort in the fact that most of our Western travelers arrived in China knowing considerably less about Chinese history and customs than he himself will know when he has done with this book. For the most part it was on these men, in all their variety and in all their variegated states of ignorance and knowledge, that the story of East-West relations hung, at least until something like a hundred years ago. After that time governments tended to take the center of the stage, changing the pattern of relations. This change is reflected in the closing chapters.

By any standard, the story of the East and West face to face is a fascinating one. There is wit enough in it, and humor, suffering and endurance, courage, tenacity, and also cowardice—on both sides. There are great men, ideas and ideals great and less great, old and new. There are—a point worth noting—two of the major civilizations of the world for protagonists, the Chinese and the Western. But it is also a tragic tale of confrontation and clash arising from what is perhaps one of the fundamental misapprehensions of history—the idea that one race or people is innately superior to another. Very early in the story, when Western traders realized that their guns were all they needed in order to enforce their will on China, the West began to assume its own superiority toward the Chinese, and to Oriental peoples in general. Once set on this course, their feelings of superiority expanded to the dimensions of a cult and were accepted as axiomatic. Right up to the time when the present Chinese regime came to power, there were lamentably few Westerners who in their hearts thought of the Chinese as much more than an ancient nation sunk irretrievably in an outworn culture and its dark abuses.

The Chinese, for their part, had always—quietly, even smugly—felt superior to the rest of the world for reasons we shall see. And when the Western part of the world (as distinguished from China's less culturally developed immediate neighbors) came to her shores in numbers, the activities of its representatives tended to confirm the age-old Chinese opinion that China was indeed the seat and source of the sole valid culture in the world. From times far earlier than any described in this book—times long before the first recorded European set foot in the Middle Kingdom—the character *yi*, "barbarian," was the normal Chinese word applied to all non-Chinese peoples. When the first Europeans at last reached China, the Chinese saw little reason to make fish of one foreigner and fowl of the other. From the apex of that extraordinary pyramid of power—the emperor and mandarins in the capital and the august governors of the provinces—right down to the base, to the ordinary people with their feet in the immemorial soil, the Chinese continued to call *all* foreigners barbarians.

Westerners went on calling the Chinese heathens and pagans, and considering them very much a people to be pitied. (And to pity is, often enough, to despise.) Heathens and barbarians—West and East: the epithets carried

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almost the same derogatory connotation. Who, then, were the barbarians? And who the mandarins? What happened in the long confrontation? These are questions I have hoped to suggest in the title of this book, to trace and disentangle in the pages that follow.

Many quotations are used from the writings of the travelers themselves as well as from other sources. Every effort has been made to identify the precise source of each substantial quotation, without burdening the book with excessive paraphernalia. When all quotations from a particular author come from a single volume, the author's name alone is sufficient for finding the source in the Bibliography, where full bibliographical details are given. Two or more works by a single author are distinguished by abbreviated titles as well as the author's name.

# Barbarians and Mandarins

Thirteen Centuries of  
Western Travelers in China

*Nigel Cameron*



"Some of the figures in this delightful work are famous (Marco Polo), and some of the events are infamous (the Opium War), but most of what Mr. Cameron has to tell is unfamiliar, and fascinating besides."

—*New Yorker*

"*Barbarians and Mandarins*, Cameron's history of Western travelers in China from the Nestorian monk Alopen down to the neocolonial diplomats of the beginning of this century, is a kind of travel story in reverse. For Alopen in the seventh century, for William of Rubruck and Marco Polo 600 years later, and for the Portuguese traders and Jesuits of the sixteenth century, the journey to China was like a science-fiction odyssey. They traveled on foot and on horseback across unforgiving deserts; they sailed the seas in boats no sane man would board to cross the lake in Central Park; they burned, froze, starved, were tortured and humiliated, only to find at the end of their journey a civilization infinitely more complex and advanced than the one they had left behind. . . . As Nigel Cameron describes it . . . the country becomes, literally, that bourne from which no traveler returns, the final enigma that not even jet travel has solved." —A. Alvarez, *Saturday Review*

"By reviewing what western travelers have seen and said about China since Alopen in the seventh century, Cameron illumines both the weaknesses of the old dynasties and the persevering qualities of their ever-resilient peoples. He weaves the fascinating details upon which his picturesque traveling westerners reported together with terse and historical summaries of his own. The result is a smoothly flowing narrative that will interest even travel readers only remotely interested in the Middle Kingdom." —Louis Zara, *Chicago Sunday Sun-Times*

NIGEL CAMERON began his own travels in Asia in 1955 as special correspondent for the *London Daily Mail*. He is the author of *The Chinese Smile*, *To the East a Phoenix*, *The Yellow River*, and coauthor, with Brian Brake, of *Peking: A Tale of Three Cities*.

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