

---

# Pro Rege

---

---

Volume 50 | Number 3

Article 9

---

March 2022

## The Last Embassy: The Dutch Mission of 1795 and the Forgotten History of Western Encounters with China (Book Review)

Jack R. Van Der Slik

Follow this and additional works at: [https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro\\_rege](https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege)

---

### Recommended Citation

Van Der Slik, Jack R. (2022) "The Last Embassy: The Dutch Mission of 1795 and the Forgotten History of Western Encounters with China (Book Review)," *Pro Rege*: Vol. 50: No. 3, 43 - 44.

Available at: [https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro\\_rege/vol50/iss3/9](https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege/vol50/iss3/9)

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the University Publications at Digital Collections @ Dordt. It has been accepted for inclusion in Pro Rege by an authorized administrator of Digital Collections @ Dordt. For more information, please contact [ingrid.mulder@dordt.edu](mailto:ingrid.mulder@dordt.edu).

---

*The Last Embassy: the Dutch Mission of 1795 and the Forgotten History of Western Encounters with China.* Tonio Andrade. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2021, 408 pages. ISBN 978- 0- 691177113. Reviewed by Jack R. Van Der Slik, Professor Emeritus of Political Studies and Public Affairs, University of Illinois Springfield.

---

It is, of course, the long subtitle for *The Last Embassy* that drew my attention to this fascinating historical inquiry about a Dutch political mission to China in the late 18th century. The story has a simple premise. The Dutch nation and its Dutch East India Company were seeking trade opportunities with China. A unique event, the celebration of the Chinese Qianlong Emperor's 60th year in office, was to be held in Beijing in 1795. On behalf of country and company, the duty to serve as an ambassador-celebrant fell to a high-ranking company man, Isaac Titsingh, a director of the trading company with years of experience in Japan. Assigned to second place for the mission was Everardus Van Braam Houckgeest, an experienced director of the Canton (now Guangzhou) office for the Dutch East India Company. His trade experience in Canton was significant because the Canton port was "the only port in China where people from the Western Oceans are allowed to trade" (22). To remedy the fact that neither Titsingh nor Van Braam could converse in Chinese, Titsingh engaged the son of a French acquaintance to be his translator: Chretien Louis Joseph de Guignes. Titsingh assuaged the translator's ego by appointing him as his secretary and allowing him a French assistant of his own.

The storyline, told by historian Tonio Andrade, with many details about the more than 1300 miles of travel from Canton to Beijing, has three parts. First is the arduous trip, beginning in mid-November, to reach Beijing for a 1795 New Year's celebration. The travelers, totally dependent on the Chinese nation's travel arrangements, had to suffer harsh, often cold, circumstances. The Dutch complained among themselves that the "accommodations [were] terrible," and they recorded in their journals about the very poor food and host conditions." Often housed overnight, the Dutch spent many evenings "in a miserable hut [where their hosts] and the others go to bed without dinner" (118-119).

But the scene changed sharply when the visi-

tors arrived in Beijing. Their status rose markedly, as they were included in the Emperor's season of celebration. Great hospitality was then extended to them. For example, "As a sign of his pleasure with the Dutch, he [the emperor] grants another unprecedented honor: a tour of temples and pavilions in imperial gardens off limits to most foreign guests." As an additional favor, the Dutch received a special tour around the Eternal Peace Temple, Five Dragon Pavilions, and all the other beautiful places, an unprecedented mark of imperial favor (176). The culminating treat for the Dutch was the pleasurable return from Beijing to Canton, with more leisurely touring and good-weather-blessed days. Carried along and served by porters, cooks, and guardians, the principals traveled with a substantial retinue in an exquisite but unfamiliar land. Stopping in major cities to be honored by local dignitaries according to imperial protocol, the Europeans were on display. Sometimes carried in sedan chairs, they were shown sites that local dignitaries considered noteworthy. The journey took a slow pace, not arriving in Canton until mid-May 1795. The Dutch celebrated their return as a political and economic victory over rival British interests.

The victory was of brief significance even for Titsingh and Van Braam. During their successful venture in China but unknown to them, the Dutch Republic had been overwhelmed by the French. The Dutch royal house had fled to England. All of Dutch trade was upset by new enmities and alliances. The fallout divided Titsingh from Van Braun. Although Titsingh, who died in 1810, sought to document his experiences (as Andrade tells us), most of his writings "remained unpublished until the 1990s. Titsingh could have made a great name for himself as a traveler and statesman.... But he was more interested in scholarship than celebrity" (281). Van Braam, who managed to collect and auction off an assemblage of Chinese art with financial success, returned to Europe and died in 1801.

Andrade concludes his study by comparing and contrasting the views of historical scholars about the seemingly submissive Dutch diplomats who deferred to Chinese customs of deference, especially when entertained by the Chinese emperor. The British were particularly aggrieved by the Dutch success. Its traders had scorned the rite of kowtow and had been denied courtesies and respect from the emperor because of their offense. The Dutch received favor for conforming to the courtesies expected by the Chinese.

Andrade closes his study on a light note, commending the Dutch mission of 1795 for revealing and sharing feelings of sociability in their mission of diplomacy. Their mission was not one of bargaining, strategy or dealmaking: “The Dutch visi-

tors were greeted so warmly in the Forbidden City and the Imperial Pleasure Gardens not just because their kowtows reinforced the imperial order, but also because it was fun to include these exotic outsiders in the holiday festivities” (307).

Andrade’s deep scholarly dive into obscure sources in Dutch, Latin, French, Spanish, and Chinese is the basis for a masterly account of a minor, yet historic, East-West cultural exchange. Had the Napoleonic hostilities between the French and the English not intruded upon Dutch enterprise in Asia at the beginning of the 19th century as it did, even Dordt University might have a decidedly different location and history. Andrade’s book is a charming piece of scholarship. I strongly recommend it as a pleasurable read.