

The practice of 'kowitz'

In 1793, a person granted an audience with the Qianlong Emperor was expected to kowitz – to approach the Emperor and bow so low that one's forehead touched the floor. Sometimes, the person would be prostrate on the floor, or at other times still kneeling, probably awkwardly, while lowering the head to the floor. (William Alexander records in his journal that on one occasion when the Emperor passed by in procession, one of the Chinese officials placed a hand on his neck and forced his head down to the ground. Alexander suggests he was being a bit curious and was looking around.)

There have been debates about the meaning of the kowitz. To some, it represented an unequal relationship between the two parties, with the emperor seen as all-powerful and superior while the visitor was seen as inferior, subordinate and even humiliated by the act. Others claim that the act of kowitz was a ritualistic sign of respect for the emperor and China, and that the emperor in return welcomed and accepted the visitor. Confucianism was at the centre of Qing government practices and rituals, such as the kowitz, were seen as essential to maintain the hierarchical social and political order of Chinese life.

Lord Macartney came from a British culture where respect for the monarch was shown by bowing or kneeling, but not by prostrating oneself. Some historical accounts indicate that, on approaching the Emperor, Macartney went down on one knee – as he would have before his monarch King George III – but did not perform kowitz. In his diary, Macartney wrote that he had acted according to British royal court decorum.

Macartney was instructed to follow all protocols of the Chinese court as long as they did not lessen the dignity of the English monarch. Before the actual audience with the Emperor, Macartney carried out extensive negotiations with the imperial court officials to find a way around the issue of how Macartney would act on meeting the Emperor. The imperial officials even suggested they understood how difficult it would be for Macartney to kowitz because of the kind of clothing he wore, in particular the tight pants buttoned at the knee. He was even given permission to present himself to the Emperor with the buttons undone, a significant concession since one was expected to dress properly in front of the emperor. He declined this and negotiations continued for several days as both sides tried to sort out the issues. Macartney agreed to kowitz if the Emperor's closest advisers did the same before a portrait of King George III. This was declined.

Whether Macartney actually did kowitz is still debated by historians. The Emperor seems to have commented that the British envoy was simply 'ignorant', which may suggest he didn't kowitz, but in a poem the Emperor wrote about the meeting he seems to express satisfaction at the actions of the British.