contemporary Western conception of responsibility, but the fact that he was condemned because he was responsible for choosing an unauspicious day makes it clear that, in fact, he was held responsible.


15 For this latter aspect, see N. Svin, “Copernicus in China”, Studia Coper- nicana (Warsaw) 6 (1973), pp. 63–122. The nature and content of the astronomy, as well as the European sources it was based upon, are best described in the work by Hashimoto Keizo, Hsü Kuang-Ch’i and Astronomical Reform. The Process of the Chi- nese Acceptance of Western Astronomy 1629–1635 (Osaka, 1988).


It is not surprising that after two centuries the subject of the first formal British diplomatic mission to the Chinese court is still capable of stimulating questions and debate. The documents this mission generated, from Qianlong’s letter to George III to the profusion of writings its various British members left behind, have set the tone of (Western) ideas on Sino-Western relations and late imperial Chinese history for the larger part of these two centuries. Conversely, the reaction that is taking shape in the last two decades — turning away from the essentially “Western-centred” con-
cepts of “impact and response”, “tradition and modernity”, and the (predetermined) negative interpretations that go with them (implied in the term “non-Western”) – also comes to bear on this episode, which after all gave rise to these concepts. The deep “symbolic resonance” of the embassy, that none of the present authors fails to mention in one way or another, seems to have amplified to such an extent that it has become difficult to read these papers without mentally keeping score of their progress up and down the current ladder of socio-historical correctness. From Zhang Shunhong, who claims that what the court “needed to do” was “to learn from the West as it did in the late nineteenth century”, just as it “needed to reform feudal institutions and start to move towards a modern society” (both of which “the Qing court under Qianlong failed to do”), to James Hevia for whom “tribute has become a taboo word, only to be used in the phrase “tribute system (synthesis)” – with reference to the approach he disputes – but never as a translation for the term gong 貢, this volume offers valuable insight into the rifts in the field of late imperial Chinese history.

In his introduction, the editor also appeals for a rethinking of traditional notions, when he speaks of

the complacent structure of explication which the mission is too easily, and too often, forced into: a “collision of civilizations”, one of which is “immobile”, and the other, by implication, dynamic (p. 8).2

Although one cannot but agree that the present collection does not offer a definitive response, he rightly claims that these papers (I would say: some of them) indicate departures – directions indicating the work still to be done.

P.J. Marshall3 paints in nuanced colours a picture of the mission from the late 18th century British point of view, filling in the background setting as well as the principal characters. The incentives for the undertaking are set in their context of domestic and East India Company politics – with the home government’s hopes for commercial expansion (no doubt largely through private trade) overruling the Company’s fears of losing its privileges. No less important a goal was the observation of the country and its people as objects for study. In this respect, the embassy members’ frame of mind before they set out on their journey is characterized by Marshall as “confident scepticism”:

It was most unlikely that there was anything exceptional about China. It must be carefully observed and recorded. Assessments