Explaining British–Chinese Divergence through Comparative Strategic Scopes

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This paper finds that “grand strategic scope” bridges ideational and material explanations for the so-called “great divergence” between the West (specifically Britain) and China.

Keywords: scope, strategy, Macartney, Britain, China

Introduction

Lord George Macartney’s 1793 Embassy to the Qing Chinese imperial court represents a pivotal moment in world history. The British offered access to Western technology, but the Qianlong Emperor declined Macartney’s overtures because, he wrote, the Chinese had no use for Europe’s innovations and industry. Nevertheless, after about 1800, China became mired in domestic and international challenges while the Europeans came to physically dominate the world. Consequently, scholars have focused on this moment to understand how and why such a divergence could occur. Though fruitful, such research has tended to favor either material (such as geographic) or ideational (such as cultural) factors.

This paper, in contrast, finds that “grand strategic scope” bridges these perspectives and provides a missing element to scholarship surrounding the so-called “great divergence.” Specifically, grand strategic scope (or simply “scope”) offers a means to capture both material and ideational divergence between international actors. Drawing from International Relations (IR) and Geography literatures, I define scope as the geopolitical parameters of what policy makers consider relevant to state security. Thus, comparing the scopes of two international actors enables the researcher to form a picture of how cultural and ideological beliefs mix with security and economic interests to shape policy and behavior. Grand strategic scope describes how the interaction of these variables can lead to different outcomes for different actors as representatives of distinct civilizations.

To analyze the British and Qing scopes, this study uses the Macartney Embassy as a focal point to compare crucial elements of scope: role perception, or view of others and self; official and foreign policies (including military action); and trade network priorities. It finds, first, that while both empires constructed civilizing missions, the British vision was more proactively global where the Chinese assumed that peripheral actors would inevitably be drawn toward the imperial center. Second, imperial rivalries drove the British to develop military competence at home, on their own continent, upon the oceans and trans-continentally. In contrast, the Qing geostrategic position drove the regime to develop only the first two of these spheres. In terms of trade, finally, British ideology dictated that global maritime commerce might enlarge British coffers as well as foster a benign international order. A land empire legitimated by a set of established hierarchical relationships, the Qing saw overseas trade as both marginal and dangerously uncontrollable.
The Macartney Embassy

By the 1790s, Western and Eastern civilizations seemed to boast similarly advanced levels of material development. China’s Qing dynasty commanded an empire vaster and wealthier than any other in the world. Its sophisticated institutions reigned over one the largest and most diverse populations of pre-industrial history. At the same time, however, western European nation-states underwent a consistent expansion of scientific knowledge, surplus wealth, imperial ambition, military capacity and industrial technology.¹

In this context, British traders had grown frustrated with China’s Canton system, in which the Qing court insisted that Western traders be physically contained and supervised at the port of Canton. Consequently, Henry Dundas, the Pitt government’s foreign minister, charged Macartney with seeking official diplomatic relations, a treaty of commerce and friendship, information about the distant land, potential new markets and a permanent representative in Beijing.² The embassy hoped to impress the Qing ruling elite with access to state-of-the-art items like a diving bell and a hot air balloon. In fact, whereas British trade had come to rely upon Chinese tea, silk and porcelain, Chinese merchants and consumers considered European products like sea otter pelts and navigational equipment to be of marginal interest.

For the Qing court, the traditional kowtow was what mattered about the English embassy. This symbolic expression of hierarchy conveyed Qing legitimacy, and it confirmed to observers that the world remained in proper, Sino-centric order. Given British reservations, the emperor allowed Macartney to perform an amended kowtow.³

Ultimately, though, the Emperor rejected all of Britain’s substantive requests. In a letter to George III, he explained that China had no need for western novelties and enjoyed a secure position in the world. Such an explicit rejection of incipient modern scientific and economic innovations still arouses passion when observers consider China’s subsequent political, economic and military domination by the West.

Competing Explanations

Explanations for this outcome can be divided into two levels of analysis. The first focuses specifically on the Embassy. It involves a discussion amongst historians who highlight culture and ritual as decisive factors informing the Qing rejection of Britain’s request. Mid-twentieth century scholars like Earl Pritchard and John Fairbank, for instance, considered the tribute system a pre-modern cultural artifact leading to a stagnant view of the world that ended in “a failure of perception, a failure to respond to challenge.”⁴ Chinese scholars like Tsiang T’ing-Fu and Dai Yi also argue that the tribute system both reified China’s feudal ideology and confirmed a dogma in which national security was possible only in isolation and suzerain relationships.⁵ Marxists and Chinese nationalists, on the other hand, insist that the Qianlong

¹ Of note here are arguments that, before they diverged materially, 18th century Qing and Western imperialisms were “strikingly similar.” John Adas. “Imperialism and Colonialism in Comparative Perspective,” International History Review 20:2 (June 1998): 371-373.
emperor’s response was a wise move now clouded by the inevitability of Western imperial expansionism. From a post-modern perspective, James L. Hevia argues that the tribute system was in fact a flexible one that allowed ongoing “discourses about agency.” Thus, rather than a failure to compete with the West, the Embassy demonstrates irreconcilable attempts to construct power relations through ritual.

Whatever their distinct merits, these accounts of the Embassy and its significance remain focused on the specific event and lack a rigorous appeal to a global or comparative civilization context. Furthermore, aside from the Marxist view, they turn on cultural and domestic-institutional explanations.

The second level of explanations for the Western-Chinese divergence focuses on long-term, world-historical trends. Kenneth Pomeranz dubs this world-historical shift “the great divergence.” He argues that colonial growth, especially in the Americas, solved Europeans’ “land problem” by opening overseas energy and agricultural resources, while East Asian economic growth reached an “ecological impasse” without such territories to exploit. Other theories focus on more general economic processes. Andre Gunder Frank and others, for instance, argue that the Europeans, individually and as a civilization, came to diverge from “the rest” through typical, global-level economic cycles.

Focusing more on civilizations’ characteristics, Goldstone offers an institutional explanation in which, facing rebellion and normal Malthusian decline, the Qing “promoted an orthodox and unusually rigid form of Confucian culture” even as Europeans developed engine and other sciences. Peter Perdue, meanwhile, shows how the Qing territorial push westward may have activated “decline” as the ruling elite 1) rigidly applied their western imperial policies to maritime trade, and 2) negotiated settlements with nomads that decentralized commerce and undermined the imperial center. At the same time, English developments in administration, logistics and financing fostered enhanced military and economic capacity. Wong, finally, concludes that Europe’s geography supported multiple power centers, whereas Chinese geography encouraged a more unified institutional and ideological legacy. Ultimately, the Chinese enjoyed greater unity but lacked the internal competition that drove Western states to constantly expand their economic and military powers.

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6 Hevia 1995, 244; See also Guo Yunjing. “Shilun Quingdai bingfei biguan suoguo. (Discussion on why the Qing was not a “closed-door period) in Association for the History of Sino-Foreign Relations, ed., Zhongwai guanxishi luncong (Collection of papers on Sino-foreign relations) (Peking: World Knowledge Press, 1991). 3:182-195.
7 Ibid., 30, 131.
8 Esherick (1998) disagrees; see 135-161.
15 Wong, 76-78.
A couple weaknesses surface in these accounts. First, they tend to subsume specific events and agency. Though not a fundamentally devastating problem, this tendency reduces important events like the Macartney Embassy to representative status when in fact they may play important roles in relations between and developments within the two civilizations. Second, these macro perspectives (Goldstone is an important exception) tend to favor material explanations. Given the difficulties in assessing the impact of beliefs upon behavior, this shortcoming is understandable but still leaves potentially crucial variables underexplored.

**Grand Strategic Scope**

With an array of ready explanations for the Macartney embassy’s outcomes, why add another? Grand strategic scope, as argued here, can help unify these explanations and address their weaknesses. “Grand strategy,” as a term of art for international relations (IR) scholars, can be understood as an overarching “theory” of how to achieve security and national interests during peace- and wartimes.¹⁶

In turn, grand strategic scope involves the *geopolitical parameters of what policy makers consider relevant to state security*.¹⁷ In a world of limited resources filled with many possible existential threats, policy makers must make decisions about where to allocate resources and attention. Even if implicit, scope calculations represent policy makers’ conceptual landscapes of what places are both important to core state interests and, specifically, important to state security. As studies of historical grand strategies consistently recognize, scope might be applied to current international as well as to historical contexts ranging from civilizations to small city-states – any actor capable of formulating a grand strategy may wrestle with questions of scope.¹⁸

How does grand strategic scope compensate for shortcomings in other accounts of the “great divergence” and the Macartney Embassy? First, scope allows a standardized comparison even when the actors are of different types – though of different territorial scales, the British and Qing empires still applied grand strategies. Second, scope can include both broad trends and immediate details since at any one moment in time it is both nested in long-term strategizing and focused on short-term policy challenges. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, scope unites material and ideational variables. As Johnston argues, culture and ideas converge with material realities to shape the contours of grand strategy.¹⁹

This paper assesses grand strategic scope as a map in the minds of British and Chinese elites, but variations on either material or ideational constraints should affect policy and behavioral outcomes.

**Comparison – British and Qing Grand Strategic Scopes of the Early 1790’s**

Comparing the grand strategic scopes of these two states, therefore, should offer new insights into both the Embassy’s particular outcomes and the “great divergence” overall. To operationalize British and Qing scopes, this study compares crucial elements of scope: role perceptions (or view of others and self); official and foreign policies (including military action); and trade network priorities. Not all may weigh the same in their influences on scope, but each

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represents a piece of purview without which the entire picture would stand critically incomplete. Discussions of these aspects will remain, in some ways, unsatisfactory given space constraints.

Role Perceptions

“Role perceptions” is examined first, for such perspectives inform justifications for strategic action as well as set psychological parameters to the range of possible actions available to decision-makers. For the Qing, by the 1790’s interaction with the “wider world” was routine, if constrained. A non-native dynasty, they worried especially about domestic control and what today we might call “national security.” Thus, the Qing welcomed the added strategic leverage that foreign knowledge of mathematics, philosophy, warfare, cartography, shipping and navigation might bring to the court.

Despite this openness to the “other,” Qing officialdom’s driving dichotomy remained civilization versus barbarism. In this context, civilization was, tautologically, whatever “we’ are” and deeply pervaded Chinese governance. Chen Hongmou, a bureaucrat and thinker, for instance, “understood the instrumental value of the civilizing mission, but … he also had a secure and sanguine faith in the righteousness of his purpose.” On an imperial scale, this “civilizing project,” was applied to those outside the Qing “civilizing center” to lift peripheral peoples – portrayed as unlearned children – out of barbarism.

Ideologically, the Qing also sought to cast themselves as bearers of the past while showing a path for the future. This required carefully selecting and co-opting helpful cultural identities and local elites. The military banner system, for example, distinguished the Manchus (the Qing ethnicity) as an elite warrior class with a clear role and history with the empire.

All these elements coalesced to form a clear Qing view concerning the roles that China and its outsiders ought to assume. A world of multiple lords in which the Qing sought ultimate overlordship, led the Qianlong emperor to describe himself as the Chinese Son of Heaven, the Khan of Khans; overlord of the Mongols, Xinjiang, Qinhai and Tibet; pacifier of Taiwan, Yunnan, Vietnam, Burma, Zungaria and the Gurkhas; the incarnate bodhisattva Mañjuśrī; and the head of the Manchus. Rather than hyperbole, such a title broadcasts the proper relationships inherent in what the Qing conceived as a “pluralistic, multiethnic empire.” In fact, “they regarded the peoples inhabiting the strategic Inner Asian peripheries as major participants in the imperial enterprise, imperial subjects on equal footing with Han Chinese.” For the Qing, barbarians within and outside the empire should recognize civilization’s proper, transcendent order. Pragmatically, though, the Qing demanded only ritualistic recognition of their suzerainty in distant places like Xinjiang in order to foster slow but relatively inexpensive sinicization and order.

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21 Ibid., 105-106.
24 Ibid., 407.
27 Ibid., 42-44; 90.
In a similar fashion, the British conceived of themselves as unique and offering an example as the most advanced and civilized nation. Dissimilarly, however, they also saw themselves amidst a society of peers against whom they were forced to compete and with whom they held regular interaction.

Like the Chinese, the British had grown accustomed to regular interaction with an array of regional and distant “others.” Since the European discovery of America, Western thinkers had cycled through several conceptualizations ranging from Hakluyt’s satanic aborigines to Rousseau’s noble savage. Most of these accounts cast an ill-known other as Europe’s moral or developmental counter-example. Such categorizations matured in the nineteenth century with racial notions of social Darwinism, but in the 1790’s, the British still struggled to define and understand their relationship with unfamiliar peoples. Macartney, for instance, set out with a great respect for the Chinese, developed a frustrated view of them as immobile and, afterwards, reflected with equanimity that in intercultural encounters, much is lost or misunderstood.

Edmund Burke, a well-known Parliamentarian of the era, offers instructive insights into contemporary British role conceptions. His articulation of a “Commonwealth of Europe” captures a strong sense of belonging to an international society in which a coherent “law of nations” applied between European states. Burke also worked to show how other nations, India specifically, observed laws and customs that were, in their given context, powerfully legitimate. In effect, his writings reveal a Britain that associated itself strongly with regional peers curious to understand and interact with other societies.

In addition, from their earliest contacts with distant societies, Europeans, and the British specifically, conceptualized those populations as earlier iterations of Western civilization and stuck in history without outside guidance. Having developed a civilization that esteemed rationalism and capitalist enterprise, Europeans saw non-Europeans as generally unique and diverse but also superstitious and suffering from lack of vigor.

Thus, British elites in the 1790’s considered themselves at civilization’s cutting edge, and they saw non-Europeans as ready pupils for advancement. First and foremost, Britain was ensconced in an international European society, but British of this era also saw a role for themselves bringing industry and rationalism to other nations trapped in history. This bears striking resemblance to Qing role perceptions, where the center was theoretically obliged to help civilize barbarians both inside and outside the empire. On the other hand, three key differences arise here. First, in terms of substance, where the British conflated modern innovation with civilization, the Qing held to a more ahistorical, Sino-centric ideal. Second, the British vision prescribed identifying and facilitating the historical process of cultures they encountered, whereas the Qing assumed distant cultures, like the British, would naturally be drawn into orbit.

around the Chinese center. Third, Britain’s notion of a society of peers bound by a “law of nations” was completely foreign to the hegemonic and hierarchically-minded Chinese.

**Official Relations and Foreign Policies**

Official relations and foreign policies describe how state decision makers attempt to interact with their international environment, a vital component in assessing decision makers’ grand strategic scope. For over a century, the Qing had cultivated a “geopolitical strategy [that] solved the historic problems that faced all dynasties on the northwest frontier.”

In particular, they utilized Ming supply logistics, but developed economic extraction strategies to tap agricultural and economic resources across China. They obtained scarce horses by including Mongols in the conquest elite, and they conducted divide-and-rule diplomacy with Northern neighbors where the previous dynasty lacked cultural access. By establishing a precise, cartographically modern border, they introduced an “unprecedented redefinition of China’s regime” that redefined boundaries and governance.

Finally, nuanced guest rituals channeled even the most peripheral powers toward the empire’s center, where legitimacy for both the guest and the Emperor would be enhanced.

Achieved by the 1790’s, most of these changes left the Qianlong Emperor presiding over a vast land empire and unconcerned about major geopolitical threats.

Imperial administration was both centered and diffuse. The Grand Council, a well-known policy-making body close to the emperor and imperial power, was fully centralized under Qianlong. This move consolidated internal imperial relations by enabling greater autocracy, an extensive imperial communications system, links throughout the bureaucracy, and greater secrecy to hide inner court politics. However, departments began to “own” different aspects of foreign relations. Coastal frontier policy, for example, left no room for extensive European interactions because it aimed simply to organize rulers of smaller states, ward off pirates, manage “Western Ocean” merchants (including limiting technology inflows), and prevent seditious links with overseas Chinese.

Integral to Qing imperial administration was the “tribute system.” This practice reinforced the Sino-centric civilizational order by combining ritual, economic, and material techniques to reify the emperor’s role as administrator of all civilized peoples. Refusal to participate or follow the proper strictures was not an insult to the emperor’s person but an “unnatural” act requiring punishment for threatening social harmony. In the tribute relationship with Korea, for example, the ceremony was too elaborate and expensive for either participant to profit materially, but both enjoyed enhanced legitimacy at home and abroad through the relationship. Nevertheless, the system was not egalitarian, for aside from geopolitically distant powers like the Russians, “those whom they could not incorporate they exterminated.”

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36 Ibid., 284.


39 Westerners invented this term to describe Chinese imperial relations.

40 Mancall 1970, 63.


42 Perdue 2000, 265-266.
The Qing was also a colonial empire and sought to transform cultural as well as physical spheres. Colonization usually began with a military victory and then proceeded to a minimal administrative structure that worked with local customs, began promoting integration with China proper, and began controlling movement of people across borders.\(^{43}\) Hostetler points to Guizhou province as exemplary here, because Han settlers displaced existing populations.

And what of British official policies? Above all, they were consumed with European affairs and, especially, upheaval sparked by the French Revolution. Such conflict underscores how Britain contended for its survival in a highly volatile, multipolar environment, whereas the Qing faced declining threats from nomads squeezed between the Chinese and the Russians.

For the British, the state had, over nearly a century, “monopolized and bureaucratized” the military into a regular and professionalized force.\(^{44}\) More importantly, an effective system of public finance helped fund increasingly expansive and distant international wars, while Britain’s geographical situation insulated it from land powers and encouraged naval development. Still, Britons in the 1790’s were keenly aware of their limits: the American Revolution demonstrated their weakness on land at great distance, and Pitt sought to cut the government’s massive military spending up until the outbreak of war with France.\(^{45}\)

Nevertheless, spurred by imperial challenges and great power rivalries, Britain had been pulled into, or initiated, conflicts literally around the globe for over a century. Though unplanned, military conquests grew as perceived threats to “national interests” arose in regions as diverse as North America, South Africa, and India. This led to an effort at military competence in four spheres: domestic (against rebels); land (against forces in Europe); naval; and trans-oceanic land conflict (such as in the American colonies).\(^{46}\) Tellingly, due to its geostrategic position, the Qing felt a need to only develop the first two of these four spheres.

Britain’s major purpose for military engagement was empire. For the British, empire was first and foremost an economic venture. In America, for example, colonists descended from British immigrants and considered themselves equal citizens, but the monarchy had tended to “cling to the old orthodoxy that colonies were economic satellites of Britain, and existed solely to generate wealth for the mother country.”\(^{47}\) The British East India Company, on the other hand, slowly gained authority over the subcontinent by taking advantage of local rivalries and governing with a light hand as the Mughals declined. In both cases, though, the mother country was drawn into wars and compelled to expand its military capacity and political reach in order to protect its overseas assets.

Nevertheless, an overarching imperial vision did not develop until the latter eighteenth century. Many took Rome as an example: it valued the virtue of spreading liberty and economic prosperity, just as Britons were beginning to associate their identity with liberty and sea power. Even Parliament with all its inefficiencies and public contention became a kind of clearing house or arbiter of international policies for those very reasons – it embodied liberty, hence legitimacy.\(^{48}\) Consequently, British encounters with the unfamiliar encouraged sharper

\(^{43}\) Di Cosmo 1998, 306.


\(^{45}\) Ibid., 117-120.


definitions of self and narratives of identity.\textsuperscript{49} The empire, then, extended both geographically and ideologically to accommodate a people both thrust into action and ambitious for leadership.

**Trade Network Priorities**

Finally, as an element of grand strategic scope, “trade network priorities” touches on economic policies but is also concerned with the areas or regions authorities consider important to economic health. For the Qing, internal trade strengthened the empire, especially since its networks doubled as imperial conduits. Trade from outside the empire also was necessary, yet it posed a threat: as Waley-Cohen suggests, the Qing were “anxious not to lose control of the profits, but they were also unwilling to risk the insidious effect on their overlordship that might result from the free circulation of goods emanating from altogether different cultures.”\textsuperscript{50} Consequently, trade was generally rolled into the tribute system.

Similarly, the Canton system was a matter of practicality and security; yet as scholars consistently point out, “China was drawn into the international trading world long before the fact was realized.”\textsuperscript{51} In particular, China became a “silver sink” through the first half of the eighteenth century. By the 1790’s, the global economy was deeply ensconced as Europeans, Middle Eastern Muslims, Southeast Asians and others vied to control and extend maritime trade. Nevertheless, the Qing “remained intellectually unaware of it and politically cut off.”\textsuperscript{52}

Why did China not extend its scope outward to more fully encompass this maritime wave? Certainly Chinese traders did establish communities overseas, especially in Southeast Asia, but these were “not fostered nor even countenanced by the Chinese imperial government.”\textsuperscript{53} Similarly, China enjoyed “specialized production for distant markets with wage labor, highly efficient and increasingly rational allocation of labor and capital, uniform laws to smooth the flow of trade.”\textsuperscript{54} Nevertheless, the Qing feared, in part, seditious plots developing in an uncontrolled environment – as a non-native dynasty, they remained keenly aware that Ming sympathies or political innovations could metastasize overseas.\textsuperscript{55} Unlike in Britain, no Chinese merchant class could politically flourish.\textsuperscript{56}

Indeed, the British rose to power on the wings of global trade. By the 1790’s, Britain’s global commercial interests included Caribbean sugar cane plantations, African slave ports and a wide influence over India under the British East India Company. This latter institution represents the full complexity of the British trade scope, for despite being a private company, its Royal charter offered it “wide powers of governance abroad:” it could build and arm outposts, develop navies and merchant fleets and exercise jurisdiction over local countrymen around the world.

During the 1790’s, a number of dynamics pressed Britain to maintain and even extend its trade scope. Transatlantic and Indian trade were booming, and having recovered financially from war with the American colonists, Britain was more actively engaged in Europe. Further afield, as the French wars got underway, Britain’s navy seized a host of its enemies’ ports around


\textsuperscript{50} Waley-Cohen 1999, 92.


\textsuperscript{52} Fairbank 1989, 256.

\textsuperscript{53} Fairbank 1992, 193.


\textsuperscript{55} Ibid., 133.

\textsuperscript{56} Fairbank 1992, 193.
the world. Meanwhile, incipient industrial enterprises fostered interest in finding and maintaining trade partners. As Kennedy points out, “growing trans-oceanic possessions and commerce were simultaneously a strengthening of Britain’s power position and a strategic distraction.”

Previously, Captain Cook’s Pacific voyages charted areas and catalogued resources unknown to most Europeans. This exploration broke “psychological barriers that had hitherto prevented … filling in large areas of the map.” Like China on its steppe frontiers, modern cartography reoriented thinking towards exploring territory, encompassing resources, and protecting borders. As James suggests, “two hundred years of overseas expansion had taught Europeans that new worlds contained products desired by the old.” China had learned the opposite lesson. During the Ming dynasty, the era’s most massive and sophisticated maritime endeavor set out to explore the world, but the Chinese found that the further they traveled, the less there seemed to be worth justifying such an expense. Later, the Qing found that merchants would come to them, and that limited and ritualized trade could ensure that policy goals would be met.

Empire, geopolitics and capitalism drove British trade across the globe, and the British developed ideologies to match. Whereas Britons considered French and Spanish territorial ambitions for “Universal Monarchy” a recipe for Catholic tyranny, they saw their own trade as a “mutual interaction of the peoples of the world, uniting to shower their benefits on one another in peaceable transactions.” Such ideological sleight of hand justified a global trade scope in which “dominion was reconciled with liberty” and struck a chord for many British. They believed that they surveyed a universally valid order that could improve the lot of all who accepted certain imperialist tenets. Similarly, the Qing sought tribute arrangements within an empire that allowed autonomy within a clear hierarchy.

Conclusions

As a conceptual tool, grand strategic scope both clarifies the Macartney Embassy as a key event in the “great divergence” and provides a useful case study tool in the comparative study of civilizations. It reifies and elaborates research suggesting that material, geopolitical realities channeled the West’s dramatic uptick in relative power. Specifically, this study finds that in the 1790’s, decision makers in both states worked with fundamentally different conceptual maps of the world. Thus, when Macartney requested more extensive access to China, he considered the Middle Kingdom an important field of competition in a global European contest for dominance. Indeed, this competition, coupled with economic innovations and geographic realities, drove the British to develop military and administrative competences around the world. The Qianlong Emperor, on the other hand, received Macartney as one of a number of middling, geostrategically distant actors. China’s real strategic threats had always come from the west – on land. The geographic and economic features that fostered a single empire between Mongolia and Southeast Asia also left the Qing elite unconcerned about challenges and innovations from overseas.

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57 Kennedy 1987, 137.
58 James 1996, 143.
61 Gregg 2005, 8.
Grand strategic scope also suggests that beliefs and culture interacted with these realities to shape the conceptual horizons of both British and Chinese decision makers. Whereas British elites thought in global terms, the Qing worked within a heretofore successful but more limited scope. The Chinese sought a pluralist world order that fit the “natural” overlordship relations crucial to “civilization” and saw no reason to seriously engage the maritime world, given its dangers and diminishing returns. “Western Ocean” and other peripheral would naturally enter the empire’s scope. Britain, meanwhile, extended it scope as far as it could to compete with neighborhood foes and developed an ideology that contrasted with the Qing vision of plurality within imposed order. As Peyrefitte puts it, “The British were convinced that universal domination would fall to the society that was most open and mobile and that commanded the most far-flung presence in an interrelated world.”

Why did the West and East Asia diverge in terms of material capabilities and economic prowess? This paper suggests that grand strategic scope offers accurate shorthand to encompass several answers to this question. It standardizes comparisons and draws in elements from various levels of analysis. Specifically, the Qianlong emperor rejected Macartney’s appeal because their respective grand strategic scopes - products of ideational and material constraints - proved mutually incompatible. Scope also demonstrates that while the Macartney Embassy could have experienced a different outcome, Chinese beliefs and material conditions combined to make engagement with the Western trajectory, at that moment in history, unlikely.

Scope cannot explain why the Western trajectory should have developed to become the more materially powerful, but it can illustrate why Chinese civilization failed to compete when it was in a position to do so. More broadly, scholars interested in comparing civilizations or representative actors within civilizations should find scope an important axis along which material and ideational variables diverge, both across cases and through time.

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Table 1: Grand Strategic Scopes Compared

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<th>Perceived Role</th>
<th>Policies</th>
<th>Trade Priorities</th>
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<tr>
<td>Qing China</td>
<td>Active, continental civilizing mission in service of ruling regime.</td>
<td>Domestic and continental military competence driven by continental insecurity.</td>
<td>Hierarchical continental trade to reinforce central imperial control; overseas trade marginal and considered dangerous.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Britain</td>
<td>Modern, global civilizing mission.</td>
<td>Domestic, continental, naval, inter-continental competence driven by peer competition.</td>
<td>State-protected global maritime trade to enrich nation and promote benign world order.</td>
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