Kowing to the Chinese Emperor

Critical Challenge

Critical Question

What advice would you give to Britain’s ambassador to China in 1816 on the matter of the British trade delegation kowtowing to the Chinese Emperor?

Overview

Students step into the shoes of Sir Thomas Staunton, the most knowledgeable British subject on China around 1800, to advise the ambassador whether or not the British trade delegation should kowtow—kneel and bow nine times—to the Chinese Emperor. Before making their recommendation, students read about British-Chinese relations in the nineteenth century and about the competing interests and customs. As contemporary extensions of this dilemma, students consider Prime Minister Chrétien’s refusal to speak out about human rights violations during a 1994 trade mission to China, or the propriety of taking a job with a company that participates in unethical labour practices.

Requisite Tools

Background knowledge

• British and Chinese interactions and customs around 1800

Criteria for judgment

• balancing economic interests with social and ethical norms

Critical thinking vocabulary

Thinking strategies

• role play

Habits of mind

• empathic perspective
Suggested Activities

◆ Ask students if they have heard of the word ‘kowtow.’ Explain that it is an ancient Chinese custom of showing great respect and submission to a superior, especially to the emperor, by kneeling before the person and touching one’s forehead to the ground nine times. In Western circles the idea of “kowtowing to someone” has come to suggest that a person is being excessively submissive, almost whimpish. The issue of whether British officials should kowtow to the Chinese Emperor arose in 1793 and again in 1816 when British delegations travelled to China to secure trade agreements with the Chinese.

◆ Assign students to work in groups of two or three to read and discuss Briefing Sheet #1: The 1793 British delegation to China (Blackline Master). Encourage students to examine the issue from both perspectives. Using the Data Chart: Kowtowing to the Emperor (Blackline Master) as a guide, ask students to list all the reasons for the British to kowtow from the Chinese perspective and all the reasons for the British to not kowtow.

◆ Invite students to present their reasons to the class as they sincerely believe them. Focus the discussion so that students will appreciate how upsetting it would be for a proud person (either British or Chinese) to compromise their honour and prestige.

◆ Provide the following information about the second trade delegation to China:

In 1816 the British decided to again attempt to negotiate a trade agreement with China. The young Thomas Staunton had grown up and was a person of importance in Britain—he was a Member of the Parliament of Britain and the most famous and respected British scholar on China of the time. On this mission he was the chief advisor to the new ambassador, Lord Amherst. Emperor Qianlong had died and been replaced by his son, Jiaqing. The Chinese still expected all foreigners to kowtow to the emperor. Staunton was asked for his advice on whether the delegation should do so.

◆ Introduce the critical question:

What advice would you give to Britain’s ambassador to China in 1816 on the matter of the British delegation kowtowing to the Chinese Emperor?

◆ Ask each student to assume the role of Sir Thomas Staunton and prepare a recommendation to the King about whether or not Ambassador Amherst should kowtow to the Emperor. Students should write their response in 2-3 paragraphs, justifying their decision with reasons and explanation.
◆ After students have discussed their written recommendations, explain that Staunton advised against kowtowing—and the Emperor for this and other reasons refused to even see the British delegation. Staunton was influential later in persuading Britain to use force against China. Ask if any students want to change their recommendation because of this additional information.

**Evaluation**

◆ Assess the *Data Chart* for the number and thoughtfulness of the reasons students generated for and against kowtowing to the Chinese Emperor.

◆ Assess written responses to the critical challenge for their sensitivity to the conflicting values facing the British and their thoughtful justification of a recommendation in the face of this tension.

**Extension**

◆ Invite students to discuss and decide on the compromises to be made between cultural and ethical values on the one hand, and economic benefit on the other. One of the following scenarios may be a useful focus for this discussion:

Ask students to imagine that they have been offered a highly paying job as a public relations officer for a multi-national corporation. Unfortunately, the company seriously exploits labourers in developing countries and must continue to do so because of financial reasons. The job would involve helping the company avoid unfavourable publicity about its international labour practices. Explain to students that, if they do not take this position, someone else will and that jobs as attractive as this one are very rare.

Ask students to read *Briefing Sheet #2: The 1994 Canadian delegation to China* (Blackline Master) and consider whether Canadian officials should have spoken up publicly against Chinese human rights abuses during the “Team Canada” trade delegation to China.
The year was 1793. King George III of Britain sent a trade mission to seek an agreement with Qianlong, the Emperor of China. The chief advisor to the King’s ambassador to China was Sir Thomas Staunton. His son, also Thomas, accompanied his father as an aide. During the nine-month, 3000 KM trip the young Thomas learned Chinese—the only member of the 700-man British delegation to do so.

Europe in 1793 was in considerable chaos. The French Revolution was at its height. Many European nobles saw this revolution as a threat to all European kings and queens. Indeed, while the British mission was on its way to China, King Louis XVI, the king of France, was executed by the revolutionaries. As well, several European countries were in competition with each other to trade around the world—including with China. Various European countries had tried to gain access to China either to convert the Chinese to Christianity or to engage in trade with China.

Britain was a major naval and commercial power seeking to expand its world influence, especially its trade. The British government wanted to trade with China in particular because China had a population of tens of millions and would be a huge market for British goods—Britain’s population was a mere 8 million. The British ambassador and his advisors saw Britain as “the most powerful nation of the globe.” The Chinese, on the other hand, saw themselves as “the only civilization under heaven.” The Chinese regarded all foreign delegations as vassal delegations, meaning that they came to China to pay homage to the Emperor. The rulers in China viewed humans as falling into 3 categories:

- *men with black hair* was their term for themselves; and they alone were civilized;
- *baked barbarians* were those who had declared their obedience to the Celestial Order and the Emperor;
- *raw barbarians* were those who were either unable or unwilling to partake of the benefits of civilization. Being a baked barbarian was acceptable; being a raw barbarian meant a person was sub-human.

Some Europeans of that time had a romantic view of China, believing that it was a wonderful and well-governed empire. This view was based largely on reports by Christian missionaries from France, Portugal and Russia who had established themselves in various coastal regions of China. What the British ambassador actually found was a “closed” society (it did not want foreigners or foreign ideas to enter China) with a complex and often ruthless hierarchy descending from the Emperor down to the lowest person. China’s culture was, of course, an ancient one stretching back to 2,000 B.C. Since about 500 B.C., the culture had been strongly influenced by the ideas of Confucius. One of these ideas was that a person should do his duty. Confucius also advocated that people should be kind to those beneath them. Although the political system was run essentially by Confucian scholars, people on the lower levels of the hierarchy were treated in a brutal manner.
The Chinese political system was highly centralized, and power and authority resided in one person—the Emperor. Bits of this power and authority, starting from the Emperor, were passed down, through a long and complex series of levels, from major to minor officials who had been selected on the basis of how well they had done on the Confucian examinations. But no matter how lowly (minor) was an official, each was responsible to the Emperor, and disobedience to the Emperor had serious consequences, including execution.

Part of this ancient culture was a complex set of ceremonies and rituals. Many of these were designed to show respect for superior officials and eventually to the Emperor. One way of showing this respect was kowtowing. The kowtow consisted of kneeling and touching one’s forehead to the ground nine times in front of the Emperor. Indeed, when Chinese officials came on board one of the British ships, they kowtowed to a painting the British had of the Chinese Emperor. Anyone who would not kowtow to the Emperor risked serious consequences. The Emperor was considered divine. He typically lived a life isolated from contact with people other than the members of his court.

The court of King George III also had its ancient ceremonies, and the King was also at the top of a complex hierarchy. For example, on his first trip to China the young Thomas Staunton looked forward to what he thought would be his most important moment in China: he was to carry the train of the cloak (the long flowing back of the robe) of the Knights of Bath worn by the Ambassador. Wearing such a cloak represented an honour which had begun in Europe in 1399 AD.

At this time Britain was politically and economically different than China. Britain had the beginnings of an elected parliamentary democracy. In reality, two groups of people dominated the British political system: the aristocracy, who had inherited their power and status, and the rich business class, whose power stemmed from the immense wealth acquired within the emerging capitalist system. It was this latter group of the upper class in Britain who wanted access to the Chinese market. However, any negotiations had to be carried out by the King, and the ceremonies of that court were focussed on respect for the sovereign leader. This respect was typically shown by having people of lower rank kneel when presented to the King. And these people believed, as did the Chinese, that they were superior to all other people. The stage was thus set for a confrontation of ceremonies!

After two weeks of negotiations—essentially about whether or not the British would kowtow to Qianlong—the ambassador, a translator, Thomas Staunton’s father and Thomas were given an audience with the Emperor. The British knelt before the Emperor, but would not kowtow. The Emperor, nonetheless, exchanged gifts with the ambassador and his assistant. When the Emperor discovered that young Thomas spoke Chinese, he was so delighted he gave the boy a special present.

For reasons including a desire to keep China closed, distrust of the “raw barbarians,” and, perhaps most importantly, disgust over the refusal of the British to kowtow, the trade mission failed to secure a agreement with the Chinese. The Emperor’s decision was, however, kept secret from the British mission until they were about to leave China’s shores.
# Kowtowing to the Emperor

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Canada’s 1994 delegation to China


In June 1989, the Chinese government’s brutally stopped peaceful student demonstrations in Beijing’s Tienamen Square. Although there were widespread threats of economic sanctions against China if it did not improve its human rights record, the international community has been reluctant to apply significant economic pressure on China. One of the reasons for this reluctance is fear of being excluded from China’s immense economic market. It is estimated that in 25 years China will be the world’s largest economy.

It appears that China’s human rights record continues to be unacceptable. For example, the international group, Human Rights Watch—Asia, reported in 1994 that the Chinese were using death sentence prisoners as sources of organs for human transplants. The report suggests that about 3,000 organs are obtained yearly from Chinese prisoners. Apparently some prisoners undergo surgery to have organs removed the night before their execution and, it is suspected, that some executions are deliberately botched to keep prisoners alive until their organs can be removed.

In November 1994, Prime Minister Jean Chrétien led a high profile trade mission to China. The successful mission, referred to as “Team Canada” included most of the provincial premiers and resulted in the signing of $9 billion in trade agreements. While in China, Canadian officials offered no public criticism of the Chinese government’s human rights record. Prime Minister Chrétien was reported in the Beijing papers to suggest that Canada was too small a country to have any effect on China’s policies.

The fear during the trade mission to China was that any public criticism by Canadian officials would be a seen as a grave diplomatic insult by their Chinese hosts. If Canada had been seen to insult the Chinese government, the trade mission and relations generally between the two countries would be severely damaged. On the other hand, groups such as Amnesty International urge that Canada be consistent in its commitment to human rights. Although Amnesty is not against trading with nations that violate human rights, it suggests that our government’s “failure to speak clearly about Canadian values and fundamental principles, refusal to acknowledge the reality of endemic human rights violations, reluctance to raise specific cases or talk about specific examples, only confirms to those responsible that these matters are not taken seriously” (Amnesty International Bulletin, August/September 1994).