

RESEARCH ARTICLE**Conjuring the Castle: Romanticising the Architecture of Samuel Taylor Coleridge's Kubla Khan through the Lens of Literary and Political dialogue**

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Abstract

This paper examines Kubla Khan by Samuel Taylor Coleridge as a product of geopolitical imagination shaped by late eighteenth-century historical realities. It situates the poem within the context of the Macartney Embassy and its diplomatic failure, arguing that the poem reflects active historical engagement rather than escapist fantasy. The study analyses how Gothic and Sublime aesthetics transform political tensions into symbolic architecture. It explores the “pleasure-dome” as a metaphorical diplomatic space mediating between the Qing Empire and Britain. Drawing on travel narratives by figures such as George Macartney and John Barrow, the paper highlights the interplay between literary imagination and imperial discourse. The research further interprets the poem's landscapes as reflections of revolutionary anxieties during the 1790s. It investigates how Orientalism, mythology, and Romantic creativity converge to construct a hybrid imaginative geography. The study also incorporates ecofeminist and psycho-political readings to expand interpretative possibilities. Ultimately, it argues that the poem functions as a form of “literary diplomacy” that negotiates cultural and political tensions. The paper concludes that *Kubla Khan* encodes both imperial desire and deep historical unease within its visionary structure.

Keywords: Kubla Khan, Geopolitics, Literary Diplomacy, Romanticism, Orientalism**Introduction: The Geopolitics of the Imagination in 1797**

Samuel Taylor Coleridge moved to a secluded farmhouse located between Porlock and Linton during the autumn of 1797 which coincided with the fallout and documented failure of the Macartney Embassy which is mentioned in famous and most studied period in English literature. The completed work Kubla Khan: A Vision in a Dream gets classified into three critical fields which are psychological analysis, metaphysical study, and pure aesthetic evaluation. Scholars have analysed the “stately pleasure-dome”(Coleridge, 1816,) as an actual substance which Coleridge described in his 1816 preface as a psychological curiosity or as a powerful poetic symbol which creates new things from nothing. The reading of Kubla Khan reveals its actual world withdrawal because its context contains powerful compositional elements. The year 1797 marked a time when Britain faced major geopolitical problems because the country was fighting Revolutionary France

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while the Welsh coast faced invasion threats and the British Empire suffered diplomatic defeat from the Macartney Embassy to China which operated between 1792 and 1794. The article demonstrates that Kubla Khan acts as an active historical engagement rather than an historical retreat. The text functions as a literary diplomatic space through which Gothic and Sublime aesthetics create a new way to address political failures between the Qing Empire and the Western world. The architectural features of the poem which include walls, towers, domes, and caves create an architectural contrast with the archival records of Lord George Macartney, Sir George Staunton, and John Barrow which reveal how British imperialism tried to control the Orient while the Romantic movement created myths about it. The poem uses Gothic elements to represent domestic fears which British people experienced during the French Revolution and Jacobin activities that took over their society in the 1790s.

The “stately pleasure-dome”(of Coleridge, 1816) exists as a diplomatic construction based on actual Sino-British diplomatic events. The space functions as a palimpsest which contains the historical Xanadu of the Yuan Dynasty together with the present-day Jehol of the Qing Dynasty and the imagined "pleasure grounds" of the British aristocracy. The poem establishes a “contact zone”(Pratt, 1992, p.14). which Mary Louise Pratt created as a concept, but it describes a location concept, diplomatic and architectural and political aspects join together to create a terrifyingly beautiful vision. The ancestral voices prophesying war emerge from the dream residue but they actually represent the collapse of a geopolitical order caused by revolutionary Jacobinism in Europe and Qianlong Emperor's impenetrable resistance in Asia.

Section I: The Embassy of Failure — 1793 and the British Imagination**1.1 The Diplomatic Imperative and the Closed Empire**

British observers in the years before the poem's creation needed to see the Qing court's actual architecture before they could understand the specific architectural features of Xanadu. The Macartney Embassy operated as the first British diplomatic mission to China which aimed to create trade through new ports and eased trade through Canton restrictions while establishing a permanent diplomatic office in Beijing. The mission conducted by Lord Macartney also served as an intellectual and aesthetic exploratory initiative. Lord Macartney travelled with artists William Alexander and scientists James Dinwiddie to create a map of the Celestial Empire which included its geographic and cultural and architectural features.

The mission required companies to reach their urgent need for commercial success. The British East India Company lost silver because it needed to purchase Chinese tea which forced British manufacturers to search for new sales opportunities for their woollen and industrial goods. The cultural anxiety which emerged during this period extended beyond its economic effects. Enlightenment Europe viewed China as a country which practiced rational governance under philosopher-kings (a belief Voltaire and the Jesuits popularized). The people who loved Chinese

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culture in the 1790s started to develop an aversion to Chinese culture. The embassy's failure would create a new story which described China as a stopped empire which had lost its ability to govern because it had become a repressive power which operated as a closed system.

The evidence shows that the embassy's mission failed. The Qianlong Emperor rejected King George III's request through his edict which stated that "We possess all things set no value on objects strange or ingenious" (Qianlong Emperor, 1793, p.28). The British Empire experienced an existence-altering event because of his rejection which functioned as an international diplomatic refusal. Historically, the Qianlong Emperor viewed Britain as the tribute-bearing country. The framework established China (the Qing Empire) as the central authority to which all other nations were considered subordinate. The British people received a treatment as barbarians who had their scientific inventions (planetariums, carriages, air pumps) which were treated as toys.

1.2 The Textual Aftermath: Publishing the Empire (1797–1804)

The political mission failed but "literary diplomacy" (Kitson, 2013) that followed achieved massive success. The embassy members brought back from their trip an overwhelming number of travelogues and journals and illustrated folios which enchanted all British readers. The years 1797 to 1804 saw the publication of Sir George Staunton's *An Authentic Account of an Embassy from the King of Great Britain to the Emperor of China* (1797), Aeneas Anderson's *A Narrative of the British Embassy to China* (1795), later John Barrow's *Travels in China* (1804) and Macartney's own journals (were posthumously published).

The timing of events holds critical importance. The autumn of 1797 found Coleridge writing his poem at the same time Staunton released his official account. The poem's pleasure-dome references Samuel Purchas's seventeenth-century text *Purchas his Pilgrimes* (1613) even though Coleridge's preface establishes this connection. Coleridge read travel writing with great enthusiasm because he found floating imagery from the Orient to be a part of the intellectual environment during 1797.

The texts established China as a physical location which existed in reality according to Peter Kitson who describes this process through the word "forged" (Kitson, 2013, p.39). They constructed a Romantic China that existed through the Sublime (vast walls, rugged mountains, terrifying punishments) and the Picturesque (gardens, pavilions, strange customs). Macartney's journal created a liminal space which permitted British observers to view through both their need to understand everything through scientific measurement and their need to experience everything through their senses. The tension between what can be measured and what exists beyond measurement serves as the legacy which Coleridge received.

1.3 Coleridge's Reading: Purchas vs. The Contemporary Journals

Coleridge used Samuel Purchas's *Purchas his Pilgrimes* as the inspiration to create his dream according to his preface. The section of the text shows that "Kublai Can built a stately Palace" which stretched "sixteen miles of plain ground with a wall...".

Coleridge made major changes to the original source when he transformed its text into his

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poem which shows that Macartney accounts influenced Coleridge's writing. The shift from Palace to Pleasure-Dome is particularly significant. The dome functions as the most artificial of constructs which indicates a clear divide between human culture and the natural environment. The 1790s Orientalism period established dome as a reference point which British people used to describe Mughal Empire Islamic architecture during their ongoing colonization of India and the Tartar architectural style of the Qing Dynasty. Coleridge Orientalizes the structure through his description of dome which leads to his work being seen as different from European neoclassical palaces. The structure serves as a physical representation of Eastern despotism and sensual excess because it serves as house of pleasure instead of being a place for rational governance.

Section II: The Architecture of Xanadu — A Comparative Analysis**2.1 From Xamdu to Xanadu: The Philology of Romanticism**

The transformation of Xamdu to Xanadu serves as more than a poetic device since it functions as a linguistic claim which reflects the diplomatic need to change territorial names and their corresponding classifications. The existing summer Capital of the Yuan Dynasty named Shangdu functioned as the historical summer Capital of the Yuan Dynasty which Kublai Khan established. The Manchus who were British termed Tartars had established their summer capital Jehol which existed in the North of the Great Wall by the time of the Macartney Embassy arrived. The two sites become one for Coleridge. The Xanadu of the poem exists as a hybrid space which combines the historical ruins of Kublai's city with the living vibrant pleasure grounds of Qianlong's Jehol which Marco Polo and Macartney had described. Coleridge creates this conflation which enables him to combine the ancestral past of the Mongol conquerors with the immediate political reality of the 1790s. The Khan represents both the mythical Kublai and the modern Qianlong who defied George III as the Great Tartar.

2.2 Great Wall and the Walls of Xanadu: Macartney's Survey

The embassy identified Great Wall of China as the most impressive architectural element which they recorded. Macartney with Henry William Parish conducted thorough research of the wall which showed both its square towers and lofty gates. Macartney's journal entries present a mixture of wonder and military evaluation when he observes "The great wall with their square towers and lofty gates are its only architectural antiquities" (Macartney, 1793, p. 62). Coleridge distills this imperial survey in his couplet which states "So twice five miles of fertile ground with walls and towers were girdled round" (Coleridge, 1816, source 63). The word girdled specifies a defensive perimeter which protects the fertile area from the untamed wilderness that exists beyond. The British diplomatic mission used the Great Wall to symbolize Chinese exclusionism because it created an unbreakable diplomatic boundary which British representatives could never cross. Coleridge establishes the British diplomat's tension between forbidden access and distant paradise through his use of walls and towers. The term girdling parallels the Enclosure Acts of Britain which resulted in

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a dramatic increase of common land privatization during this historical period.

The pleasure-dome operates as a space which excludes everyone except the Khan and the landed gentry who use this area as their private sanctuary from outside disturbances. Macartney observed the dual nature of the imperial parks since he found the Chinese peasantry to be in a wretched state while the parks showed extreme richness. Coleridge's poem depicts the conflict between an enclosed paradise and the lifeless ocean of dispossessed people.

2.3 The Pleasure-Dome: Jehol, Yuanmingyuan, and the Hybrid Monument

The embassy's various activities lead to critical confusion which results in the incorrect linking of different pleasure domes. The British public was captivated by two separate locations which included the Old Summer Palace located close to Beijing and the Imperial Summer Resort situated at Jehol. John Barrow who stayed at Yuanmingyuan while Macartney visited Jehol described the grounds as lacking any 'sublime' characteristics which he valued in English Romantic gardens. Macartney's Jehol account contains a more vivid description of the site where actual diplomacy took place which reflects Coleridge's poem.

Macartney describes Jehol's western park as a space that contains parks and pleasure grounds which have been designed to create picturesque beauty. Jehol's Tartar City served as the Emperor's demonstration site where he could display his abilities as a Khan who ruled over the steppes. The architecture their combined elements from Chinese, Mongolian, and Tibetan styles to represent the multicultural harmony of the Qing Empire. The dome in Coleridge's poem takes on a palimpsest appearance because it contains two elements which George Macartney saw in the garden of Ten Thousand Trees reception area. The building combines two styles which create an imperial Chinese appearance and a Mongolian summer retreat feel.

2.4 The Garden of Ten Thousand Trees: Sharawadgi and the "Sinuous Rills"

The landscape design of Xanadu which includes winding rills and **gardens bright with sinuous rills and forests ancient as the hills** shows British people were fascinated with Chinese gardening because of its sharawadgi design which creates graceful disorder.

In his dissertation on Oriental Gardening (1772) Sir William Chambers praised Chinese gardens for their ability to combine terrifying elements with pleasing features which included hot and cold temperatures. Macartney's journal describes Jehol's gardens as having an exceptional advantage because they contain numerous canals and rivers and big water bodies. He describes the design as having an irregularity which made it opposed to the geometric formalism of Versailles, and it appealed to English people who liked the Picturesque style. Coleridge's sinuous rills feature design elements which imitate irregular patterns. The water moves through the area in a way that creates mazy motion instead of following the straight paths of the canals. The landscaping has a creepy quality that makes it feel threatening. Macartney observed that the pleasure grounds were

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maintained by many labourers and eunuchs who created a despotic system which controlled both people and nature.

Kubla Khan's decree of "In Xanadu did Kubla Khan A stately pleasure-dome decree" (Coleridge, 1816, p.90) establishes his absolute power. The landscape emerges through commands which dictate its creation. This situation parallels how British people criticize Oriental despotism since they believe that authoritarian rulers have the ability to reshape all land according to their personal desires.

Section III: The Gothic Subterranean — The Politics of Depth**3.1 The "Deep Romantic Chasm": Geological Sublime and Political Terror**

The Gothic style first appears in the Orientalist fantasy world when the narrative switches from the sunny pleasure-dome to the "deep romantic chasm" (Coleridge, 1816, source 94). The built environment of Xanadu extends beyond its architectural structures because all of its natural landscapes have been turned into architecturalized spaces which the inhabitants refer to as a savage place. The "savage place! A holy place which retains its enchanted state" "The moonlight" "The woman wailed for her demon-lover!" (Coleridge, 1816, p. 96). The literary diplomacy moves from Macartney's courtly engagements toward the untamed savage regions which exist beyond civilization. The dome symbolizes Imperial control through the decree which serves as the Emperor's ultimate command. The chasm represents nature's uncontrollable forces which reflect the behaviour of the common people whom they refer to as the 'mob'. Conservative critics like Edmund Burke used the term savage during the 1790s to attack French Jacobins whom he described as savages who destroyed the foundations of civilization.

Coleridge uses the sacred rive Alph which he places inside the savage chasm to form an hydraulic model which describes the process of revolution. The "mighty fountain" forcefully pushes upward through "ceaseless turmoil"(Coleridge, 1816, p.102) which sends stones into the air like "chaffy grain beneath the thresher's flail"(Coleridge, 1816, p.102). This imagery creates a strong connection with how people described the tumult during the French Revolution which showed volcanic masses rising up to consume the "stately" monarchy. The sacred river which flows through "caverns measureless to man" (Coleridge, 1816, p. 104). reveals a subterranean power that exists beyond the state's ability to control it through its walls and towers.

3.2 Caves of Ice: The Unconscious of the State

The "caves of ice"(Coleridge, 1816, p.106) stand as the most contradictory image which exists within the poem. "The sunny pleasure-dome with caves of ice" (Coleridge, 1816, p.107). fulfils the definition of a coincidental opposite because it achieves a miraculous transformation which unites opposing elements. The caves of ice which exist in Sino-British relations probably refer to the ice houses which served as standard structures during the Summer Palace because they helped to cool the Emperor's court throughout the oppressive Chinese summer months. The functional utility of Coleridge's work transforms into a Gothic symbol which represents existential dread.

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While poetically true, in a historical context, the ice houses were actually functional, measurable structures. The measureless aspect is Coleridge's Gothic transformation of those real structures into symbols of existential dread. These two scientific tools exist in Macartney's account of his journey to China because they include scientific instruments and sextants and chronometers.

The caves of ice represent the political unconscious of the time period. The dome serves as the visible representation of the state which includes the monarchy and the empire while the caves conceal the historical trauma which exists as frozen depths beneath the state. They represent the 'chilling' effect of the Terror in France which began with the sunny idealism of 1789 but escalated into the bloody execution system of the guillotine. The two empires share frozen diplomatic relations which resulted in the Macartney embassy receiving a 'cold' welcome from the Chinese.

3.3 The 'Lifeless Ocean': Nihilism and the End of Empire

The river Alph runs down to a sunless sea or a 'lifeless ocean'. The destination serves as the complete negation of both fertile ground and sunny dome. The abyss of political nihilism exists alongside the sunless void which represents a world without the divinely ordained order of monarchy.

The Macartney accounts reveal a pattern in which rot and decay exist below the surface beauty of China. The Chinese Empire exists as a "crazy old man of war... drifting for some time past"(Macartney, 1793, p. 121) according to Macartney who believed it would eventually meet its doom when "dashed to pieces on the shore"(Macartney, 1793, p.121). The lifeless ocean represents how British people viewed the Qing Empire's historical destiny because they saw it as a stagnant water body which decayed while British commerce maintained its constant flow through river. The prophecy of doom exists within Coleridge's poem which ends in a disastrous outcome. The pleasure-dome presents its shadow over the waves which create a shadow of a building that exists in an unstable state. The river's tumult predicts the dome's destruction just as the ancestral voices declare the impending war. The lifeless ocean represents the silence which exists after empires cease to exist.

Section IV: Ancestral Voices — Prophecy, War, and the 1790s**4.1 The Fishguard Invasion (1797) and the Alarm of Invasion**

The line Ancestral voices prophesying war is perhaps the most explicitly political line in the poem. The poem which was composed in 1797 corresponds to the peak of the French invasion panic. In February 1797, a French force (the Légion Noire) actually landed at Fishguard in Wales. The French invasion caused panic throughout London which resulted in bank runs and the Bank of England suspending gold payments despite the invasion failing and the French forces surrendering within a short time. Coleridge, living in the West Country (Nether Stowey), was acutely aware of this threat. His poem *Fears in Solitude*, written the following year, explicitly deals with the alarm of invasion. The ancestral voices of *Kubla Khan* function as the historical warnings from British history which predict future conflicts with Revolutionary France. The "tumult" of the river is the sound of the approaching conflict.

The ancestral nature of the voices connects them to the Tartar context. The Qing Emperors

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maintained their Manchu ancestry as an obsession while they sought to protect their martial ‘Tartar’ attributes from the relaxing impact of Chinese culture. Macartney described how the Emperor travelled to Jehol to practice hunting while he preserved his ‘Tartar’ lifestyle. The ancestral voices function as the ancestral warnings from Genghis Khan that his Mongol ancestors wanted to alert Kublai about because the sedentary existence at the pleasure-dome would result in his ultimate downfall.

4.2 Jacobinism as the ‘Demon-Lover’: The Sexual Politics of Treason

The woman wailing for her demon-lover introduces a sexual and gendered dimension to the political allegory. The conservative propaganda of the 1790s depicted the French Revolution as a monstrous female figure or a chaotic sexual force according to the widespread belief popular at that time. Edmund Burke famously described the Parisian mob as “furies of hell, in the abused shape of the vilest of women” (Burke, 1790, p.142). The demon-lover suggests a seduction by the dark forces of radicalism. Coleridge, who had flirted with radical politics (Pantisocracy) and then recoiled from the violence of the Terror, uses the Gothic imagery to dramatize his own ambivalence. The chasm is holy and enchanted but also savage. The mighty fountain creates the creative/revolutionary energy that exists within the stately pleasure-dome, but it has the power to destroy the established order. This imagery also connects to the Oriental context. The wailing woman evokes the trope of the Oriental despot and his harem, a site of sexual excess and danger. Macartney’s accounts contained scandalous rumours about the emperor’s concubines and the degraded state of women in China. The demon-lover represents the monstrous union of the British radical with the ‘Jacobin cause’, or the British diplomat with the seductive but dangerous Orient.

4.3 The Mongol Threat: Genghis, Kublai, and the “Tartar” Anxiety

The Ancestral voices are specifically prophesying war. Kublai Khan functions as the grandson of Genghis Khan who was the most powerful conqueror throughout history. The war being prophesied is not just a defensive war, but the inevitable expansionist war of the Mongol Empire. The British people of 1797 had mixed feelings toward the Tartar character. The Tartar represented two opposing views of himself as the noble warrior and as the destroyer of all civilizations. The ancestral voices remind the reader that the pleasure-dome is built on a foundation of violence. The lands of Pax Mongolica and Pax Britannica exist in peace because both sides maintain a state of readiness for war.

Macartney attended military training exercises at Jehol and he found the Chinese army's clumsy matchlocks and bows to be unimpressive. He Macartney viewed the **technological** state of the Chinese military (matchlocks and bows) as weak and "clumsy," while recognizing the **sheer scale** of their manpower and ancestral martial pride. He recognized that the Manchus possessed significant manpower power while they maintained their ancestral pride. The ‘prophesying war’ line captures this tension because it describes how both empires prepared for the upcoming battle, which would break out in 1839.

RESEARCH ARTICLE**Section V: The Abyssinian Maid — Gender, Orient, and the Muse****5.1 Displacing China: Why Abyssinia?**

The poem's last part moves from Xanadu to a vision of an **Abyssinian maid** who plays the dulcimer and sings about Mount Abora. Critics remain confused about the geographical shift which occurs when the story moves from China to Africa. The approach represents a hybridization strategy which enables “literary diplomacy”(Kitson, 2013, p. 9). to achieve its diplomatic goals through the use of two different cultural traditions.

Ethiopia maintained a connection to the Nile's origin in the Romantic movement through its relationship with the Nile's sacred river Alph/Nile connection and through its linkage to the Rasselas legend from Samuel Johnson's *The History of Rasselas Prince of Abissinia* which describes a Happy Valley that resembles Xanadu. Coleridge establishes a connection between the Chinese pleasure-dome and the wider network of ‘Oriental’ paradises through his reference to Abyssinia.

5.2 The ‘Damsel with a Dulcimer’ vs. The ‘Woman Wailing’

The poem presents two female characters who include the woman wailing for her demon-lover in the savage chasm and the Abyssinian maid who sings about Mount Abora. The two figures demonstrate how the Other possesses two opposite characteristics. The ‘wailing woman’ represents the Gothic elements of the Orient through her status as a chaotic sexualized character who embodies danger and madness. She is associated with both the waning moon and the savage place. The Abyssinian maid represents the Apollonian Orient through her musical connection which brings artistic inspiration and musical harmony to the world. She embodies the concept of deep delight. The poet seeks to ‘revive within me’ / Her symphony and song because he wants to obtain Oriental creative abilities without experiencing their demon destructive forces. This mirrors the diplomatic desire to trade with China (to extract its symphony of goods—tea, silk, porcelain) without being contaminated by its despotic or pagan politics.

5.3 Ecofeminist Readings: Nature vs. The Decree

Recent scholarship has explored the Abyssinian maid through an ecofeminist lens. The Khan ‘decrees’ the dome—an act of patriarchal domination over the land. He ‘girdles’ the fertile ground. The Abyssinian maid, by contrast, sings of the mountain. Her relationship to nature is one of harmony (symphony) rather than domination.

The poet's wish to build that dome in air with music loud and long suggests a third way: an architectural construction that is sustained by art (the maid's song) rather than by imperial decree or forced lab or. The dome in air exists as a delicate poetic construction which goes beyond the strong physical walls of the Khan. It is a structure of sympathy rather than tyranny.

Section VI: Literary Diplomacy**The Poem as Treaty****6.1 The Failure of Political Diplomacy vs. The Success of Poetic Appropriation**

The Macartney Embassy failed to secure its political objectives. The mission failed to

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establish diplomatic ties with China. The mission failed to obtain a treaty from China. The two empires entered into a state of cold war according to the mission's results.

Kubla Khan demonstrates success through its achievements which Macartney could not accomplish. The work uses literary diplomacy by taking Chinese cultural capital to create an English literary tradition. Coleridge conquers Xanadu through his use of iambic tetrameter instead of gunboat weapons. He transforms the Tartar despot's 'stately pleasure-dome' into an emblem of Romantic imagination for the entire world.

The act of appropriation functions as a strategy of imperialism which establishes control over others' cultures. The poet declares his authority to construct that dome using his native language to display the sunny dome and 'the caves of ice' to everyone who listened. The 'holy dread' that surrounds the poet at the end of the poem Weave to a circle round him thrice—marks him as the new Khan. "He has consumed 'honey-dew' from the East to become a powerful figure" (Coleridge, 1816, p. 189).

6.2 The 'Hypothetical Mandarin': Coleridge's China as a Theoretical Space

Eric Hayot presents his argument in *The Hypothetical Mandarin* which states that China operates as hypothetical space in Western theoretical frameworks that allow for testing modernity and sympathy and universalism. Kubla Khan serves as the ultimate demonstration of this hypothesis. Xanadu exists as a theoretical concept which Coleridge used to describe his vision of a dream. Coleridge uses this space to handle the 1790s issues that bring him distress during that time. He explores the boundaries between Decree (political power) and Song (poetic power) through his examination. He attempts to evaluate how the dome (state) withstands the tumult created by the river (revolution). He examines sunny Enlightenment rationalism through its icy Unconscious depths. China provides the perfect backdrop for this testing because it was viewed as an inverted world—a place where everything was the opposite of Europe. Coleridge uses this inverted world as his vision space to explore the upside-down reality which exists after a revolution.

6.3 Opium: The Trade Good and the Creative Spark

Opium played an important role which deserves our full acknowledgment. The poem was famously induced by an **Anodyne** (opium). The British used opium to open up Chinese markets because it was their only successful commodity. The East India Company cultivated opium in India and illegally transported it to China to fund tea purchases. Coleridge's poem establishes a chemical connection to the Sino-British trade war. The 'honey-dew' and milk of Paradise serve as code words for the substance that connects British poets with Chinese consumers. The caves of ice represent the frozen seclusion experienced by addicts who find themselves stuck in a lifeless ocean of dependency—which originates from China's trade dependency with the British Empire.

The opium trade created the poem, and the Macartney embassy's failure created the opium war. The 'literary diplomacy' of the poem is fueled by the very substance that would destroy the 'diplomatic' relations between the two nations.

Conclusion: The Unfinished Palace and the Shadow of War

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The poem *Kubla Khan* by Samuel Taylor Coleridge creates a romantic architectural masterpiece through its construction of a castle which uses diplomatic history as its building material and Gothic anxiety as its binding force. The Macartney Embassy shows that the ‘stately pleasure-dome’ exists as a historical response to the ‘closed’ world of Qing China rather than existing as an eternal concept. The ‘walls and towers’ of Xanadu represent the barriers of the 1790s which include the Great Wall that kept Macartney out and the Enclosure walls that kept the British poor out and the psychological walls that the opium addict builds against reality. The ‘caves of ice’ and ‘ancestral voices’ show the deep fears of the time which include the fear of revolution and the gripping consternation of invasion and the fear of the Other who cannot be completely controlled or assimilated. Coleridge’s literary diplomacy provides a vision in a dream which makes up for the shortcomings of actual political conditions. The miracle of rare device appeared to Coleridge when he looked at the area which Macartney viewed as rot and decay which covered the ground. The miracle contains a haunting presence. The demon-lover and the prophecy of war remain embedded in the foundation of the palace, reminding us that every pleasure-dome is built upon a sunless sea of historical violence and repressed desire. The conjured castle stands, but it stands on the precipice of the modern world, trembling with the thud of the future—the gunboats of the Opium War that would eventually blow the gates of the widely opened real Xanadu.

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