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**British-Chinese Encounters: changing perceptions and
attitudes from the Macartney mission to the Opium War
(1792-1840)**

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Declaration

I declare that this thesis has been composed by me and that the work is my own. It has not been submitted for any other degree or professional qualification.

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Abstract

This thesis examines British-Chinese encounters in the half century before the Opium War, an under-researched medium term period that had profound consequences for both China and Britain. Unlike previous studies on China's early relations with Britain or the West, this thesis is conducted closely from a perceptual point of view, with its principal focus on British people's first-hand impressions of China and attitudes towards Chinese affairs as a result of these encounters. It shows that British perceptions of China, by and large, increasingly worsened throughout this period. During the two royal embassies to China, British observers from the Macartney and the Amherst missions presented similarly negative views of Chinese civilisation, but proposed conflicting measures in terms of realising Britain's commercial and diplomatic objectives in China. In the run up to the Opium War in the 1830s, the image of a Chinese government manipulated by a capricious and despotic monarchy was gradually constructed and seen as the primary cause of China's backwardness. China was hence increasingly envisioned as an isolated 'other' that could not be communicated with by appeals to reason or through normal diplomatic negotiations. In this context, a coercive line of action, supported by British naval force, was eventually regarded as a just and viable approach to promote the wellbeing of both British and Chinese common people. Although these developing unfavourable views about China did not determine the outbreak of the Opium War, they were certainly important underlying forces without which open hostilities with China would probably have been neither justifiable nor acceptable to the British parliament or people. This thesis also seeks to set this half-century of British-Chinese encounters in the context of Chinese history. It briefly describes how a changing image of Britain was developed by the Chinese government and people during this period. It shows that both local elites in the southeastern coastal areas and the elites at the imperial court in Beijing obtained credible as well as inaccurate information about Britain and its people. These early notions held in the southeast and in the Beijing sometimes had an impact on each other, but sometimes stayed distinct and unaffected. This situation partly explains why the Chinese government was caught off guard when a serious challenge from Britain occurred in the form of the Opium War.

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Contents

Abstract	ii
Acknowledgements	iii
Preface	1
Introduction	11
Part I	
1. British perceptions of China during the Macartney embassy (1792-4)	32
2. British perceptions of China during the Amherst embassy (1816-17)	74
Part II	
3. The debate on the EIC's monopoly: British perceptions of China in the early 1830s	129
4. 'The Napier Fizzle' and beyond: British perceptions of China in the mid-1830s	165
5. An 'Opium' war? British perceptions of China in the late-1830s	203
Part III	
6. Britain through Chinese eyes: Chinese perceptions of Britain during the early Sino-British encounters	246
Conclusion	274
Bibliography	281

Preface

The First Anglo-Chinese War (1840-2), also known as the ‘Opium War’, was a fateful conflict that had profound consequences for the later history of both China and Great Britain. Although the periodisation of modern Chinese history as beginning with the Opium War has been challenged,¹ research on China’s early encounters with Britain prior to the 1840s remains inadequate.² The Opium War itself, however, has attracted considerable attention from historians, but neither the more general explanation highlighting the irreconcilable conflict between Britain’s industrial expansion and China’s containment policy³ nor some highly specific causes,⁴ such as the domestic political crisis facing the Whig government in the late-1830s, is convincing enough to decide the debate on what caused the Opium War. A very important reason for this phenomenon is that most of these studies are either grand narratives, which have overlooked many important historical details, or specific ‘short-term (*courte durée*)’ studies that, according to Fernand Braudel, ‘centred on the drama of “great

¹ Philip A. Kuhn, for example, has doubted whether the modern period of China’s history can be demarcated by largely external events. Instead, Kuhn suggests that ‘we can reasonably seek the beginning of the old order’s decline ... no earlier than 1864, the year the Taiping Rebellion was destroyed’. See Philip A. Kuhn, *Rebellion and its Enemies in Late Imperial China: militarization and social structure, 1796-1864* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1970), pp. 5, 8.

² John K. Fairbank pointed out in 1978 that, among existing studies, the first half of the nineteenth century, largely the pre-Opium War period, has been greatly under-researched. See ‘Bibliographical essays’, *The Cambridge History of China*, ed. John K. Fairbank, *et al.* (15 vols., Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), X, 596.

³ For example, see David Owen, *British Opium Policy in China and in India* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1934; reprinted, Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1968), p. 168; W.C. Costin, *Great Britain and China: 1833-1860* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1937), p. 20; Michael Greenberg, *British Trade and the Opening of China 1800-42* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1951), p. 215; Hsin-pao Chang, *Commissioner Lin and the Opium War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1964), p. 2; Gerald S. Graham, *The China Station: War and Diplomacy, 1830-1860* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), p. x, etc.

⁴ Glenn Melancon, ‘Honour in Opium? The British Declaration of War on China, 1839-1840’, *International History Review*, 21 (1999), 855-74; Glenn Melancon, *Britain’s China Policy and the Opium Crisis: Balancing Drugs, Violence and National Honour, 1833-1840* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003), pp. 5-6, 133-9.

events”” only.⁵ For these reasons, most research on the Opium War traces the causes back no earlier than the rise of the opium trade and thus fails to explore the British-Chinese engagements over a longer time span.⁶ In particular, there has not been any medium-term (*moyenne durée*) study on what attitudes and perceptions were developed as a direct result of the early encounters between Britain and China and how, ultimately, the idea of a war against China was justified in Britain, on the basis of the perceptions and images that had been gradually constructed from these encounters.

It is true that neither the history of early Sino-British contacts nor the western image of China is a completely new research field. Nevertheless, in order to explain the origins of the Opium War, existing research faces some major problems. First, most studies that have covered the pre-Opium War period, especially the half century before the war, are those which deal with long-term changes in the history of Sino-Western relations. These studies, such as Hosea Ballou Morse’s classic works, *The Chronicles of the East India Company trading to China 1635-1834* and *The International Relations of the Chinese Empire*,⁷ have offered wide-ranging narratives of China’s engagement with the world over the centuries. The vast majority of them, however, have concentrated on political, economic and diplomatic actions,⁸ rather than the perceptions and attitudes which developed as a result of these encounters.

⁵ Fernand Braudel, *On History*, translated by Sarah Matthews (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1980), p. 28.

⁶ Peter Ward Fay, *The Opium War 1840-1842* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1975); Tan Chung, *China and the Brave New World: a study of the origins of the Opium War 1840-42* (Durham, NC: Carolina Academic Press, 1978); James M. Polachek, *The Inner Opium War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992); Julia Lovell, *The Opium War: Drugs, Dreams and the Making of China* (London: Picador, 2011), etc.

⁷ Hosea Ballou Morse, *The Chronicles of the East India Company trading to China, 1635-1834* (5 vols., Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1926; reprinted, London: Routledge, 2000); Hosea Ballou Morse, *The International Relations of the Chinese Empire* (3 vols., London: Longmans, 1910-18; reprinted, Folkestone: Global Oriental, 2008). The latter book covers the period from 1834 to 1911.

⁸ For example, G.F. Hudson, *Europe and China: A Survey of their Relations from the earliest times to 1800* (Boston: Beacon, 1961); Wolfgang Franke, *China and the West* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1967); John S. Gregory, *The West and China since 1500* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003); D.E. Mungello, *The Great Encounter of China and the West, 1500-1800* (Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006), etc.

Second, previous books on western images of China or Asia, such as Donald Lach's three-volume *Asia in the Making of Europe* and V. G. Kiernan's *The Lords of Human Kind: European attitudes towards the outside world in the imperial age*,⁹ often fail to differentiate clearly between Britain and the West or between China and Asia.¹⁰ Nor do they draw a clear line between first-hand and second-hand sources that were available to western readers. In most of the existing research, the British or western peoples' direct discoveries from their encounters with the Chinese have been confounded with the images of China constructed upon some second- or even third-hand knowledge produced by those who had no experience of or direct connection with China. These studies, such as P. J. Marshall and Glyndwr Williams' *The Great Map of Mankind* and Gregory Blue's article 'China and Western social thought in the modern period',¹¹ tend to dwell on how China as a civilisation was understood by the western public, especially by intellectuals, rather than what impressions were formed as a direct consequence of early Sino-British encounters.¹²

Although, in 1992, Mary Louise Pratt has pointed out in *Imperial Eyes*¹³ the importance of studying cross-cultural perceptions from the perspective of 'contact zone' and recently this

⁹ Donald Lach, *Asia in the Making of Europe* (3 vols., Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965-93); V.G. Kiernan, *The Lords of Human Kind: European attitudes towards the outside world in the imperial age* (London: Serif, 1995).

¹⁰ See also *Western Views of China and the Far East*, ed. Henry A. Myers (2 vols., Hong Kong: Asian Research Service, 1982); Colin Mackerras, *Western Images of China* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989); Jonathan D. Spence, *The Chan's Great Continent: China in the Western Minds* (London: Penguin, 2000); David Porter, *Ideographia: The Chinese Cipher in Early Modern Europe* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001).

¹¹ P.J. Marshall and Glyndwr Williams, *The Great Map of Mankind: Perceptions of New Worlds in the Age of Enlightenment* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982); Gregory Blue, 'China and Western social thought in the modern period', in *China and Historical Capitalism: Genealogies of Sinological Knowledge*, ed. Timothy Brook and Gregory Blue (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 57-109.

¹² See also Raymond Dawson, *The Chinese Chameleon: an analysis of European conceptions of Chinese civilization* (London: Oxford University Press, 1967); Adolf Reichwein, *China and Europe: intellectual and artistic contacts in the eighteenth century* (London: Routledge, 1968); *Discovering China: European interpretations in the Enlightenment*, ed. Julia Ching and Willard G. Oxtoby (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 1992); Raymond Dawson, 'Western Conceptions of Chinese Civilization', in *The Legacy of China*, ed. Raymond Dawson (Boston, MA: Cheng & Tsui, 1990), pp. 1-27; Gregory Blue, 'China in Western Social Thought: with special reference to contributions from Montesquieu to Max Weber', unpublished PhD dissertation (University of Cambridge, 1989).

¹³ Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London: Routledge, 1992).

approach has been adopted by Ulrike Hillemann to the research of early British cultural interactions with China, Hillemann's book *Asian Empire and British Knowledge*¹⁴ has not explored in detail the perceptions and images built up in the many accounts written by British travellers to China prior to the Opium War. In order to understand 'how the networks of imperial expansion shaped diverse British imaginations of China',¹⁵ Hillemann tells her readers much about British interest in Chinese material culture and the Chinese language, about the activities of Protestant missionaries in China, and about Chinese contacts with the British in India and in southeast Asia. She has not, however, seriously studied how the changing British perceptions of China influenced the drift to war in the 1830s and she has entirely ignored Chinese perceptions of Britain over the decades from the Macartney mission to the outbreak of the Opium War.

Last, but not least, some other relatively recent studies, which have attempted to offer close cultural investigations of the history of British-Chinese relations, tend to focus on highly specific topics. For example, Elizabeth Hope Chang and Catherine Pagani have analysed the cultural awareness of China in nineteenth-century Britain, largely from the perspectives of aesthetic practice and material culture.¹⁶ The debate between James Hevia and Joseph Esherick, which prompted widespread discussion in both western and Chinese academia, has mainly concentrated on the court ritual of the Qing dynasty.¹⁷ Joanna Waley-

¹⁴ Ulrike Hillemann, *Asian Empire and British Knowledge: China and the Networks of British Imperial Expansion* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 1.

¹⁶ Elizabeth Hope Chang, *Britain's Chinese Eye: Literature, Empire and Aesthetics in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010); Catherine Pagani, 'Chinese material culture and British perceptions of China in the mid-nineteenth century', in *Colonialism and the Object: empire, material culture and the museum*, ed. Tim Barringer and Tom Flynn (London; New York: Routledge, 1998), pp. 28-40.

¹⁷ James L. Hevia, *Cherishing men from afar: Qing guest ritual and the Macartney Embassy of 1793* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995); Joseph W. Esherick, 'Cherishing sources from afar' in *Modern China*, 24 (1998), 135-61; James L. Hevia, 'Postpolemical history: a response to Joseph W. Esherick', *Modern China*, 24 (1998), 319-27; Joseph W. Esherick, 'Traduttore, Traditore: A Reply to James Hevia', *Modern China*, 24 (1998), 328-32. See also *Ritual and Diplomacy: The Macartney mission to China, 1792-1794*, ed. Robert Bickers (London: Wellsweep, 1993); Huang Yinong 黄一农, 'Yinxiang yu zhenxiang: qingchao zhongying liangguo de guanli zhizheng' 印象与真相: 清朝中英两国的观礼之

Cohen and Maxine Berg have paid particular attention to the presents offered to the Chinese by the Macartney embassy. The former concentrates on how British science and technology were perceived by the Chinese in the late eighteenth century,¹⁸ while the latter discusses the attitudes of British manufacturers and government officials towards their own products and technologies.¹⁹ Although, in these studies, much attention has been placed on the interactions between Britain and China in particular, rather than more generally between the West and Asia, the wider historical context, particularly the subsequent hostility between the two countries, has not been addressed.

Unlike previous research which has such limitations, this thesis scrutinises the crucial but understudied fifty-year period before the Opium War, a medium-term period that had profound significance for both China and Britain. It correlates three major encounters in this period, namely the Macartney diplomatic mission (1793-4), the Amherst diplomatic mission (1816-17) and the lead up to the Opium War (1834-40), with a special focus on how British observers perceived and interpreted China, such as its government, society and people, when these were met and confronted. Since Edward Said's *Orientalism* has influentially challenged the patronising attitudes which western societies adopted when regarding their own identity 'as a superior one in comparison with all the non-European peoples and cultures',²⁰ much attention is paid in this thesis to the presentation of these perceptions in the most unbiased manner possible. To serve this purpose, first of all, this thesis does not aim to justify British

争 ('Impressions vs. Reality: a study on the guest ritual controversy between Qing China and Britain'), *Zhongyang yanjiuyuan lishi yuyan yanjiusuo jikan* 中央研究院历史研究所集刊 (*Bulletin of the Institute of History and Philology Academia Sinica*), 78 (1) 2007, 35-106.

¹⁸ Joanna Waley-Cohen, 'China and Western Technology in the Late Eighteenth Century', *American Historical Review*, 98 (1993), 1525-44; Joanna Waley-Cohen, *The Sextants of Beijing: global currents in Chinese history* (New York; London: Norton, 1999), pp. 92-128. See also Michael Adas, *Machines as the Measure of Men: Science, Technology, and Ideologies of Western Dominance* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989), pp. 177-93.

¹⁹ Maxine Berg, 'Britain, industry and perceptions of China: Matthew Boulton, "useful knowledge" and the Macartney Embassy to China, 1792-94', *Journal of Global History*, 1 (2006), 269-88.

²⁰ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (London: Penguin, 1995), p. 7. Likewise, Elizabeth Hope Chang has stated that, instead of showing China as how it was, the vision of China in the nineteenth century was 'in fact a reflection mirrored back to the European reader by a representation made by a Western writer'. See Chang, *Britain's Chinese Eye*, p. 22.

prejudice against China, nor does it seek to claim that Chinese society was more advanced or better informed than it actually was.²¹ Moreover, since Said has admitted that the ‘backbone’ of his work is a ‘set of historical generalizations’ rather than some empirical findings built ‘upon an exhaustive catalogue of texts’,²² this thesis examines a wealth of available primary materials on this particular period, partly as a response to Said’s warnings. By using these wide-ranging sources, some of which have received little attention in the past, such as the accounts written by some of the lower orders on the Macartney embassy (for example, Aeneas Anderson and Samuel Holmes)²³ and newspapers published by British residents in China (such as *The Canton Register*, *The Canton Press*),²⁴ specific contexts are provided wherever possible in this thesis to indicate that certain perceptions and images of Chinese society, such as the ignorance of the Qing courtiers and the hospitality of the Chinese people, were at least partly constructed to defend the authors’ own preconceptions, standpoints and actions.

Despite this effort to benefit from Said’s general perspective, it should be noted that, in order to be perfectly fair, it is also erroneous to assume that all these British observations on China were made to suit a particular purpose. Although it is undeniable that there were

²¹ Some contemporary historians have shown the latter intention. For example, Waley-Cohen has maintained that ‘the Chinese were extremely interested in technological advances and in what the West had to offer’. The evidence she has collected, however, is only enough to prove that certain facts about western science and technology were within the knowledge of a small-numbered elite class of the Chinese society, particularly the imperial court and some leading scholars. See Waley-Cohen, ‘China and Western Technology in the Late Eighteenth Century’, 1543-4.

²² Said, *Orientalism*, p. 4.

²³ Aeneas Anderson, *A Narrative of the British Embassy to China, in the Years of 1792, 1793 and 1794* (London: J. Debrett, 1795); Samuel Holmes, *The Journal of Mr Samuel Holmes, Serjeant-Major of the Sixth Light Dragoons, during his attendance as one of the guard on Lord Macartney’s embassy to China and Tartary, 1792-3* (London: W. Bulmer, 1798).

²⁴ *The Canton Register* was founded in November 1827 by Scottish merchants James Matheson and his nephew Alexander, together with Philadelphian, William Wightman Wood, who was the first editor. *The Canton Press* was sponsored by Dent & Co., a British firm and a direct rival to Matheson’s Jardine, Matheson & Co. *The Canton Press* was first published in 1835 but closed nine years later in 1844.

indeed some interest groups behind different views of China, especially in the 1830s,²⁵ given the fact that so many of these writings were published anonymously, it is, in fact, impossible to be certain whether some particular commentator was disposed to promote a partisan view or was simply attempting to make impartial observations. Since, among the various authors, some must have tried to be disinterested and were probably seeking to be as objective as they could be, this thesis does not seek to prove how and why each of them made his comments. Nor does it attempt to draw definite connections between different views of China and particular interest groups. Instead, the changing perceptions and attitudes of China are the prime focus of this thesis. To explore what perceptions were developed as a result of the early contacts and confrontations between the two peoples, rather than to ascertain which individuals or interest groups were most accountable for the ensuing Sino-British hostilities, is hence a key objective of this research.

Furthermore, this thesis also seeks to find out the underlying causes as well as the immediate triggers of the Opium War from a perceptual point of view. To achieve this end, much importance is attached to those British people who offered first-hand observations on China, because in comparison with the multi-hand representations of China's image made by those who had no experience of China, these direct comments on Chinese affairs are more likely to have had greater influence on the attitudes of government decision-makers. From Amherst to Napier, as well as some MPs who participated in the debates on the opium question, many of them placed emphasis on the 'local experience' obtained by previous British travellers to China.²⁶ This fact shows not only that they believed that this knowledge

²⁵ Some of these connections can indeed be drawn. For example, Greenberg has highlighted the relation between some leading British merchants in China, such as James Matheson, and manufacturing interests of Manchester, Liverpool and Glasgow. See Greenberg, *British Trade and the Opening of China*, pp. 175-95.

²⁶ For example, British Library, London: India Office Library and Records: India Office Amherst Correspondence, Lord Amherst's Embassy, 1815-17, G/12/197/271. Letter from Amherst to George Canning, 28 Feb. 1817; George T. Staunton, *Miscellaneous Notices Relating to China, and our Commercial Intercourse with that Country* (London: John Murray, 1822), p. 238; Napier to Palmertson, 9 Aug. 1834, in *Correspondence Relating to China, presented to both Houses of Parliament, by Command of*

was in some sense more reliable than other kinds, but also that the first-hand findings or perceptions probably exerted more influence on the opinions of these decision-makers who later travelled to China or helped to shape the development of British-Chinese relations. For these reasons, this thesis concentrates on what exactly was presented to British readers by those who did have first-hand knowledge of China, but refrains from assessing how these perceptions engaged with so-called 'public opinion'. What the general public thought or how it responded to what it read is, in essence, very difficult to prove or perhaps impossible to know, more attention is therefore paid in this thesis to examining how parliament and some government officials responded to these first-hand perceptions, especially on the eve of the Opium War. They did, however, show by their comments and decisions what arguments might have influenced them and this thesis concentrates on these arguments. As Hillemann has claimed, in this sense, Britain itself, especially in the late-1830s, can be regarded as 'a zone of contact ... even though this was less immediate than in Canton'.²⁷ Only when these changing viewpoints which were formed in the 'contact zone', as well as their impact on attitudes of the decision-makers, have been sufficiently investigated, can we ascertain, how such perceptions may have influenced why the First Anglo-Chinese War broke out and why this happened at such a particular point in time.

In addition to analysing how perceptions were developed on the British side, one chapter of this thesis is devoted to Chinese perceptions of Britain over the same period. By utilising some previously overlooked Chinese sources, this chapter traces how Britain was known to and understood by the Chinese government and people in the half century before China was forcibly thrown open. With some general knowledge about China's internal history of this period, this chapter can help to confirm or challenge the reliability of some British attitudes

Her Majesty (London: T. R. Harrison, 1840), p. 8; *Hansard's Parliamentary Debates*, House of Commons, 9 Apr. 1840, Third series, vol. 53, 937.

²⁷ Hillemann, *Asian Empire and British Knowledge*, p. 12.

towards China, such as Qing's dynastic decline which was highlighted by the Amherst embassy. This does not mean however that this thesis attempts to offer as detailed an analysis of Chinese perceptions of and attitudes towards Britain, since such an approach is not really practicable given the limited Chinese sources available, especially compared to the wealth of evidence presented by British commentators on China.

To be more specific, this thesis starts with a brief introduction of British and Chinese people's knowledge of each other before the official Sino-British encounters took place. The main body of the thesis consists of three parts. In part one, two British royal embassies to China, the Macartney and the Amherst missions, are investigated and analysed. These two early official contacts are conventionally regarded as unsuccessful, simply because they both failed to achieve their primary diplomatic and commercial goals. If we take into consideration their impact on the development of British attitudes towards China, however, these two embassies tell us much of importance. In general, they encouraged initial official contacts with the Chinese government, as well as leading to more visits into the interiors of many Chinese cities and rural areas by British travellers. This experience helped the British participants in these embassies to acquire more accurate perceptions of China's situation and circumstances at the time. As a result, some earlier knowledge introduced by Catholic missionaries about a developed and highly civilised China were challenged and proved to be problematic.

In part two, British perceptions during the immediate pre-Opium War period, namely the 1830s, are closely examined. From the debate between the East India Company advocates and free traders in the early 1830s, to the controversy over the opium crisis at the end of the decade, the perception of a Chinese government manipulated by a capricious and despotic monarchy was developed and seen as the primary cause of China's backwardness. China was increasingly envisioned as an isolated 'other' that could not be communicated with by

appeals to reason or through normal diplomatic negotiations on an equal footing. Thus, a coercive line of action, supported by a British naval force, was gradually deemed to be a just and viable approach to promote the wellbeing of both British interests and those of the Chinese common people.

Part three seeks to set this half-century of encounters between Britain and China in the context of Chinese history. It not only explains the major developments occurring in China over these decades, but reveals how a changing image of Britain was developed by the Chinese government and people during this period. In particular, it shows that both local elites in the southeastern coastal areas and the elites at the imperial court in Beijing obtained credible as well as inaccurate information about Britain and its people. These early notions held by the two elites sometimes had an impact on each other, but sometimes they remained distinct and unaffected. This situation partly explains why the Chinese government was caught off-guard when a serious military challenge from Britain occurred in the form of the Opium War.

This thesis, in short, seeks to present an innovative and rigorous study of the developing first-hand perceptions and attitudes produced as a result of British-Chinese encounters in the half century before the Opium War. It will not only reveal how the idea of a war against China was formed and justified on the basis of the images constructed over this period, but it will also attempt to reinterpret the history of Sino-British relations in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries from a perceptual point of view.

Introduction

I

British knowledge of China before the official encounters

Before examining British perceptions of China during the early British-Chinese encounters, it is necessary to sketch what knowledge of China an informed British public could have gained or what a Briton such as Lord Macartney could have read about China, prior to these official encounters. In general, such information might have reached Britain from the following sources. First, some Catholic missionaries, especially the Jesuits who visited the Chinese empire in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, transmitted rather favourable images of China. In order to convert the Chinese to Catholicism, these Jesuits believed that it was necessary to ‘become an integral part’¹ of Chinese civilisation. For this reason, they not only learned to speak and write the Chinese language, but also spent much time studying China’s orthodox histories, philosophical works, and religious texts. As a result of these dedicated efforts, as well as their expertise in western science and technology, some of these missionaries, such as Matteo Ricci (1552-1610) and Ferdinand Verbiest (1623-88), won the friendship of the Chinese literati and gained favour at the imperial court. It was because of either this close relationship with elite Chinese society or because of the necessity to justify their unconventional approach to converting the Chinese, that these Jesuit writings were mostly very laudatory of Chinese culture and government. China, according to these accounts, was in essence ‘a vast, powerful, and wealthy empire with advanced moral, political,

¹ John D. Young, *Confucianism and Christianity: The First Encounter* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1983), p. 23.

intellectual, and religious systems'.² In Louis Le Comte's (1656-1729) *Nouveaux mémoires sur l'état present de la Chine* (1696), an influential work that was subsequently translated into English and published in 1697, the author spoke highly of China's moral and political systems. Le Comte also praised the antiquity of Chinese civilisation, which he believed 'furnishes us [the Europeans] with an infinite number of examples of conspicuous wisdom'.³ Another monumental work, the four-volume *Description géographique, historique, chronologique et physique de l'empire de la Chine et de la Tartarie chinoise* (1735), edited by Jean Baptiste Du Halde,⁴ was the largest and most comprehensive single product of Jesuit scholarship on China. Du Halde was 'immensely positive about China' and he appreciated 'virtually every aspect of its people and society'.⁵ In particular, Du Halde claimed that China was governed in such a philosophic and enlightened way that material prosperity as well as mental contentment could be achieved for a vast population and stability could be maintained over thousands of years. In addition to Le Comte's and Du Halde's works, the Jesuit sinophilic series, *Lettres édifiantes et curieuses des Missions Étrangères par quelques Missionnaires de la Compagnie de Jesus*, which was published between 1702 and 1776, with its selective English translation *Travels of the Jesuits into various parts of the world*,⁶ was another important reference work for information about China. This series was clearly

² Chong-kun Yoon, 'Sinophilism During the Age of Enlightenment: Jesuits, *Philosophes* and Physiocrats Discover Confucius', in *Western Views of China and the Far East*, ed. Henry A. Myers (2 vols., Hong Kong: Asian Research Service, 1982), I, 158.

³ Le Comte, *Nouveaux mémoires sur l'état present de la Chine* (Paris: J. Anisson, 1696), p. 125. See Qian Zhongshu, 'China in the English Literature of the Eighteenth Century', in *A Collection of Qian Zhongshu's English Essays* (Beijing: Foreign language teaching and research press, 2005), p. 151. This article was originally published in *Quarterly Bulletin of Chinese Bibliography*, New Series, 2 (1941), 7-48, 113-52.

⁴ There are two English translations of this book: one published by John Watts in 1736 under the title *The General History of China*, the other published by Edward Cave between 1738 to 1741 in two folio volumes, which was entitled *A Description of the Empire of China and Chinese Tartary*.

⁵ Mackerras, *Western Images of China*, p. 35.

⁶ It was edited by the English author John Lockman. His first edition appeared in two volumes in 1743 with a second one in 1762.

subjected to careful selection and editing, so that a similar idealised image of China was presented to its European readers.⁷

Second, under the positive influence of the Jesuits, some key philosophers of the Enlightenment became enthusiastic about China. From the mid-seventeenth to the late-eighteenth century, the aforementioned Jesuit reports were widely read among European intellectuals. As a result, China was seen by many as an ideal model, which might be a rational alternative to the existing order of royal autocracy and religious intolerance in Europe. The German logician and mathematician, Gottfried Wilhelm Leibnitz (1646-1716), for example, was fascinated by Chinese culture. He believed that cultural exchanges between China and Europe were necessary and, in particular, ‘Chinese missionaries should be sent to us to teach us the aim and practice of natural theology, as we send missionaries to them to instruct them in revealed theology’.⁸ In particular, Leibnitz admired the Kangxi emperor (1654-1722, r. 1662-1722), who was known to have tolerated Christianity and to have shown a strong interest in mathematics, philosophy and European science. Leibnitz regarded the Kangxi emperor as a model of a benevolent monarch, because although ‘being a god-like mortal, ruling all by a nod of his head’, he was ‘educated to virtue and wisdom ... thereby earning the right to rule’.⁹ Voltaire (1694-1778), prince of the *philosophes*, was also highly laudatory of Chinese institutions. Since it was illegal to criticise openly the state or the church in his time, Voltaire employed China as a polemical weapon to cloak his attacks on obscurantism and misgovernment in France. In *Essai sur les mœurs et l’esprit des Nations* (1756), which lifted China ‘to the summit of her glory among the French’,¹⁰ Voltaire offered a panegyric of the rationality of Chinese culture and philosophy. He extolled the secular nature of Confucianism, because the religion of the emperors and the tribunals ‘has never

⁷ Du Halde edited volumes IX to XXVI, which covered the years from 1709 to 1743.

⁸ Reichwein, *China and Europe*, p. 80.

⁹ Donald F. Lach, ‘Leibniz and China’, *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 6 (1945), 440.

¹⁰ Pierre Martino, *L’Orient dans la Littérature Française au XVIIe et au XVIIIe Siècle* (Paris: Librairie Hachette, 1916), p. 181, in Qian, ‘China in the English Literature of the Eighteenth Century’, p. 143.

been troubled by priestly quarrels'.¹¹ China, moreover, was appreciated by Voltaire as a great ancient civilisation that was founded upon paternal authority and governed by an enlightened literary class, recruited by competitive examination not by noble birth. François Quesnay (1694-1774), the leader of the Physiocratic school, was another ardent admirer of China. Quesnay and his fellow Physiocrats highly valued the fact that 'in China ... agriculture has always been held in veneration, and those who profess it have always merited the special attention of the emperor'.¹² Quesnay also eulogised the Chinese constitution as founded on wise and irrevocable laws so that even 'the emperor himself is not immune from ... censure when his conduct offends the laws and rules of the state'.¹³ Quesnay, unlike Voltaire, did not deny that the Chinese government was in essence despotic, but he asserted that the power of the Chinese emperor did not prevent China from having the best form of government, because 'It is a generally established maxim among the people ... that as they should have a filial obedience toward their sovereign, he in turn should love them like a father'.¹⁴ Although Quesnay's high regard for China's enlightened despotism was not shared by some other great European thinkers, such as Montesquieu (1689-1755), who condemned the oppressiveness of the Chinese government and discredited the Jesuits' accounts,¹⁵ European intellectuals' admiration for China, on the whole, was striking from the mid-seventeenth to the mid-eighteenth centuries.

Third, along with the appeal of Chinese moral and political systems, a general fascination with Chinese artistic tastes became an essential feature of European culture. As

¹¹ Voltaire, *Essai sur les mœurs et l'esprit des Nations et sur les principaux faits de l'histoire depuis Charlemagne jusqu'à Louis XIII* (1756; reprinted, Paris: Garnier frères, 1963), p. 69, in Mackerras, *Western Images of China*, p. 38.

¹² Lewis A. Maverick, *China: A Model for Europe* (San Antonio, TX: Paul Anderson, 1946), p. 206. This work was originally published in two volumes, the second of which is the author's translation of Quesnay's works.

¹³ Quesnay in *ibid.*, p. 216.

¹⁴ Quesnay, *Le Despotisme de la Chine* (1767), II, 226, in William Joseph Eaton, 'The Old Regime and the Middle Kingdom: The French Physiocrats and China as a Model for Reform in the Eighteenth Century, a Cautionary Tale', *Tamkang Journal of International Affairs*, 10 (2006), 75.

¹⁵ Marshall and Williams, *The Great Map of Mankind*, pp. 141-2.

commercial intercourse with China increased significantly from the late seventeenth century onwards, Chinese objects were more widely circulated in Europe. In consequence, a lively vogue for Chinese fashions, which was later known as ‘*Chinoiserie*’,¹⁶ spread over much of Europe. Under such circumstances, not only were Chinese porcelain, lacquer ware, silk cloth and wallpaper extensively imported and copied, but also a number of Chinese summer houses, pavilions, pagodas and bridges were constructed, as ornaments to royal parks and aristocratic estates throughout Europe.¹⁷ Britain, in particular, excelled in Chinese-style garden designs. Sir William Chambers (1723-96), a Scottish architect who had twice visited Canton (Guangzhou), was ‘the foremost authority on Chinese architecture and gardening at the time in Europe’.¹⁸ Chambers published in 1757 his *Designs of Chinese Buildings, Furniture, Dresses, Machines and Utensils* and, several years later, he produced a more detailed *Dissertation on Oriental Gardening* (1772). Both of these books drew much attention from within and without Britain. In 1763, according to the Chinese model of gardening and architecture he learned, Chambers built Kew Gardens in the vicinity of London. Kew Gardens was perhaps the most well-known Chinese garden in Europe at the time and, in the context of *Chinoiserie*, Chambers’ designs were soon widely imitated in other countries on the Continent.

On the basis of the favourable accounts written by Jesuits and enlightened philosophers, as well as the widespread enthusiasm for Chinese material culture, Britain developed a considerable admiration for China, especially in the second half of the seventeenth century. Nevertheless, unlike Voltaire and Quesnay who were activists for social progress and

¹⁶ ‘*Chinoiserie*’ as a term to describe a European fantasy vision of China was not known in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. It is an expression of relatively recent invention, which first appeared in dictionaries in 1883. See David Beevers, “‘Mand’rin only is the man of taste’: 17th and 18th Century *Chinoiserie* in Britain’, in *Chinese Whispers: Chinoiserie in Britain 1650-1930*, ed. David Beevers (Brighton: The Royal Pavilion and Museums, 2008), p. 13.

¹⁷ Marshall and Williams, *The Great Map of Mankind*, p. 86.

¹⁸ *Western Views of China and the Far East*, I, 174.

political reforms, British admirers of China were ‘deeply sceptical about the achievements’¹⁹ of their own age and tended to believe that British society and institutions were in a worsening state. China, for this reason, was interpreted by British commentators as a venerable and ancient civilisation that ‘had kept its pristine excellence to a remarkable extent in a world prone to deterioration’.²⁰ John Webb (1611-72), for example, praised the antiquity of Chinese civilisation ‘with a dash of religious zeal’.²¹ In *An historical essay endeavoring a probability that the language of the Empire of China is the primitive language* (1669), Webb justified his admiration for China upon a biblical footing. Webb claimed that, prior to the Confusion of Tongues (*confusio linguarum*), Noah carried the world’s primitive language into the Ark with him and settled in the East. Because of the superiority and hence the independence of Chinese civilisation, the Chinese language had kept the original tongue that was common to the world before the Flood. In this respect, Emperor Yao, a legendary Chinese ruler, was even recognised by Webb as no other than Noah himself.²² Sir William Temple (1628-99), Britain’s most famous sinophile in the seventeenth century, agreed about the antiquity of Chinese civilisation by saying that the seeds of Grecian learning and institutions can be easily found in ancient China.²³ Moreover, Temple pointed out that China in his own age was ‘the greatest, richest, and most populous kingdom now known in the world’, because, ever since ancient times, the ‘admirable constitution of its government’ had been ‘established upon the deepest and wisest foundations’.²⁴ As with some Enlightenment thinkers from the Continent, Temple wrote very highly of the Chinese form of government,

¹⁹ Marshall and Williams, *The Great Map of Mankind*, p. 132.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Qian Zhongshu, ‘China in the English Literature of the Seventeenth Century’, in *The Vision of China in the English Literature of the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries*, ed. Adrian Hsia (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 1998), p. 45. This article was originally published in *Quarterly Bulletin of Chinese Bibliography*, New Series, 1 (1940), 351-84.

²² John Webb, *An historical essay* (London: Nath. Brook, 1669), pp. 15-26, 44, 60, see Qian, ‘China in the English Literature of the Seventeenth Century’, p. 46.

²³ William Temple, *The Works of Sir William Temple* (4 vols., London: J. Brotherton, 1770; reprinted, New York: Greenwood Press, 1968), III, 457.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, III, 41, 328.

which was believed to have been established upon the wisdom of Confucius. Together with the fair and efficient system of its civil service examinations, the Chinese political system overall was regarded ‘in practice to excel the very speculations ... and all those imaginary schemes of the European wits, the institutions of Xenophon, the republic of Plato, the Utopia’s, or Oceana’s of our modern writers’.²⁵ As a result of Temple’s vigorous efforts to promote such positive images of China, Britain’s enthusiasm for Chinese culture ‘reached its highest pitch in the English literature of the seventeenth century’.²⁶

Despite the fact that a similar esteem for Chinese culture and institutions can be detected in the British Isles as on the Continent, Europe’s respect for China declined first in Britain. From the beginning of the eighteenth century, the excellence of Chinese civilisation began to be doubted by British commentators. Publications censorious of China increased markedly, particularly during the second half of the century. Some reasons can be offered to explain this shift in British attitudes towards China at this particular time. Most immediately, the Kangxi emperor banned Christian missions in China in 1721. It deprived the Jesuits of the imperial patronage which they had long enjoyed at the Chinese court and most missionaries were expelled from China in the following years. In 1773, the Society of Jesus was also formally dissolved in Europe on the orders of Pope Clement XIV. These events resulted in Jesuit writers on China being unsupported by the authorities in China and in Europe. Moreover, to the British, who were largely Protestant, the Society of Jesus had always been ‘an equivocal and even sinister body’²⁷ which could not be fully trusted. The Jesuit admiration for China was therefore undermined and could no longer be so relied upon to offer a positive image of the government of China.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, III, 332.

²⁶ Qian, ‘China in the English Literature of the Eighteenth Century’, p. 142.

²⁷ Marshall and Williams, *The Great Map of Mankind*, p. 84.

The values of British society and its changing preoccupations also helped to cause mounting scepticism about China and things Chinese. For one thing, from the very beginning, British fascination with China, especially among the literati, had been weaker than on the Continent. Compared with Voltaire and others in France who produced a romanticised image of China in order to veil their criticisms of the French government, British intellectuals were generally more satisfied with their own political system. Particularly after the ‘Glorious Revolution’ in the late seventeenth century, Britain basically lost the ‘motivation to hold up China for utopian contrast with the home country which was prevalent among the French *philosophes*’.²⁸ Moreover, in the eighteenth century, as British society was undergoing rapid but mainly positive changes, which reinforced the pride and sense of superiority of the British nation, far fewer Britons adhered to the belief that British civilisation was in decline. ‘Change’ or ‘progress’, instead, was widely accepted by the public as the natural expectation of humanity.²⁹ For this reason, the antiquity and changelessness of Chinese civilisation, which was so much appreciated by Webb and Temple, lost their attractions. Increasingly, in Britain, ‘China was not judged by how well it adhered to its ancient traditions but by how it performed at the present time in terms of military power, effective government, scientific knowledge, technological skill and the living standards of the mass of the population’.³⁰ Hence, a stagnant and backward image of China began to take shape. Adam Smith (1723-90), for instance, admitted that China used to be ‘one of the richest, that is, one of the most fertile, best cultivated, most industrious and most populous countries in the world’, but ‘[it] seems ... to have been long stationary’.³¹ In order to avoid such a state of stagnation, Smith pointed out the value of cultivating an extensive foreign trade. If China engaged in such foreign trade, she

²⁸ *Western Views of China and the Far East*, I, 38.

²⁹ David Spadafora, *The Idea of Progress in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1990).

³⁰ Marshall and Williams, *The Great Map of Mankind*, p. 175.

³¹ Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, ed. R.H. Campbell and A.S. Skinner (2 vols., Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976), I, 89.

would be able to ‘learn the art of ... different machines made use of in other countries, as well as the other improvements of art and industry which are practised in all the different parts of the world’.³² Daniel Defoe (1660-1731), the author of *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), was more straightforward in his contempt for China. As he put it in Crusoe’s words, the Chinese people were ‘a contemptible herd or crowd of ignorant, sordid slaves, subjected to a government qualified only to rule such a people’.³³ In a similar tone, Defoe belittled Chinese cities, architecture, commerce, and so on. Even the Chinese mode of husbandry, which had been particularly eulogised by previous commentators, was now deemed as ‘imperfect and impotent’³⁴ according to European standards. As with Defoe, Sir William Jones (1746-94), the great Orientalist, held completely negative views of Chinese civilisation. In a speech he delivered to the Asiatic Society in 1790, Jones stated that:

Their popular religion was imported from India in an age comparatively modern; and their philosophy seems yet in so rude a state, as hardly deserve the appellation; they have no ancient monuments; ... their sciences are wholly exotick; and their mechanical arts have nothing in them characteristic of a particular family ... They have indeed, both national music and national poetry, and both of them beautifully pathetick, but of painting, sculpture, of architecture, as arts of imagination, they seem (like other Asiaticks) to have no idea.³⁵

It was probably owing to these unfavourable views of China, which were becoming commonly held in eighteenth-century Britain, that Samuel Johnson (1709-84), in sharp contrast to Temple, categorised the Chinese as ‘East-Indian barbarians’. Although Johnson still acknowledged the Chinese people as ‘great, or wise’, this was ‘only in comparison with

³² *Ibid.*, II, 681.

³³ Daniel Defoe, *The Life and Adventures of Robinson Crusoe* (1719; reprinted, Edinburgh: James Ballantyne, 1812), p. 395.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ William Jones, *The Works of Sir William Jones* (6 vols., London: G.G. and J. Robinson, 1799), I, 102.

the nations that surround them',³⁶ rather than in comparison to Britain or any other major European state.

Another crucial reason for the worsening British impressions of China in the eighteenth century was the rapid growth of Britain's China trade. As a considerable number of Britons were now able to set foot on Chinese soil, merchants, rather than Catholic missionaries, became the principal source of the images of China that were transmitted to the British public. Nevertheless, the main contacts of these new visitors to China were no longer the upper or middle classes of Chinese society, such as the intellectuals or officials in Beijing, but the Chinese merchants and seamen who belonged to the lower classes and were much more disposed to take advantage of foreigners engaged in commerce with them. Since China's external trade at this time was confined only to the southeast coast, the local authorities there, who operated thousands of miles from the central government, also tended to be 'interested in soaking them [the foreigners] for money'.³⁷ As a result, reports about deceptive Chinese tradesmen and a corrupt government were constantly on the rise. George Anson's *Voyage Round the World* (1748), according to Mackerras, was 'the first full-scale attack on the rosy images of China which the French Jesuits were pushing'.³⁸ Although Anson only skirted the coast of Canton, he formed a range of negative views of the Chinese character diametrically different from those that had appeared in earlier missionaries' accounts. In particular, Anson was incensed at 'the dishonest Chinese procurement practices that he encountered, from cramming ducks and chickens with stones and gravel to bloating hogs with water'.³⁹ On the basis of these experiences, Anson concluded that 'these instances may serve as a specimen of the manners of this celebrated nation, which is often recommended to the rest of the world as

³⁶ James Boswell, *Boswell's Life of Johnson: together with Boswell's journal of a tour to the Hebrides and Johnson's diary of a journey into North Wales*, ed. L.F. Powell (6 vols., Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1934-50), III, 339; IV, 188.

³⁷ Marshall and Williams, *The Great Map of Mankind*, p. 174.

³⁸ Mackerras, *Western Images of China*, p. 43.

³⁹ Spence, *The Chan's Great Continent*, p. 53.

a pattern of all kinds of laudable qualities'.⁴⁰ In addition, with the increase in British-Chinese commerce, the East India Company's employees in China also discovered that, whatever might be the theory, the Chinese officials in Canton 'turned out not to be philosopher rulers but to be grasping extortioners'.⁴¹ In one of the Company's reports to parliament, the Chinese government was even characterised as 'the most corrupt in the universe'.⁴² Probably as a result of these new first-hand findings, the notion that the Chinese were in fact an extremely crafty and avaricious nation spread increasingly widely across Britain, especially within intellectual circles. Anti-Chinese writings hence kept emerging and, in general, their tone 'became increasingly rude and more contemptuous than ever before'.⁴³

In sum, from the seventeenth to the middle of the eighteenth centuries, Jesuits and Continental philosophers had inspired considerable enthusiasm for China in Europe. With the changing values of British society, as well as the increasing first-hand knowledge about China, however, eighteenth-century Britain experienced a gradual decline in its admiration for the Chinese. Although the balance between favourable and unfavourable views of China was shifting away from the former and towards the latter, it should be noted that 'at any time in the eighteenth century British readers were never wholly dependent on one set of sources rather than another'.⁴⁴ By the end of the eighteenth century, despite the mounting scepticism about China, the British public still 'enjoyed some freedom to choose what published version of China it would or would not believe'.⁴⁵ It was in this context that Macartney and his retinue embarked on their journey to the Chinese empire, by which Britain, for the first time, began to take the lead in informing Europe about China.

⁴⁰ George Anson, *A Voyage Round the World in the Years 1740-1744* (London: John and Paul Knapton, 1748), p. 525.

⁴¹ Marshall and Williams, *The Great Map of Mankind*, p. 170.

⁴² East India Company, *Three reports of the select committee, appointed by the Court of Directors to take into consideration the export trade from Great Britain to the East Indies, China, Japan, and Persia* (London: J.S. Jordan, 1793), p. 82.

⁴³ *Western Views of China and the Far East*, I, 176.

⁴⁴ Marshall and Williams, *The Great Map of Mankind*, p. 174.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

II

Chinese knowledge of Britain before the official encounters

In comparison with Britain's understandings of China before the two countries' early encounters, China's knowledge about the outside world, especially Britain, was much less profound. By the end of the eighteenth century, the vast majority of Chinese people had no idea of modern geography. Only a very small number of well-informed Chinese were aware who the British were and in which part of the world they lived. In fact, over thousands of years, the Chinese empire had been the dominant force of its own Asian world. The oldest Chinese 'world' map, *Hua yi tu* (华夷图; *Map of China and the barbarian countries*) (1137),⁴⁶ only contained some parts of present-day Korea and Vietnam in addition to the Middle Kingdom itself, while other surrounding countries only had their names listed beside the map. Although it can be concluded that the culturally superior Chinese empire did not believe that these nations deserved to share a space on this map, it can also be suggested that China at this time did not have an accurate geographical notion of its neighbouring areas, let alone distant Britain and western Europe. In the Ming dynasty (1368-1644), the Chinese made some significant progress in knowing about their external world. For one thing, in order to impose imperial control over trade and to impress foreign peoples in the Indian Ocean basin, the Ming government sponsored a series of naval expeditions, particularly the seven voyages of Zheng He between 1405 and 1433. As a result of these expeditions, some of which even reached as far as East Africa, not only was China's maritime influence strengthened, but the Chinese knowledge about the world increased accordingly. Moreover, during the Age of Discovery, as the new sea route to India was discovered, a growing number of Europeans were able to visit China. As a consequence, some Catholic missionaries who

⁴⁶ *Science and Civilisation in China*, ed. Joseph Needham, *et al.* (7 vols., Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1954-2008), III, 548. A rubbing of this map is held in Harvard's Fine Arts Library.

served in the Chinese government began to introduce into China western geographical knowledge of the globe.

In 1601, as the first European invited to the Forbidden City, Italian Jesuit Matteo Ricci arrived in Beijing and became an adviser to the imperial court of the Wanli emperor. In the following year, with the help of his Chinese collaborators, Ricci produced *Kunyu wanguo quantu* (坤輿万国全图; *A map of the myriad countries of the world*), the first European-style world map in China. This map not only showed that the world consists of three oceans and five continents, but also contained descriptions of the ethnic groups and main products associated with each region. Notably, among the 850 or so toponyms, the names of England and Scotland were first mentioned. They were transliterated respectively as ‘*An-e-li-ya* (谿厄利亚)’ and ‘*Si-ke-qi-ya* (思可齐亚)’, presumably from the pronunciations of *Anglia* and *Scotia* in Latin. In 1623, another Italian Jesuit, Giulio Aleni (1582-1649), published in Hangzhou *Zhifang waiji* (职方外纪; *Account of countries not listed in the records office*), the earliest book on world geography written in the Chinese language. In this account, some basic information about European countries was introduced, together with another map of the world *Wanguo quantu* (万国全图; *Complete map of all the countries*). Compared to Ricci’s map, Aleni included in his work more knowledge about Britain. In the section of ‘*An-e-li-ya*’, its location, climate, as well as the facts that it was comprised of three ‘provinces’ (道, *dao*)⁴⁷ and that it had two universities were made known to the readers. In 1674, when the Qing dynasty was in power, the Kangxi emperor’s close friend, the Flemish Jesuit, Ferdinand Verbiest, presented another European-fashion map *Kunyu quantu* (坤輿全图; *Full map of the*

⁴⁷ Aleni did not clarify which three provinces exactly comprised ‘*An-e-li-ya*’, but he did mention *An-e-li-ya* lies between latitudes 50°N and 60°N, a space which covers Scotland. This point, however, contradicts the notion that *An-e-li-ya*’s is separated from *Si-ke-qi-ya* in his own map. In this respect, some people believe the three provinces that Aleni mentioned were England, Wales and Scotland; while others point out that Aleni referred to England, Wales and Cornwall. See Xiangjiang Guoke 香江过客, ‘Yinglun sandao tanyuan’ 英伦三岛探源 (‘On the origin of the “three islands” of Britain’), *Fang yu* 方輿, 1 (2010), 15-19.

world), along with an even larger geographical work *Kunyu tushuo* (坤輿图说; *Illustrated discussion of the geography of the world*). Largely the same information about Britain as had appeared in Aleni's work was transmitted to the Qing officials and intellectuals.

Despite the fact that European missionaries had introduced to China western knowledge of the geography of the world, as well as some knowledge about Britain, these new views of China's external world were not well received within China. In fact, not much interest in this evidence was aroused among the Chinese public, nor did it produce much of an impact on the world views of China's traditional elite, the literati. As Ricci's memoir has shown, the 'world' to most Chinese at that time was still a score of neighbouring provinces whose territories stretched in all directions to the seas.⁴⁸ Ricci noted that:

The Chinese think that the heaven is round and the earth is square. They firmly believe their country is located right in the centre of world. They do not like our geographical idea that leaves China in a corner of the east.⁴⁹

...
The Chinese people consider all foreigners as barbarians who are without any knowledge. They also address foreigners as barbarians in daily lives ... Even in written language, the words they use to refer to foreigners do not differ from those to describe beasts. The Chinese scarcely label foreign people more respectably than animals.⁵⁰

It was perhaps for these reasons that Zhang Xie's *Dongxiyang kao* (东西洋考; *On the countries in the Eastern and Western oceans*) (1617), the Ming dynasty's best geographical study on foreign nations, did not refer to Ricci's opinions at all. Some other scholars, such as Wei Jun, were even much offended when they found that China was not placed in the centre of *Kunyu wanguo quantu*. Wei Jun maintained that:

⁴⁸ Matteo Ricci and Nicolas Trigault, *Li Madou Zhongguo zhaji* 利玛窦中国札记 (*The Notes on China of Father Matteo Ricci*; originally written in Latin and titled *De Christiana expeditione apud Sinas*), translated into Chinese by He Gaoji 何高济, Wang Zunzhong 王遵仲, and Li Shen 李申 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1983), p. 179.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p.180.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 94-5.

In recent years, Matteo Ricci has created an evil theory in order to confuse the world. ... In Ricci's work ... what he described can be seen from nowhere; those places he mentioned cannot be reached on foot and, on the whole, nothing could be proved true ... Let alone anything else, Ricci located the Middle Kingdom in his map in the northwest ... how absurd and offensive this theory is!⁵¹

Ji Xiaolan, one of the Qing dynasty's most famous scholars and the chief compiler of *Siku quanshu* (四库全书; *The complete collection of the four treasures*),⁵² was also dubious about the fresh ideas and information produced by the missionaries. In *Siku Quanshu*'s annotated catalogue, Ji Xiaolan remarked that Aleni's *Zhifang waiji* was a book in which 'many of its contents were odd and bizarre. They would not withstand investigation. It is almost certain that there is much exaggeration'.⁵³ With regard to the missionaries' theory that the world consists of five continents, the editors of *Qinding huangchao wenxian tongkao* (钦定皇朝文献通考; *Imperial comprehensive investigations based on literary and documentary sources*) adopted a critical stance. In their opinion, this theory was equally 'absurd and of a pretentious nature'.⁵⁴ Even though it was mentioned in multiple accounts of the missionaries, they believed that these westerners simply plagiarised each other's studies, which were in essence utterly unfounded.⁵⁵

⁵¹ Wei Jun 魏浚, 'Lishuo huangtang huoshi' 利说荒唐惑世 ('On the absurdity of Matteo Ricci's theory and how it causes confusion to the world'), in *Shengchao poxie ji* 圣朝破邪集 (*An anthology of writings exposing heterodoxy*), ed. Xia Guiqi 夏瑰琦 (8 vols., 1640; reprinted, Hong Kong: Alliance Bible Seminary, 1996), III, 183.

⁵² At the height of the Qing dynasty, the Qianlong emperor commissioned *Siku quanshu*, in order to demonstrate that Qing scholarship could surpass Ming's *Yongle dadian* 永乐大典 (*Yongle encyclopaedia*), which previously had been the largest encyclopaedia of the world. The Qing court's ideology can be clearly observed from the selection of the works into *Siku quanshu*. Although some of the missionaries' books were included, most of them were on astronomy or calendrical studies. If occasionally the compilers disagreed with some of points in the selected works, they usually pointed out that they were 'improper' views and added their own comments beside the texts.

⁵³ 'Zhifang waiji tiyao' 职方外纪提要 ('A summary of *Zhifang Waiji*'), in *Siku quanshu*, ed. Ji Xiaolan 纪晓岚, et al. (79337 vols., 1784; reprinted, Taiwan: Shangwu yinshuguan, 1983), history category (352), geography section (594), 280.

⁵⁴ *Qinding huangqing wenxian tongkao*, ed. Zhang Tingyu 张廷玉, et al. (300 vols., 1787), CCXCVIII, in *Siku quanshu*, history category (396), political documents section (638), 713.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

Although knowledge about the western world generally had little appeal for Chinese officials and intellectuals, this cannot be attributed entirely to the cultural conservatism of Chinese society. The missionaries' ultimate aim in China was, after all, the conversion of the Chinese to Christianity. In order to arouse the Chinese people's interest in the Christian world, these missionaries not only endeavoured to amaze the Chinese by introducing western science and technology, but, at times, indeed exaggerated the knowledge and achievements of the West. For instance, to create a paradisiacal image of Europe, Ricci alleged that Britain was a country in which no poisonous snakes and insects could be found and that, even if they were carried there from elsewhere, their venom would vanish as soon as they reached Britain.⁵⁶ Given the fact that works produced by such missionaries were numerous, it would have been impossible for the Chinese to distinguish truthful and valuable knowledge from among the miscellaneous information provided. In addition, when it came to knowledge about Britain, although the British Isles were mentioned to Chinese readers, Protestant countries were not highlighted in the accounts produced by these Catholic missionaries. England and Scotland, by the time Ricci completed his *Kunyu wanguo quantu*, were still not a united kingdom and their power could not yet be compared with that of Holland, France or Spain. For these reasons, the Chinese people's initial understanding of Britain, however minimal, was not largely drawn from the maps and studies of Catholic missionaries, but was largely acquired from another source: trade on China's southeast coast.

Ever since the sixteenth century, European merchants from Portugal, Holland, and the British Isles had begun to explore business opportunities in East Asia. Under the Ming government's maritime embargo, however, foreigners were not allowed to trade within Chinese territory. As a result, the British people's earliest commercial intercourse with China was conducted with overseas Chinese who lived in southeast Asia and Japan. In the former

⁵⁶ It was noted by Ricci on the margin of *Kunyu wanguo quantu*.

area, British tradesmen established and maintained a stable relationship with their counterparts from China. They also employed Chinese as sailors and assistants in trade. In Japan, the British not only exchanged products with Chinese businessmen, who resided there, but rented and eventually bought a Chinese merchant's property as their factory in Hirado. Moreover, the Chinese used to help translate Japanese ministers' letters to the British monarch from Japanese into Malay, so that the British could find a translator to read it.⁵⁷ These preliminary interactions between the British and Chinese people were neither permitted by the Ming government, nor known to the vast majority of people in China. It was not until the early seventeenth century that the British began to have some preliminary contacts with people in China proper and, as a result, were gradually known as the 'Red Hair', an epithet that coastal Chinese residents gave to the 'foreign devils'.

In the beginning of the seventeenth century, the Dutch had a stronger presence in Asia than the British did. The Dutch forces occupied Pescadores in 1622 and, two years later, established control over Taiwan, which was used as Holland's trading post with mainland China. These activities enabled the Dutch to approach the Chinese market more effectively than any other European power, insomuch that the Dutch even dominated the Chinese coastal residents' international contacts for a few decades. Since the Chinese at this time had no idea where these strange-looking beings were from, they called the Dutch the 'Red Hair (红毛, *Hongmao*)' or the 'Red-haired barbarians (红毛藩, *Hongmao fan*; 红毛夷, *Hongmao yi*)'⁵⁸ in light of their reddish hair colour. From the 1630s onwards, Britain's determination to promote its commerce in China increased significantly. In particular, the British desired to be

⁵⁷ Zhang Yidong 张轶东, 'Zhongying liangguo zuizao de jiechu' 中英两国最早的接触 ('On the earliest Sino-British contacts'), *Lishi yanjiu* 历史研究 (*Historical research*), 1 (1958), 35-6.

⁵⁸ See Peng Zhaorong 彭兆荣, "'hongmao fan": yige zengzhi de xiangxing wenben – jindai xifang xingxiang zai Zhongguo de bianqian guiji yu hudong guanxin' "红毛番": 一个增值的象形文本——近代西方形象在中国的变迁轨迹与互动关系 ('A case study of the "Red Hair Barbarians": on the evolution of western images in China'), *Xiamen daxue xuebao (zhexue shehui kexue ban)* 厦门大学学报 (哲学社会科学版) (*Journal of Xiamen University (Philosophy and social sciences edition)*), 2 (1998), 35-40.

able to trade with local merchants in South China. In 1635, a British ship, *The London*, anchored at Macau as the first British ship ever to enter Chinese territory. In 1637, in order to gain access to Guangzhou, a British flotilla commanded by Captain John Weddell passed through the Bogue, the mouth of the Pearl River, without receiving permission from the Chinese government. When local authorities resisted this intrusion, the British opened fire and captured a fort. The viceroy of Canton hence had to assemble a large number of troops so as to force the British to withdraw. This incident was in fact the very first confrontation between Britain and the government of Guangdong, but the Ming authorities did not attempt to ascertain from whence these foreign intruders had come. As the British also had reddish hair, the Chinese took it for granted that these seamen were from Holland. In consequence, when early Qing historians were compiling the history of the Ming dynasty,⁵⁹ this conflict with the British was mistakenly placed in the Holland section.⁶⁰

From the early years of the Qing period (1644-1912), there was a steady growth in the number of British merchants who came to trade in or near China. Because of these increasing face-to-face contacts, Chinese coastal inhabitants gradually perceived that the British were from an independent nation. According to the way most of them addressed themselves, their country was known as ‘*Ying-ji-li* (英吉利)’ or ‘*Ying-gui-li* (英圭黎)’, which was almost certainly transliterated from the pronunciation of ‘England’. With the passage of time, these designations for Britain (or England),⁶¹ instead of the Jesuits’ translation *An-e-li-ya*, were widely received and employed by both Chinese officials and the common people. As China’s commercial ties with Britain and other European countries strengthened, the Chinese people’s knowledge about Europe increased accordingly. In 1730, an influential study on knowledge

⁵⁹ It is a Chinese tradition that every dynasty compiles an official history for the previous dynasty.

⁶⁰ It was not until the late nineteenth century that scholar-official Xia Xie discovered that it was the British rather than Dutch who caused this incident. See Xia Xie 夏燮, *Zhongxi jishi* 中西纪事 (*Records of Sino-Western relations*) (originally 24 vols., 1865; reprinted, Changsha: Yuelu shushe, 1988), p. 14.

⁶¹ Obviously, nobody in China at this time knew the difference between Britain and England.

of western world, *Haiguo wenjian lu* (海国闻见录; *Record of things seen and heard about the maritime countries*), was produced by Chen Lunjiong, a military official from Fujian. In his book, Chen Lunjiong not only made it clear that Britain was located to the northwest of France, Holland and Hungary, but noted Britain's main products as well as its trade with India.⁶² The publication of *Haiguo wenjian lu* demonstrated that, independent from the missionaries' maps and studies, accurate geographical information about Europe as well as Britain had finally appeared in a work written by a Chinese author.

In spite of this progress in knowledge about Europe, the Chinese people at this time did not show much interest in knowing about particular European nations. Instead, they tended to recognise the Europeans generally as one people. For this reason, the Chinese remained unconscious of their previous mistake in confusing the British with the Dutch. They, on the contrary, enlarged the definition of 'Red Hair' to include all Caucasian-looking people. For instance, Chen Lunjiong maintained that 'The Red Hair is the general name for all the northwestern [European] countries'.⁶³ Lan Dingyuan, the former governor of Guangzhou, also stated that 'The Red Hair generally refers to the island countries in the West. It includes *Ying-ji-li*, Castile, France, Holland, Portugal, Goa, and so on'.⁶⁴ Even though a very small number of Chinese people were aware that Britain and Holland were two different hordes of 'Red Hair', most of them erred in their understanding of the relationship between these two countries. Among different opinions, some assumed that Britain was affiliated with Holland;⁶⁵ while others claimed that Britain used to be a part of Holland, but had since

⁶² Chen Lunjiong, *Haiguo wenjian lu* (1730; reprinted, Taipei: Taiwan yinhang jingji yanjiushi, 1958), p. 27.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ Lan Dingyuan, 蓝鼎元, 'Lun nanyang shiyi shu' 论南洋事宜书 ('On the south ocean affairs') (1724), in *Jindai Zhongguo shiliao congkan xubian* 近代中国史料丛刊续编 (*Sequel to the collection of materials on modern Chinese history*), ed. Shen Yunlong 沈云龙 (100 vols., Taiwan: Wenhai chubanshe, 1974-82), XXXXI, 115-6.

⁶⁵ *Huangqing zhigong tu* 皇清职贡图 (*The Qing imperial illustrations of tributaries*), ed. Fu Heng 傅恒, Dong Gao 董浩, et al. (9 vols., 1761; reprinted, Changchun: Jilin chubanshe, 2007), I, 123.

become independent. For example, Yin Guangren, a famous scholar-official, asserted that, ‘Holland [was], formerly known as the Red Hair in Ming dynasty. ... Now *Ying-ji-li*, Sweden and Denmark are separate from it’.⁶⁶ According to these views, it can be observed that, in this period, the term ‘Red Hair’ was broadly defined and employed in a very loose manner. Although the British were known as ‘Red Hairs’, all other European-looking people were also so called. They did not have to be either British or Dutch or have red hair or pale features. Even the dark-skinned Portuguese were Red Hairs.

In the latter part of the eighteenth century, as Britain overtook Holland as the world’s greatest maritime power, British merchants in China vastly outnumbered those from any other European nation. In consequence, more and more ‘Red Hairs’, who came to trade with the Chinese, claimed themselves citizens of *Ying-ji-li* rather than of anywhere else.⁶⁷ This change gradually altered the Chinese people’s knowledge about who the ‘Red Hairs’ were and, increasingly, the ‘Red Hair’ was becoming an exclusive epithet that the Chinese gave to the British. By 1791, in which year Wang Dahai completed his *Haidao yizhi* (海岛逸志; *Lost gazetteer of the islands in the sea*), it can be seen that, unlike before, the Chinese were now able to distinguish the British from the original ‘Red Hair’, namely the Dutch. Wang Dahai stated that, ‘*Ying-ji-li-ren* are known to the Chinese as the Red Hair. Their country sits in the corner of the northwest sea, and is a neighbour of Holland. ... Holland forms a triangle with the Red Hair and France’.⁶⁸ These few lines showed that, by the end of the eighteenth century,

⁶⁶ Yin Guangren 印光任 and Zhang Rulin 张汝霖, *Aomen jilue* 澳门纪略 (*A brief account of Macao*) (2 vols., 1751), II, in *Xuxiu suku quanshu* 续修四库全书 (*Sequel to the complete collection of the four treasures*) (1800 vols., Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2002), history and geography category (676), 699.

⁶⁷ In fact, it would be interesting to know how the Scots (as well as the Welsh and Irish) tended to identify themselves in Britain’s initial ventures to East Asia, especially when they encountered indigenous people. It is certain, however, that the Chinese people at this stage were not aware of the identity of Scotland, Wales or Ireland. They simply identified all the British as *Ying-ji-li-ren* 英吉利人, which means ‘people from the country of *Ying-ji-li*’. Also, no Chinese at this time seemed to know that not all citizens from *Ying-ji-li* were pleased to be designated as English.

⁶⁸ Wang Daihai, *Haidao yizhi* (6 vols., 1791, first published in 1806), III, 6, in *Jindai Zhongguo renshi xifang jiqi lieqiang ziliao huibian* 近代中国认识西方及其列强资料汇编 (*Collected materials on modern*

there were finally some Chinese who were able to clearly identify the ‘Red Hairs’ or the British and, at the same time, to locate them geographically correctly on a map of Europe.

In brief, although Catholic missionaries had introduced western geography and knowledge about Britain in the early seventeenth century, these studies did not greatly interest or convince the elite class of China, nor did they inspire the general interest of the Chinese public. It was by and large from the second half of the eighteenth century, when an increasing number of British merchants came to explore the Chinese market, that some coastal inhabitants gradually grasped some initial knowledge about Britain. Compared to the substantial second-hand and even some first-hand information about China available in Europe during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, China’s understanding of Britain in this period was extremely limited. It was, however, just as some informed Chinese were beginning to understand the identity of the ‘Red Hair’ as well as their geographical origin, that the Macartney embassy set sail from Spithead, England. The first official encounter between Britain and China was about to take place.

Chinese impressions on the Western powers), ed. Hu Qiuyuan 胡秋原 (2 vols., Taiwan: Academia Sinica, 1972), I, 751-2.

PART I

CHAPTER ONE

British perceptions of China during the Macartney embassy (1792-4)

The Macartney embassy of 1792-4, also known as the Macartney mission, was the first official encounter between Great Britain and China, the greatest western and eastern powers in the late eighteenth century. Since the mid-seventeenth century, the imperial government of China began to apply a highly restrictive policy to its foreign trade. In 1757, the Qing court further confined the country's external trade to a small area outside the city walls of Canton and restricted it to being conducted through a handful of authorised local merchants. As Britain's eastern trade expanded in the eighteenth century, particularly after the American War of Independence, the trade with China became increasingly essential to the British empire. The British government and the East India Company realised that China's Canton commercial system posed a major obstacle to the expansion of British commerce overseas. In order to improve British merchants' trading conditions in China and to establish a formal diplomatic relationship with the Chinese empire, an embassy led by Lord Macartney¹ was appointed by the British government to travel to the imperial court of China.

Lord Macartney and his embassy reached China in June 1793 with various presents from the British monarch, including a variety of state-of-the-art scientific apparatus. Under the pretext of wishing to pay respects to the Qianlong emperor on his eighty-third birthday,² the

¹ George Macartney, 1st Earl Macartney (1737-1806) was regarded as the best diplomat available in Britain at the time to fill this job. In 1764, Macartney was appointed envoy to Russia, where he gained experience of dealing with an autocratic ruler, Catherine II. Macartney was also believed to be familiar with oriental diplomacy, because he served as the Governor of Madras (now known as Chennai) between 1781 and 1785. Macartney, moreover, had the esteem of the East India Company and the support of influential friends in politics, such as Home Secretary Henry Dundas.

² 'Qianlong' was actually not the emperor's name, but the name of his reign period, and so were 'Kangxi', 'Jiaqing', 'Daoguang', and so on.

embassy was granted an imperial audience at the emperor's summer resort of Jehol (Rehe, now Chengde) in September. The Chinese court at this time, however, had no idea of western diplomacy or the principle of free trade. External trade of China was deemed as a form of grace bestowed by His Imperial Majesty to those foreign nations who were willing to pay obeisance to the Chinese empire. In this context, Macartney failed to launch any official negotiations on the commercial and diplomatic objectives of the embassy. Instead, his refusal to perform kowtow, a ceremony required by the Chinese court ritual of kneeling and touching his forehead to the ground in front of the emperor, created much controversy. Although, at length, the Qianlong emperor made an unprecedented compromise in allowing the British to kneel upon only one knee, shortly after the audience Macartney received strong hints from the Qing government that the embassy should make an immediate departure. In early October, Macartney felt obliged to request permission to leave Beijing. Despite the fact that, during the return journey across China,³ the British embassy was treated with respect and civility by the Chinese authorities, none of its primary goals had been achieved by the time Macartney returned to Britain.

As the Macartney mission has long been considered as a defining episode in the modern encounters between China and the West, considerable research has been undertaken to interpret this significant event.⁴ Some commentators have maintained that it marked a missed

³ The embassy first proceeded by barge along the Grand Canal to its south end Hangzhou. They then split into two groups. Macartney and the main party travelled on inland waterways to Canton (with a short overland journey). The others followed the river from Hangzhou to the coast and the Zhoushan archipelago where the British ships waited.

⁴ For example, see E.H. Pritchard, *The Crucial Years of Early Angle-Chinese Relations, 1750-1800* (Washington, DC: Pullman, 1936); Zhu Yong 朱雍, *Buyuan dakai de Zhongguo damen* 不愿打开的中国大门 (*The Chinese gate that was unwilling to open*) (Nanchang: Jiangxi renmin chubanshe, 1989); Aubrey Singer, *The Lion and the Dragon: The Story of the First British Embassy to the Court of the Emperor Qianlong in Peking 1792-1794* (London: Barrie and Jenkins, 1992); Alain Peyrefitte, *The Collision of Two Civilisations: The British Expedition to China in 1792-4* (London: Harvill, 1993); James L. Hevia, *Cherishing men from afar: Qing guest ritual and the Macartney Embassy of 1793* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995).

opportunity for the Chinese to move towards some kind of accommodation with the West,⁵ while others have argued that it was rather the result of competing world views which were uncomprehending and incompatible.⁶ The majority of these studies, however, were conducted from a political or diplomatic point of view. In particular, much attention has been paid to the controversy over the court rituals.⁷ This emphasis has placed limitations on our understanding of the Macartney mission. First, since only very few participants in the British delegation were well informed on the embassy's official affairs, historians have previously focused too much on the accounts of the leading members of the mission, such as Macartney and his deputy, Sir George Leonard Staunton,⁸ but have overlooked the importance of the records written by some seemingly less important figures. By failing to compare these different accounts, most research in the past has failed to demonstrate that some of Macartney's and Staunton's attitudes were in fact self-serving views constructed to suit their own needs. Second, despite the fact that Macartney's embassy did not succeed in achieving its commercial and diplomatic objectives, this visit provided these British visitors with an opportunity to make contact with various Chinese officials and people, as well as to cross through the interior of China. In consequence, detailed first-hand observations were brought back to Britain. The British at home were hence able to form more accurate and comprehensive perceptions of China's situation at the time. This early knowledge of China obtained during the course of the Macartney embassy has not been sufficiently researched so far. Accordingly, in this chapter, not only will more attention be paid to test the fairness and

⁵ Zhang Shunhong, 'Historical Anachronism: The Qing Court's perception of and reaction to the Macartney Embassy', in *Ritual and Diplomacy: The Macartney mission to China, 1792-1794*, ed. Robert A. Bickers (London: Wellsweep, 1993); Zhu, *The Chinese Gate*.

⁶ Hevia, *Cherishing men from afar*.

⁷ *Ritual and Diplomacy*, ed. Bickers; Hevia, *Cherishing men from afar*; Joseph W. Esherick, 'Cherishing sources from afar', *Modern China*, 24 (1998), 135-61.

⁸ Sir George Leonard Staunton, 1st Baronet (1737-1801) was a close friend of Macartney's. He served as Macartney's secretary since Macartney was the Governor of Madras. Staunton was appointed in 1792 Minister Plenipotentiary in the absence of ambassador, with authority to carry on the mission in case of Macartney's death or incapacity.

reliability of the views advanced by the senior officials of this mission, but the perceptions and attitudes that developed as a result of this encounter will be closely examined.

I

Expectations and interpretations

Six members of the Macartney mission have published accounts of their visits to China. When the embassy returned to Britain in 1794, Lord Macartney did not release his own journal. Instead, he gave his diary and correspondence to Staunton and urged him to produce *An Authentic Account of an Embassy from the King of Great Britain to the Emperor of China*. This book remained as the most official account of the Macartney mission until 1962, in which year J.L. Cranmer-Byng edited Macartney's journal as well as his 'Observations on China' and published them under the title of *An Embassy to China*. Two middle-ranked persons, John Barrow and James Dinwiddie, also printed records of their experiences with the embassy. The former, the comptroller of the mission,⁹ published his *Travels in China* in 1804. The journal of the latter, the embassy's technician,¹⁰ was edited and published by his grandson, William Jardine Proudfoot, in 1868. Lord Macartney's valet, Aeneas Anderson, and a soldier named Samuel Holmes,¹¹ although men from the lower orders, also had their diaries printed for the public. These two accounts appeared only a few years after the conclusion of the embassy, but they have been considered as either 'vamped up by a London bookseller as a speculation'¹² or as 'nothing of value'.¹³ Among the works listed above, it is

⁹ John Barrow (1764-1859) obtained this post through Staunton's patronage. He was then the private tutor of Staunton's son, George Thomas Staunton.

¹⁰ James Dinwiddie (1746-1815) was a well-known scientist in late-eighteenth-century Britain. His public lectures in science and scientific experiments gained him much fame across the British Isles. It was not quite clear why Dinwiddie was chosen to join Macartney's embassy, but Dinwiddie's ability to demonstrate Britain's excellence in science and modern technology was probably a very important reason.

¹¹ Samuel Holmes was a sergeant-major in Macartney's official guard.

¹² John Barrow, *Travels in China* (Philadelphia: W. E. M'Laughlin, 1805), p. 393.

¹³ *An Embassy to China: Being the journal kept by Lord Macartney during his embassy to the Emperor Ch'ien-lung 1793-1794*, ed. J.L. Cranmer-Byng (London: Longmans, 1962), pp. 343-4, 346. In addition to

the first three that formerly received most attention, particularly on the parts relating to the kowtow issue. A complete survey of all these publications, however, tells us much more of importance about this British-Chinese encounter.

To begin with, as has been shown in the introduction, it is commonly known that there was a general decline in British opinions of China in the eighteenth century.¹⁴ This view, however, often leads to the assumption that, in the 1790s, British society had by and large reached a consensus on an unfavourable image of the Chinese empire. By examining the expectations of members of the Macartney embassy for their visit to China, it can be seen that British perceptions of China at this time were in fact not yet firmly established. According to his diary, we can find that, prior to the embassy, Lord Macartney indeed entertained an apparent distaste for China's political and cultural practices, as well as great confidence in Britain's superiority over the Chinese empire. At this time, with industrial advances transforming the landscape and society of the British Isles, enlightened ideas prevailed within British intellectual circles. Just like other celebrated figures, such as Samuel Johnson and Edmund Burke, both Macartney and Staunton, the former a member of the eminent Literary Club, the latter a Fellow of the Royal Society and an honorary doctoral degree holder of Oxford University, were convinced that science and progress were the key criteria for evaluating civilisations. For this reason, Macartney was not only confident about Britain's

these works, there are a few unpublished manuscript journals kept by those in the retinue of Macartney's embassy. They are: Stephen Else, *Journal of a Voyage to the East Indies and an Historical Narrative of Lord Macartney's Embassy to the Court of Peking* (London: Royal Geographical Society, 1793), B.K.S. case 260 H; William Alexander, *Journal of Lord Macartney's Embassy to China, 1792-1794*, (London: British Museum), Add 35, 174 (I. 9); Edward Winder, *Account of a Journey in China in 1793 in Lord Macartney's Mission* (Dublin: National Library of Ireland), MS 8799 (1). These materials are not preserved very well. Some parts are missing. Nevertheless, the useful contents of these accounts have been consulted as much as possible.

¹⁴ Zhang Shunhong, 'British views on China during the time of the embassies of Lord Macartney and Lord Amherst (1790-1820)', unpublished PhD dissertation (Birkbeck College, University of London, 1990), p. 18; Chong-kun Yoon, 'Sinophilism during the Age of Enlightenment: Jesuits, Philosophes and Physiocrats discover Confucius', in *Western Views of China and the Far East*, ed. Henry A. Myers (2 vols., Hong Kong: Asian Research Service, 1982), I, 174-5.

superior learning and power, but determined to impress the Chinese with western science and technology. He maintained in his journal that:

One great advantage indeed of the embassy is the opportunity it afforded of showing the Chinese to what a high degree of perfection the English nation had carried all the arts and accomplishments of civilized life; that their manners were calculated for the improvement of social intercourse and liberal commerce; that though great and powerful they were generous and humane, not fierce and impetuous like the Russians, but entitled to the respect and preference of the Chinese above the other European nations, whom they have any knowledge of.¹⁵

This statement shows that, before he had even set foot on Chinese soil, Macartney had quite low expectations of the civilisation in China. To demonstrate the strength and ingenuity of Britain, rather than to find out about China, was one of the main objectives of his mission.

Nevertheless, it is important to note that this sentiment was not shared by all the members of Macartney's embassy. In the accounts produced by others in the embassy, it can be shown that, unlike Macartney, a number of them actually had rather positive expectations for their visit to China. In this respect, Barrow wrote that, prior to the journey, he was informed that 'The Chinese ... are superior to all the Asiatic nations, in antiquity, in genius, in the progress of the sciences, in wisdom, in government, and in true philosophy; may, moreover, ... enter the lists, on all these points, with the most enlightened nations of Europe'.¹⁶ Although there were doubts about these views, 'upon the whole, however, the British embassy left England under a favourable impression of the people it was about to visit'.¹⁷ Moreover, Dinwiddie, a devoted scientist whose main job was to amaze the Chinese with Britain's latest technology, was also one of those who were excited about the prospect of exploring China. He wrote:

¹⁵ *An Embassy to China*, p. 226.

¹⁶ Barrow, *Travels in China*, p. 18.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

To visit such a country – to have an opportunity of examining into the state and arts and manufactures there – was a theme of overpowering interest in the mind of an ardent philosopher, and it is easy to guess the feelings with which those favoured individuals, whom Government had honored on this occasion, set sail.¹⁸

Henry Eades, the embassy's metallurgist, even entertained the idea that China possessed some cutting-edge technology which was unknown to the rest of the world. According to Staunton's account, Eades believed that 'many improvements in the arts were practiced at Peking, which were little known in Europe; among others, that of making a kind of tinsel that did not tarnish, or at least that kept without tarnishing much longer, than any that was made according to European methods'.¹⁹ Although Eades eventually died on the road to Beijing, while he lived, this gentleman never stopped hoping that once he had acquired such techniques, he would be able to produce considerable wealth for his family. To this end, 'he thought it not too much to shorten his own life, in a perilous voyage, for the sake of being able to communicate to his offspring, what would be the means of their prosperity'.²⁰ This kind of evidence demonstrates that although, in the late-eighteenth century, elite Britons, such as Macartney and Staunton, might hold a firm belief in the inferiority of China's civilisation compared to that of Britain, the views of other social classes were not necessarily the same. The latter's expectations of what to find in China were more diverse and more inclined to be favourable. This contrast in opinions between different orders of the embassy can also be found as the mission proceeded.

In early October 1793, only a few days after the imperial audience, the Qing government sent some strong and clear signals to Macartney that the official business of the embassy had been concluded and the British should depart immediately from Beijing. This message was delivered in such a hasty and determined manner that even Macartney's demand for a respite

¹⁸ William Jardine Proudfoot, *Biographical Memoir of James Dinwiddie: embracing some account of his travel in China and residence in India* (Liverpool: E. Howell, 1868), p. 27.

¹⁹ George L. Staunton, *An Authentic Account of an Embassy from the King of Great Britain to the Emperor of China* (2 vols., London: W. Bulmer, 1798), II, 104.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

of two more days was rejected. To most of the embassy members, who had been expecting to spend the winter in the Chinese capital, this quasi dismissal was sudden and disappointing. Some of them noted that the unexpected order to Macartney to leave without delay caused much hustle and bustle, as well as ‘a state of indescribable confusion’²¹ within the British delegation. Anderson claimed that ‘the manner in which the Ambassador was *dismissed* from Peking was ungracious and mortifying in the extreme.’²² He wrote:

Our surprise at such unexpected intelligence may be readily conceived, but the mortification which appeared throughout the palace on the occasion, was at least equal to the astonishment: ...while our fatiguing pilgrimage was to be renewed, not only with all the humiliation that accompanies a forced submission to peremptory power, but with the painful despondency which arises from the sudden annihilation of sanguine and well-grounded hope. ... But, though we might, in the first moments of surprise, be disposed to feel something for ourselves, superior considerations soon succeeded, and we forgot the trifle of personal inconvenience, in the failure of a political measure which had been pursued with so much labour, hazard, and perseverance; had been supported with such enormous expense, and to which our country looked with eager expectation, for the aggrandizement of its commercial interests.²³

This general sentiment within the British embassy, however, was well concealed in the narratives of Macartney and Staunton. Macartney’s diary entries for these few days were remarkably short. He simply explained that the reason given by the Chinese government was the extreme coldness of Beijing’s winter and he justified his own decision in only a few lines.

Macartney wrote:

It is now beyond a doubt, although nothing was said upon the subject, that the Court wishes us to be gone, and if we don’t take the hints already given, they may possibly be imparted to us in a broader and coarser manner, which would be equally unpleasant to the dignity of the Embassy and the success of its objects.²⁴

²¹ Proudfoot, *Biographical Memoir of James Dinwiddie*, p. 55.

²² Aeneas Anderson, *A Narrative of the British Embassy to China, in the Years of 1792, 1793 and 1794* (London, J. Debrett: 1795), p. 270. Italics added.

²³ *Ibid.*, pp. 266-7.

²⁴ *An Embassy to China*, p. 150.

Staunton, in comparison, gave a more detailed explanation for the necessity of this sudden departure. Among other reasons, he pointed out that, due to the probable outbreak of war between Britain and France, a warship was needed to convoy British merchant ships back home. Since the embassy's flagship, the sixty-four-gun *Lion*, was the best available for the time being, the British mission should lose no time in joining the *Lion*'s Captain, Sir Erasmus Gower, at Chu-san (Zhoushan).²⁵ Moreover, with regard to the deep disappointment within the embassy, Staunton noted as follows:

So sudden a removal was a disappointment to several persons of the Embassy, who had made their arrangements for passing the winter at Peking. Judging of its temperature by the latitude of the place, a few minutes under forty degrees north, they were not aware of the violent effect of the great range of high Tartarian mountains, covered perpetually with snow, upon that capital, where the average degree of the thermometer, is under twenty in the night during the winter months, and even in the day time considerably below the freezing point.²⁶

In this manner, Staunton not only interpreted the extent of the frustration to be among only 'several persons', but partly agreed with the Chinese on the justification for the embassy's removal from Beijing. In comparison with that of other British authors, this interpretation was much more positive. As the most senior officials of the embassy, Macartney and Staunton tended to justify the departure as a sensible 'decision' based on rational advice, rather than an ungracious dismissal. In their journals, the bustle and depression across much of the British delegation was completely ignored. They did not even seem to have much regret for not remaining in the Chinese capital. In this light, therefore, the request to leave Beijing became neither unacceptable, nor inconsistent with the interests of Britain.

²⁵ Staunton, *An Authentic Account*, II, 104.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 337-8.

Although from Anderson's standpoint, the departure from Beijing implied the failure of the embassy's political undertaking, Macartney and Staunton never accepted this conclusion. Throughout the return journey, they seemed anxious to prove this opinion wrong, even though none of them had clearly stated that his arguments were opposed to such a conclusion. In order to defend their view that the mission was not a failure, various viewpoints and images were raised and constructed. First of all, it was maintained that, despite the great distance from the imperial court, Macartney actually obtained a much more effective channel of communication with the emperor than he would have done by staying at Beijing. This was because, as Macartney and Staunton both maintained, the two Chinese officers conducting them on their return journey, Songyun and Changlin,²⁷ were very kind and helpful to the British mission. Since they held 'a regular and almost daily correspondence with the Emperor',²⁸ intercourse with the Chinese sovereign 'was in fact maintained ... more intimately ... than while he [Macartney] remained in the middle of his court'.²⁹ Owing to this favourable channel, Macartney eventually had a chance to advance some of the real objectives of the mission, such as the extension of China's foreign trade and the establishment of a permanent ambassadorship in Beijing. Although these requests were all eventually turned down, Macartney suggested that it was due to the invariable laws and usages of China,³⁰ rather than any particular ill feelings occasioned by his embassy. Moreover, he claimed that Songyun and Changlin were keen to impress upon him the opinion that the emperor had a good disposition towards the embassy as well as towards Great Britain. To account for this perception, Macartney spared no effort in collecting every positive sign that might support his own view. For example, the civility and respect with which the

²⁷ Both Songyun and Changlin were men of very high rank. The former was one of the six grand councillors of the Qing court, the latter a relation of the emperor and the next governor-general of Guangdong and Guangxi provinces.

²⁸ Staunton, *An Authentic Account*, II, 471.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, II, 337.

³⁰ *An Embassy to China*, p. 168.

embassy was treated along the return journey were taken as strong evidence that not only was the emperor not affronted by his refusal to kowtow, but he actually had a favourable attitude towards the embassy. For this reason, Macartney reported that some gracious messages had been conveyed to him by Songyun and Chnaglin that ‘the English merchant should be treated with kindness and favour’,³¹ even though Macartney had failed to attain from them any written statement of this generous intention.

Furthermore, it was maintained that, through frequent intercourse with these accompanying officers, and because of the British embassy’s presence in China, Chinese prejudice against the British was considerably softened and was gradually diminishing. Macartney claimed that it was completely understandable that the Chinese, as ‘one of the vainest nations in the world’,³² should have held poor impressions of the British in the past. Nevertheless, ‘By my Embassy the Chinese have had, what they never had before, an opportunity of knowing us, this must lead them to a proper way of thinking of us and of acting towards us in future’.³³ Staunton added that, in recent contacts between the two nations, on the one hand, some Chinese senior officials had become convinced that Britain indeed had no other purpose in view than developing a mutually beneficial trade relationship with China. In addition, many more Chinese people had been given an opportunity to learn ‘some of the advantages which the English now had over them’.³⁴ In consequence, their ‘superior knowledge and acquirements’ earned for the British ‘admiration, esteem, and consequent good treatment’.³⁵ The Chinese perceptions of Britain were hence greatly improved. In order to highlight this important achievement of his embassy, Macartney earnestly emphasised this opinion in the conclusion of his journal. He wrote:

³¹ *Ibid.*, 167.

³² *Ibid.*, 215.

³³ *Ibid.*, 213.

³⁴ Staunton, *An Authentic Account*, II, 514.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, II, 534.

It is no small advantage rising from the Embassy that so many Englishmen have been seen at Peking, from whose brilliant appearance and prudent demeanour a most favourable idea has been formed of the country which had sent them. Nor is it any strain of vanity to say that the principal persons of rank who, from their intercourse with us, had opportunities of observing our manners, tempers and discipline very soon dismissed the prejudices they had conceived against us, and by a generous transition grew to admire and respect us as a nation and to love us as individuals.³⁶

Despite the fact that efforts had been made to demonstrate that the embassy was not a failure, it was evident from Macartney's and Staunton's accounts that it did not succeed in most of its primary objectives. Why this mission was not successful in achieving all its goals, therefore, became another important question which the British diplomats had to answer. As with the previous analysis, a range of images and perceptions relative to the Chinese affair were created to suit their explanations. According to the arguments of Macartney and Staunton, the principal cause was the prejudice and hostility of a very few powerful ministers who stood between the British visitors and the emperor, as well as between them and the Chinese people. To prove this, Macartney contended that, contrary to the common notion that the Chinese monarch had absolute control over all state affairs, the practical operation of the Chinese government was in fact quite different:

Although the Emperor was styled despotic, and decorated with all the titles and epithets of oriental hyperbole, the power and administration of the State resided in the great councils or tribunals, whose functions were not to be violated or disturbed by court intrigue or ministerial caprice. ... The government as it now stands is properly the tyranny of a handful of Tartars over more than three hundred millions of Chinese.³⁷

For this reason, when he was obliged to leave Beijing without achieving any of his main objectives, Macartney asserted that:

³⁶ *Ibid.*, II, 214.

³⁷ *An Embassy to China*, p. 236. 'Tartar' is a general term denoting peoples of central Asia, including Manchus, inhabitants of Manchuria who conquered China and founded the Qing dynasty (1644-1912).

from the observations which it has fallen in my way to make, I should rather imagine that the personal character of the Ministers, alarmed by the most trifling accident, the aversion they may naturally have to sudden innovation, especially at the Emperor's late period of life ... have been among the chief obstacles to my business.³⁸

Compared to this general comment, Staunton's criticism of these principal ministers was more specific. He pointed out that Fukang-an, one of the six grand councillors, and Heshen, the Colao,³⁹ were the most blameable persons. Fukang-an, as introduced by Staunton, was a Manchu general who had governed many provinces, including Canton. Not long before, he had led a military campaign against the Gurkhas on the Tibet-Nepal border, where he claimed to have met interference from the British. Perhaps because of these reasons, no matter how hard Macartney endeavoured to please him, Fukang-an remained extremely hostile to the embassy. Fukang-an's animosity towards the British was so obvious and strong that Staunton could not help exclaiming that:

nothing was, perhaps, more desirable for its [Britain's] interest in China, than that he should neither be continued in the councils of the Emperor, or be sent back to the vice-royalty of Canton, where he might oppress the factory there, or misrepresent their conduct and disposition in his dispatches to the government.⁴⁰

Heshen, the minister who enjoyed the almost exclusive confidence of the Qianlong emperor, was considered by Staunton as 'The Vizier of China, who ... possess[es], in fact, under the Emperor, the whole power of the empire'.⁴¹ Although in his intercourse with the British diplomats, Heshen 'indeed displayed all the good breeding and politeness of an experienced

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 153.

³⁹ Both Staunton and Macartney translated 'Colao' as 'prime minister'. An analogy was apparently drawn between the British and Chinese political systems.

⁴⁰ Staunton, *An Authentic Account*, II, 274.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, II, 210-11.

courtier',⁴² it was apparent that his real attitude was the same as that of Fukang-an's. In Macartney's estimation, it was Heshen, rather than anybody else, who was behind various designs to render his embassy unproductive. For instance, he wrote that:

It is much regretted that as the first Minister was determined not to give me such opportunities as I sought for conversing upon business with him, he had not appointed Sung-yun to attend to us from the beginning instead of the Legate [the earlier conducting officer], as possibly we might have been able by his means or through his channel to enter into negotiation, whereas the Legate did everything in his power to obstruct and disappoint us.⁴³

In conjunction with the perception that these senior ministers were responsible for the difficulties the British embassy had encountered, Macartney and Staunton presented a liberal, amicable and father-like image of the Chinese emperor. They insisted that he was 'a leader of a calm judgement',⁴⁴ who had 'a high esteem for the Ambassador and his nation ... and ... [was] determined to protect their trade'.⁴⁵ Even on the controversy over kowtow, it was believed that 'the good sense and liberality of the emperor himself, cloyed too perhaps with adoration, rendered him much more inclined than any of his advisers, to dispense with that ceremony in the present instance'.⁴⁶ While, by contrast, it was those few ministers 'more than the Emperor himself, [who] adhered to this antiquated claim of superiority over other nations'.⁴⁷ With regard to the disposition of lesser-ranked mandarins as well as the Chinese common people, Macartney and Staunton also introduced a rather positive impression. The British ambassador noted that:

most of the principal people, whom I have had opportunities of knowing, I have found sociable, conversable, good-humoured, and not at all indisposed to

⁴² *Ibid.*, II, 246.

⁴³ *An Embassy to China*, p. 163.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 236.

⁴⁵ Staunton, *An Authentic Account*, II, 413-14.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, II, 219.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, II, 134.

foreigners. As to the lower orders, they are all of a trafficking turn, and it seemed at the seaports where we stopped that nothing would be more agreeable to them than to see our ships often in their harbours.⁴⁸

By such means, the contention that the British embassy obtained respect and favour from the vast majority of the Chinese, including the emperor himself, was further strengthened. The success of the mission was unfortunately undermined only by the attitude of a handful of prejudiced Tartar ministers.

In addition, both these British diplomats maintained that, according to the character of the Chinese government, no concession could possibly be made all of a sudden, but provided with time and patience, good results might follow in due course. This attitude was largely drawn from Father Amiot, a helpful French missionary who had served in the Chinese court since 1750 and was regarded as ‘the spiritual leader of the missionaries in Peking’.⁴⁹ Shortly before Macartney decided to request permission to depart from Beijing, a letter was received from Amiot with his views on and advice to the British mission. He claimed that, based on his knowledge and experience, the Chinese had no idea of commercial treaties and modern diplomacy, but, ‘they might be rendered sensible of them if applied to and solicited without precipitation, and managed with caution and adroitness, for nothing was to be expected as attainable on the sudden’.⁵⁰ In light of this advice, Staunton was convinced that:

such was the nature and practice of the Chinese government, that however adverse in the beginning to any new propositions, lest it should be surprised into an undue concession or improper regulation, the same matters might be brought again, when the offensive novelty of the idea was over, into a more serious and dispassionate consideration.⁵¹

⁴⁸ *An Embassy to China*, p. 153.

⁴⁹ Peyrefitte, *The Collision of Two Civilisations*, p. 555.

⁵⁰ *An Embassy to China*, p. 153.

⁵¹ Staunton, *An Authentic Account*, II, 335-6.

Since ‘the present mission had made such an impression throughout the empire’,⁵² and the emperor ‘entertained very kind intentions with regard to us’,⁵³ beneficial consequences could still eventually be obtained ‘by time and management’,⁵⁴ despite them not having been achieved immediately. According to this perception, nothing wrong had been done by the Macartney embassy to render it less productive than had been hoped. Given the character of the Chinese government, not only was the request to depart from Beijing justified, but favourable foundations had been laid for future British-Chinese contacts. The present mission, therefore, had not in fact proved to be entirely unsuccessful.

Notwithstanding these self-serving explanations offered by Macartney and Staunton, their views were not confirmed by all the other embassy members who published their views. Dinwiddie, in particular, was dissatisfied with many of their arguments. He asserted that, despite the fact that the heads of the embassy endeavoured to ‘look upon their treatment in the most favourable light’,⁵⁵ it was indisputable that the mission was so shameful for the British that ‘no apology will satisfy’ the public when they returned home.⁵⁶ Even though general assurances were allegedly made by Chinese officials in private conversations to the effect that the trading conditions of British merchants in China would be improved, ‘nothing that looks like an improvement has yet taken place’⁵⁷ and ‘the Chinese are not likely to make any alteration in our trade’.⁵⁸ In this light, in contrast to the contention that no immediate achievements were obtained because of the unique character of the Chinese government, Dinwiddie claimed that, ‘the behaviour of the gentlemen of the Embassy themselves was the principal cause’ of the embassy’s failure.⁵⁹ First of all, since Dinwiddie’s main task had been

⁵² *Ibid.*, II, 335.

⁵³ *An Embassy to China*, p. 166.

⁵⁴ Staunton, *An Authentic Account*, II, 334.

⁵⁵ Proudfoot, *Biographical Memoir of James Dinwiddie*, p. 70.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 87.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 86.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 78.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 70.

to impress the Chinese with various presents, he maintained that mistakes had been made in terms of the selection and presentation of these gifts. For one thing, the erection of some highly sophisticated machines should have been concealed from the Chinese before they were presented as a whole. As a result, what transpired was that the sensation they created was so much reduced that very few of the Chinese were impressed. Some of them even doubted the British mechanics' ability to set up their own machines. For another thing, since the Chinese were only able to appreciate a limited number of the presents, 'to have any good effect on the Chinese', more military contrivances rather than scientific apparatus should have been taken, and 'the guns ought to have been of a larger calibre'.⁶⁰ Second, Dinwiddie complained that the leadership of the embassy was unprofessional and indecisive, to such an extent that 'In all our operations, no plan or system has been adopted; no regular orders given, [or] at least adhered to'.⁶¹ For example, it was well-known that Heshen was 'one of the most corrupt men in the empire'. Although the Colao always refused to receive a public present, he was in fact expecting 'something considerable in a private way'.⁶² Failing to bribe such a key figure, in fact, rendered the mission fruitless. Moreover, in employing a suspicious Portuguese missionary as Dinwiddie's interpreter, inconsistent and contradictory instructions were given by the heads of the embassy. This fact resulted in much embarrassment for Dinwiddie. Hence, he became further convinced that it was mainly the mistakes of Macartney and Staunton that had caused the failure of the mission.

Apart from the ill conduct of these leading British officials, Dinwiddie also attributed the embassy's diplomatic failure to the ignorance and prejudice of the Chinese. As a devoted scientist, Dinwiddie actually seemed much offended by the manner in which the Chinese court viewed the British gifts. He noted that, when the emperor came to examine the

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 78.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 71.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 78.

scientific instruments, he ‘expressed nothing observable in his countenance’.⁶³ Many state-of-the-art apparatus, such as the air-pump, were only regarded by him as ‘*good enough to amuse children*’.⁶⁴ When a variety of experiments were performed in the presence of Heshen and a number of mandarins, they ‘seemed little pleased with the most entertaining’.⁶⁵ Even the trial that showed how a convex lens could set fire to wood and melt coins did not seem to excite the interest of any of them. Instead, the Colao asked: ‘*How can an enemy’s town be set on fire by the lens? How will it act in a cloudy day?*’⁶⁶ These comments and attitudes showed how little the Chinese were acquainted with science at this time and hence they were considered by Dinwiddie as ‘truly provoking to a European philosopher’.⁶⁷ Since the failure to impress the Chinese by these machines and experiments undermined the success of Dinwiddie’s official business, he entirely abandoned the positive image that he had previously entertained of China. It can be observed in his journal how, during the return journey, the Chinese were repeatedly accused of sheer ignorance and prejudice. These insurmountable obstacles were therefore seen by Dinwiddie as another important reason for the embassy’s complete failure.

Compared to Dinwiddie, the lower-ranked embassy members, such as Anderson and Holmes, did not comment so much on the management and result of the Macartney mission. Some of their observations, however, also revealed that certain important impressions introduced by the principal persons of the embassy deserve further examination. Most important, with regard to the reported cheerful disposition of most Chinese mandarins and people, Holmes maintained that this was actually not their real character. On the contrary, it was occasioned by their fear of offending their guests whom they were ordered to respect. Holmes noted that, ‘though, in many instances, they treated us with singular marks of respect,

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 53.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.* Quotes of the Qianlong emperor. Italics in the original.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 53.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.* Quotes of Heshen. Italics in the original.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 53.

yet all their attention to us seemed tempered with fear and dread; it was apparent enough that they wished us away from amongst them'.⁶⁸ To demonstrate further that the attention with which the British embassy was received derived from the Chinese officials' dread of displeasing their superiors rather than indicating any genuine hospitality, Holmes added that, apart from the principal ministers, who had no fear of any authority, most mandarins who had contacts with the British

treated us with singular marks of attention and politeness, and were ever anxious to do us some acceptable piece of service, where it did not endanger their own personal safety; but the slightest deviation from any given order is punished with such severity, without regard to the rank of the offender, that all are very cautious; and more particularly, when that order respects any Europeans or strangers, of whom they are so unaccountably suspicious and fearful.⁶⁹

According to this interpretation, Macartney's claim that his mission obtained the goodwill of the majority of the Chinese was severely challenged. Furthermore, Anderson's account suggested that Macartney and Staunton focused too much on the civility and respect the British embassy was receiving during the journey, but considerably ignored the disrespectful manner in which they were treated by the Chinese court once they arrived there. In particular, Anderson noted that, prior to the embassy's arrival in Jehol, where the imperial audience was scheduled to take place, Macartney was anxious to create a favourable impression of his mission on those Chinese high officials who were supposed to welcome them at the city gate. To achieve this end, he was determined to impress the Chinese court by a glorious procession, so that repeated practices and rehearsals were made during the few days before the embassy's arrival. To everyone's great disappointment, however, when the embassy finally reached its destination, not only did Macartney's highly anticipated meeting

⁶⁸ Samuel Holmes, *The Journal of Mr Samuel Holmes, Serjeant-Major of the Sixth Light Dragoons, during his attendance, as one of the Guard on Lord Macartney's Embassy to China and Tartary, 1792-3* (London: W. Bulmer, 1798), p. 150.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 138-9.

with Heshen not occur on this occasion, but ‘not a mandarin appeared to congratulate the Ambassador on his arrival, or to usher him, with that form which his dignity demanded, to the apartments provided for him’.⁷⁰ This dishonourable reception, as might be expected, did not appear in Macartney’s or Staunton’s account. Neither was any importance attached by them to the disappointment and frustration it generated across the embassy. To the lower-order persons, who were not informed of official affairs, however, it did send them the very first signal that the success of the embassy was becoming problematical. Anderson wrote:

Nothing, however, as yet transpired that could lead us to form a judgment as to the final issue of the business: as far as any opinion could be formed as to the general aspect of things, it did not bear the promise of that success which had been originally expected from it.⁷¹

Last but not least, there is evidence that not only did the heads of the embassy tend to describe the mission experience to suit their own purposes, but so did such middle-ranked men as Dinwiddie. Contrary to Dinwiddie’s assertion that the Chinese were too ignorant to appreciate the ingenuity of British presents and the principles of science, Anderson noted in his journal that:

several of these presents, which a trial of them was made before the mandarins, were found to fail in the operations and powers attributed to them; and others of them did not excite that surprise and admiration in the breasts of the Chinese philosophers, which Dr. Dinwiddie and Mr. Barrow expected, who immediately determined upon the ignorance that prevailed in China, and the gross obstinacy of the people.⁷²

This evidence shows that, even though Dinwiddie kept criticising Macartney and Staunton for hiding their own mistakes and interpreting the mission in the most favourable light, he

⁷⁰ Anderson, *A Narrative of the British Embassy*, p. 208.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 211.

⁷² *Ibid.*, pp. 264-5.

himself showed similar intentions in describing his own role. Compared to the heads of the embassy, Dinwiddie had less reason to deny that his own task ended in total failure, but he did not mention the failure of some of his experiments in his journal at all. He attributed the failure of the embassy entirely to the misconduct of the British officials and the ignorance of the Chinese mandarins. These failures, however, could well have been due to Dinwiddie himself, as well as being a key reason why the Chinese spectators were not impressed by the British presents. On this basis, even the commonly held assumption that western technology at this time enormously exceeded Chinese understanding can be doubted.

To sum up, by examining and comparing various accounts of the Macartney embassy, it can be seen that men of different social ranks entertained diverse expectations for their visit to China. From a variety of perspectives, they also tended to interpret the occurrences on the mission in ways that suited their own purposes. Although the number of examples given herein is limited, the contrast between these different opinions strongly indicates that these authors indeed were self-serving in their intentions when they were explaining the actions and legacy of the embassy. It is understandable that all observers have their own perspectives, but, in the case of the Macartney mission, it has to be remembered that some of the key perceptions of the embassy's members were at least partly constructed to justify certain standpoints and actions of the authors of them, rather than being entirely objective observations as they might appeared to be.

II

Discoveries and prospects

Although the Macartney embassy did not secure any material concession from the imperial court of China, this mission did enable the British travellers to make contact with the Chinese government in a way that had never been achieved before, as well as allowing Britons to

traverse the interior of China for the very first time. The detailed observations they made during this experience built the foundations for British understanding of China in the nineteenth century. They were, however, another important aspect of the embassy that previous scholarship has failed to examine. Much first-hand knowledge about China gained at this time remains insufficiently investigated. A survey of the perceptions and attitudes developed during this significant encounter, therefore, is worth making and should prove valuable.

One of the greatest discoveries made by Macartney's embassy is that China in the Qing dynasty was actually a country of two distinct nations, the Chinese and the Tartars. Unlike previous commentators who confounded these two peoples under the general name of Chinese, the British visitors had discovered that 'although their appearance and manners are externally the same, a closer acquaintance soon discovers that in disposition they are widely different'.⁷³ According to their observations, the Chinese were 'more regularly educated, more learned and more patient than the Tartars', while the latter 'in general ... prefer active military duty to tranquil or sedentary occupations'.⁷⁴ Despite the fact that, after their conquest of China in 1644, the Tartars had adopted a lot of Chinese manners and retained a great part of the Ming dynasty's government administration, they also paid much attention to preserving their own identity and to promoting Tartar culture within the empire. These measures, however, did not entirely merge the two nations. Instead, there had always been 'mutual jealousy and antipathy'⁷⁵ between them. The Tartars regarded the Chinese as a conquered nation, while 'The Chinese consider the Tartars in general in the light of barbarians'.⁷⁶ Although the Qing emperor professed impartiality and wished to have it understood that he made no distinction between the two nations which he governed, 'neither

⁷³ Barrow, *Travels in China*, p. 125.

⁷⁴ *An Embassy to China*, p. 237.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 249.

⁷⁶ Staunton, *An Authentic Account*, II, 419.

Tartars nor Chinese are imposed upon by the pretence'.⁷⁷ In this respect, Macartney claimed that:

whatever might be concluded from any outward appearances, the real distinction is never forgotten by the sovereign who, though he pretends to be perfectly impartial, conducts himself at bottom by a systematic nationality, and never for a moment loses sight of the cradle of his power. ... The Viceoys of the provinces, the commanders of the armies, the great officers of state are almost all Tartars. The detail of business indeed, and the laborious departments are chiefly carried on by the Chinese. ... In all the tribunals of justice and finance, in all the courts of civil or military administration, an equal number of Tartar assessors is indispensably necessary to be present, in order to watch over and control the others. A Chinese may preside at the Board, and pronounce the opinion, but the prompter and manager is a Tartar who directs and governs the performers. These regulations and precautions sufficiently disclose the sovereign's real opinion of his tenure of the empire, and how little he depends upon the affections and loyalty of his Chinese subjects.⁷⁸

Macartney drew most of this intelligence from two friendly Chinese escort officers, Wang Wenxiong and Qiao Renjie. Through them, Macartney found that the predominance of the Tartars and the emperor's partiality for his own nation were common subjects of conversation among the Chinese whenever they met together in private. In public, however, it was noticed that these two Chinese officials had to pay humble deference to Tartar mandarins, insomuch that they did not even venture to sit down in the presence of a Tartar officer of the same rank as themselves. These observations helped the British visitors form an impression that the internal conflicts between China's two nations were so serious that to the Chinese it was like living under 'a foreign tyranny'.⁷⁹ On the basis of these perceptions, some of the British commentators gradually realised that the stability and integrity of the Chinese empire was becoming such a matter of concern for the Qing rulers that even a collapse from within was not entirely inconceivable. Barrow wrote that:

⁷⁷ *An Embassy to China*, p. 227.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 237-8.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 222.

Whether this most ancient empire among men will long continue in its stability and integrity can only be matter of conjecture: but certain it is, the Chinese are greatly dissatisfied, and not without reason, at the imperious tone now openly assumed by the Tartars; and though they are obliged to cringe and submit, in order to rise to any distinction in the state, yet they unanimously load them with “curses, not loud, but deep, mouth-honour breath” ... Whenever the dismemberment or dislocation of this great machine shall take place, either by a rebellion or revolution, it must be at the expense of many millions of lives.⁸⁰

These new images of China certainly differed from any previous assumptions held by other British observers. British knowledge about the Chinese empire was hence greatly strengthened as a result of this very first Sino-British official encounter.

Apart from the differences between the Chinese and the Tartars, the British embassy also realised that their visit to China was in essence an attempt to establish an amicable intercourse ‘with a suspicious and forbidding court’.⁸¹ Shortly after the delegation arrived in China, the caution and vigilance of the Qing government were clearly perceived by the British. Macartney noted that, ‘we have indeed been very narrowly watched, and all our customs, habits and proceedings, even of the most trivial nature, observed with an inquisitiveness and jealousy which surpassed all that we had read of in the history of China’.⁸² Moreover, particular care was also taken by the Chinese authorities to prevent the British travellers from making contact with the common people of China. During the journey, when the British wished to make some excursions from their boats into the towns or the countryside nearby, ‘our wishes were seldom gratified’.⁸³ In Beijing, Holmes wrote that, except for Lord Macartney, ‘none of his train, gentle or simple, were ever allowed to leave the place appointed for them, not even to peep out of it, till permission was obtained’.⁸⁴ This extreme suspicion by the Chinese government, however, was not merely restricted to visitors

⁸⁰ Barrow, *Travels in China*, p. 280.

⁸¹ Staunton, *An Authentic Account*, II, 134.

⁸² *An Embassy to China*, pp. 87-8.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 87.

⁸⁴ Holmes, *The Journal of Mr Samuel Holmes*, p. 139.

to China. As the embassy proceeded, the British observers gradually learned that the same caution was applied to the subjects of the empire as well. Macartney maintained in the Chinese capital that, ‘The police is singularly strict. It is indeed stretched to an extent unknown I believe in any other city, and strongly marks the jealousy of the Government, and their unceasing apprehension of danger’.⁸⁵ Staunton found that, ‘the provident attention of the Chinese government preserves carefully the exclusive advantage of giving information to, or withholding it, as it may deem expedient, from the body of the people’.⁸⁶ For example, although an express mail system was well established, its purpose was solely to convey messages to and from the emperor and his court: ‘There is no establishment of a post for the general convenience of the people through the Chinese empire’.⁸⁷ Neither were canals in China built to benefit the public. They were all ‘under the regulation and immediate inspection of the government, whose policy is to maintain an easy communication between the several parts of the empire’.⁸⁸ It was through this strict control of information, the British commentators found, that the Chinese government not only developed a high notion of self-importance among its people, as well as ‘invincible prejudices’⁸⁹ in favour of its own customs and practices, but also learned to ‘undervalue in their eyes as much as possible the superior invention of foreign nations’.⁹⁰ Even though it had been more than two centuries since they were first acquainted with Europeans, the Qing rulers never gave up their ‘vanity of an usurped national superiority’⁹¹ or attempted to adopt western science and technology. Instead, over the past two hundred and fifty years or so, they had remained ‘averse to all novelties, and wish[es] to discountenance a taste for any foreign article that is not absolutely

⁸⁵ *An Embassy to China*, p. 155.

⁸⁶ Staunton, *An Authentic Account*, II, 36.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 35.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 403.

⁸⁹ Proudfoot, *Biographical Memoir of James Dinwiddie*, p. 70.

⁹⁰ *An Embassy to China*, p. 275.

⁹¹ Barrow, *Travels in China*, p. 126.

necessary'.⁹² As a result, 'the Chinese, in some instances, were centuries behind the nations of Europe'.⁹³ The 'extraordinary ignorance'⁹⁴ of the Chinese people, hence, became another important discovery of the British embassy.

According to the observations of these British travellers, the ignorance of the Chinese people generally 'has no bounds'.⁹⁵ Dinwiddie claimed that, 'In no country, perhaps, do popular errors and prejudices prevail so much [as] in China'.⁹⁶ In particular, the Chinese were said to 'have scarcely an idea of there being any other country than their own'.⁹⁷ They believed themselves 'the only enlightened people, and that all other nations are barbarous; that China is situated in the middle of the earth, and all other countries scattered round it'.⁹⁸ Staunton once heard that Holland was considered by the ministers of China as 'bearing a political weight proportioned only to its size'⁹⁹ and the same rule was applied to Britain. He was also informed that, in the opinion of the Chinese court, a key scale for judging the relative importance of other nations was the degrees to which they tended to accept the superiority of the Chinese sovereign. It was for these reasons, Staunton inferred, that Britain, as a small island country whose ambassadors did not even know how to perform kowtow, failed to establish equal diplomatic relations with the Chinese empire.¹⁰⁰ In respect of science, the British commentators were also convinced that 'the Chinese are certainly far behind the European world'.¹⁰¹ They claimed that 'no branch of natural philosophy is made a study, or a pursuit, in China',¹⁰² because 'as soon as the product of any art or manufacture has appeared to answer the general purpose for which it was intended, it seldom happens that the

⁹² *An Embassy to China*, p. 226.

⁹³ Proudfoot, *Biographical Memoir of James Dinwiddie*, p. 74.

⁹⁴ *An Embassy to China*, p. 80.

⁹⁵ Holmes, *The Journal of Mr Samuel Holmes*, p. 158.

⁹⁶ Proudfoot, *Biographical Memoir of James Dinwiddie*, p. 83.

⁹⁷ Holmes, *The Journal of Mr Samuel Holmes*, p. 158.

⁹⁸ Proudfoot, *Biographical Memoir of James Dinwiddie*, p. 83.

⁹⁹ Staunton, *An Authentic Account*, II, 131.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, II, 131-2.

¹⁰¹ *An Embassy to China*, p. 264.

¹⁰² Proudfoot, *Biographical Memoir of James Dinwiddie*, p. 228.

Chinese ... endeavour to make any further progress'.¹⁰³ For instance, although, in Chinese superstition, much importance was attached to astrology, 'not a single Chinese, nor a Tartar, who shewed themselves there, were possessed of the slightest knowledge of astronomy, nor one who could explain any of the various phenomena of the heavenly bodies'.¹⁰⁴ Moreover, 'Of pneumatics, hydrostatics, electricity, and magnetism, they may be said to have little or no knowledge'.¹⁰⁵ In the art of navigation, Chinese maps were 'so confused and incorrect'¹⁰⁶ that 'they have no means whatsoever of ascertaining the latitude or the longitude of any place'.¹⁰⁷ Instead, 'The present system of Chinese navigation is to keep as near the shore as possible; and never to lose sight of land, unless in voyages that absolutely require it'.¹⁰⁸

With regard to the military and civil infrastructures of China, members of the Macartney embassy also obtained rather negative impressions. Chinese military displays were considered to be 'always unsoldierlike, and their march tumultuous. Bows, sabers, and matchlocks, were the only distinguishable weapons'.¹⁰⁹ Their guns were described as 'nothing more than a piece of hollowed wood'¹¹⁰ and proper cannons were never seen throughout the journey except for a few 'rude, ill-sharpen[ed], and disproportionate pieces'¹¹¹ in Beijing, Hangzhou and on the frontier of Canton. In addition, there were basically no inland roads in China, insomuch that 'there is scarcely a road in the whole country that can be ranked beyond a foot-path'.¹¹² Chinese carriages, even though they were the best ones the Qing government could provide for the use of the British mission, were deemed as

¹⁰³ Staunton, *An Authentic Account*, II, 539.

¹⁰⁴ Proudfoot, *Biographical Memoir of James Dinwiddie*, p. 194.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 228.

¹⁰⁶ Staunton, *An Authentic Account*, II, 42.

¹⁰⁷ Barrow, *Travels in China*, p. 26.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁹ Proudfoot, *Biographical Memoir of James Dinwiddie*, p. 41.

¹¹⁰ Holmes, *The Journal of Mr Samuel Holmes*, p. 157.

¹¹¹ Barrow *Travels in China*, p. 202.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, p. 347.

‘extremely uncomfortable’ and ‘the most uneasy vehicles that can be imagined’.¹¹³ As for the imperial palace in which the British stayed in Beijing, Anderson commented that ‘I could see nothing that disposed me to believe the extraordinary accounts which I had heard and read of the wonders of the imperial residence of Pekin’.¹¹⁴ He thought that the architecture of that palace was ‘not only destitute of elegance, but in a wretched state of repair’, and generally ‘unworthy the residence of the representative of a great monarch’.¹¹⁵ Even the dwelling of the emperor and the grand hall in which he held audiences, ‘when divested of the gilding and the gaudy colours with which they are daubed, are little superior, and much less solid, than the barns of a substantial English farmer’.¹¹⁶ Moreover, compared to European cities, Barrow noted that Beijing had no ‘conveniences of common sewers, to carry off the dirt and dregs that much necessarily accumulate in large cities’.¹¹⁷ Hence, ‘a constant disgusting odour remains in and about all the houses the whole day long, from the fermentation of the heterogeneous mixtures kept above ground, which, in our great cities, are carried off in drains’.¹¹⁸ In the rural areas, contrary to the notion that the Chinese excelled in agricultural techniques, it was found that the Chinese approach to farming was in fact ‘incapable of performing the operations of husbandry to the greatest advantage’.¹¹⁹ Not only were some of the implements which they made use of the same as those employed two thousand years ago, but ‘They have no knowledge of the modes of improvement practiced in the various breeds of cattle; no instruments for breaking up and preparing waste lands; no system for draining and reclaiming swamps and morasses’.¹²⁰

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 61.

¹¹⁴ Anderson, *A Narrative of the British Embassy*, p. 259.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 166-7.

¹¹⁶ Barrow, *Travels in China*, p. 84.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 67.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 383.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 384.

With respect to Chinese arts and literature, it was believed that, first of all, Chinese painters ‘can be considered in no other light than as miserable daubers’.¹²¹ Barrow maintained that the Chinese were ‘unable to pencil out a correct outline of many objects, to give body to the same by the application of proper lights and shadows, and to lay on the nice shades of colour, so as to resemble the tints of nature’.¹²² Even with regard to the paintings in the imperial collection, ‘none of the rules of perspective were observed, nor any attempt to throw the objects to their proper distances’.¹²³ The Chinese mode of education, Barrow went on to claim, focused too much on the classical works of Confucius, ‘who lived about 450 years before the Christian era’.¹²⁴ As a result, ‘little improvement seems to have been made in the last two thousand years’¹²⁵ in Chinese literature. Since the examinations to be passed for the attainment of government office were principally confined to the knowledge of the language, no progress in science was likely to be fostered in such a system. Even with respect to the high civility of the Chinese, which was well-known to European readers, Dinwiddie asserted that, the previous authors of China must ‘have made out their description from Confutzee what ought to be, rather than what is’,¹²⁶ because, throughout their journey, the British travellers failed to form such an impression. Instead, ‘We have experienced ... the most violent fermentation of passions, throwing stones, boxing on the highway, frequent wrangling in the palace, and impudent boys’.¹²⁷ With reference to such discoveries, it can be observed that the accounts published as a result of the British embassy of 1793 presented a very different image of China compared to those which readers might have previously found in print. These British commentators who had served on the Macartney embassy, regardless of their social class, basically held the same view of Chinese civilisation. They agreed that no

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 216.

¹²² *Ibid.*

¹²³ *Ibid.*

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 183.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 182.

¹²⁶ Proudfoot, *Biographical Memoir of James Dinwiddie*, p. 50.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*

matter what high degree of perfection the Chinese had achieved in the distant past, they had failed to develop and had even taken some retrograde steps in recent times. With regard to the progress of science and technology in recent centuries, Britain had leaped far ahead of China.

Both Staunton and Macartney claimed that,

when China was visited by Marco Polo, the natives of it had already reached their highest pitch of civilization, in which they were certainly much superior to their conquerors, as well as to their European contemporaries;¹²⁸

...

but not having improved and advanced forward, or having rather gone back, at least for these one hundred and fifty years past, since the last conquest by the northern or Manchu Tartars; whilst we have been everyday rising in arts and sciences, they are actually become a semi-barbarous people in comparison with the present nations of Europe.¹²⁹

To account for the underdevelopment of China, the British travellers formed another key perception that explained why the Chinese had failed to keep pace with the western world. They maintained that, the fundamental reason for this was that the Chinese government had established a range of maxims that swayed the sentiments and actions of its people. In particular, the principle of filial piety had been instilled throughout their history to such an extent that a system of universal obedience towards superiors pervaded every branch of China's public service. In this respect, Barrow commented that, 'Filial duty is, in fact, in China, less a moral sentiment than a precept which by length of time has acquired the efficacy of a positive law; and it may truly be said to exist more in the maxim of the government than in the minds of the people'.¹³⁰ Since the entire submission of children to the will of their parents was inculcated 'from early childhood amongst the lowest as well as

¹²⁸ Staunton, *An Authentic Account*, II, 514.

¹²⁹ *An Embassy to China*, p. 222. Similar views can also be found in Barrow, *Travels in China*, p. 238.

¹³⁰ Barrow, *Travels in China*, pp. 96-7.

highest classes of society’,¹³¹ the strength of parental authority gained much ground by precept and habit. As a result, ‘it gives to the parent the exercise of the same unlimited and arbitrary power over his children that the emperor, the common father, possesses by law over his people’.¹³² To strengthen this long-established precept, ‘The laws of the empire, to corroborate the disposition to filial obedience, furnish an opportunity for punishing any breach of it, by leaving a man’s offspring entirely within his power’.¹³³ In addition, the government of China employed many intellectuals to write extensively on this subject, in order to impress upon the minds of the people the similarity between the authority which the emperor exercised over his subjects and that which a parent wielded over his children. As a consequence of such measures, not only was the emperor’s image as ‘the common father of his people’¹³⁴ further strengthened, but the reasonableness and the justice of patriarchal authority at national and family levels were fully established. Thus:

Conformably to this system, founded entirely on parental authority, the governor of a province is considered as the father of that province; of a city, the father of that city; and the head of any office or department is supposed to preside over it with the same authority, interest, and affection, as the father of a family superintends and manages the concerns of domestic life.¹³⁵

Although this system of patriarchal government sounded just and reasonable in theory, it generated a variety of problems in practice. First, since ‘the heavy hand of power has completely overcome, and moulded to its own shape, the physical character of the people, and that their moral sentiments and actions are ... almost under the entire dominion of the government’,¹³⁶ there did not exist in China a middle class of men whose independent ideas gave them weight and influence in their country. Neither were there an ‘enlarged sphere of

¹³¹ Staunton, *An Authentic Account*, II, 109.

¹³² Barrow, *Travels in China*, p. 97.

¹³³ Staunton, *An Authentic Account*, II, 158.

¹³⁴ Barrow, *Travels in China*, p. 240.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 241.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 240.

public life'¹³⁷ or any friendly societies or cultural associations in which the transactions of government could be freely and openly discussed as in Britain. On the contrary, there were 'no other than the governors and the governed'¹³⁸ in the entire empire of China. Second, this resulted in a situation in which 'everything is at the instant command of the state'.¹³⁹ The officers of government, although by the constitution they were supposed as agents between the emperor and the people, instead became 'the greatest oppressors' of the latter.¹⁴⁰ The supposed fatherly affection they were supposed to show, in reality, turned out to be exercises in tyranny and oppression. As a consequence, 'The poor and private individuals in China, who have no means of communicating their complaints, or declaring their sentiments on the conduct of their particular rulers, are left in great measure at their mercy'.¹⁴¹ The ordinary Chinese people rarely had any means of redress, or of conveying their complaints to the imperial ear. Particularly, on the grounds of paternal authority, the maxims of the government commanded and the opinions of the people accepted that every officer of the government was entitled to inflict corporal punishment on the people. It created in the latter a natural dread of the former and established, overall, a system of universal servility in Chinese society. Barrow, for example, maintained that:

In a government, where every man is liable to be made a slave, where every man is subject to be flogged with the bamboo, at the nod of one of the lowest rank of those in office, and where he is compelled to kiss the rod that beats him, or, which amounts to the same thing, to thank the tyrant on his knees for the trouble he has taken to correct his morals, high notions of honour and dignified sentiments are not to be expected. ... The condition itself of being dependent upon, and subject to, the caprice of another, without the privilege of appeal, is such a degraded state of the human species, that those who are unfortunately reduced to it have no further ignominy or sense of shame to undergo.¹⁴²

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 102.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 261.

¹³⁹ *An Embassy to China*, p. 87.

¹⁴⁰ Barrow, *Travels in China*, p. 261.

¹⁴¹ Staunton, *An Authentic Account*, II, 484.

¹⁴² Barrow, *Travels in China*, p. 120.

The third conclusion reached was that, due to the arbitrary nature of this unique system, mutual confidence among the Chinese people was permanently destroyed. Instead, everyone was 'reserved and suspicious of his neighbour'¹⁴³ and, as a result, caution and suspicion became an integral part of the Chinese national character. In this respect, it was maintained that, unlike in Britain, where laws afforded security for the possession of private property and hence stimulated individuals to amass a fortune by all legal means, the government of China failed to provide that security for its people. As a matter of fact, every Chinese person was afraid of being considered as wealthy and,

If a man, by trade, or industry in his profession, has accumulated riches, he can enjoy them only in private. He dares not, by having a grander house, or finer clothes, to let his neighbour perceive that he is richer than himself, lest he should betray him to the commanding-officer of the district, who would find no difficulty in bringing him within the pale of the sumptuary laws, and in laying his property under confiscation.¹⁴⁴

For this reason, not only 'the characteristic disposition of the Chinese merchants is that of timidity and caution',¹⁴⁵ but normal social intercourse within Chinese society was restricted to a very small extent. This lack of communication among Chinese people, as well as the lack of any stimulus to build personal wealth, made it impossible to promote innovation in China. Thus, over the past few centuries, 'the talent of invention is there seldom exercised beyond suggesting the means of providing for the first necessities and the most pressing wants'.¹⁴⁶ Last, but not least, the sense of insecurity and feeling of mutual mistrust were not confined to the multitude alone, but were shared by the officers of the Chinese government. According to Chinese law, mandarins from the ninth degree upwards to the fourth could, at any time, administer a gentle 'correction' to his inferiors. The emperor ordered punishments to his

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 265.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 261.

¹⁴⁵ Staunton, *An Authentic Account*, II, 566.

¹⁴⁶ Barrow, *Travels in China*, p. 119.

ministers, as well as to the other four classes, whenever he might think it necessary. At the same time, spies were dispatched from the imperial court into the provinces in order to watch over the actions of most mandarins. The other magistrates also kept a steady eye upon each other. They, particularly, 'let no opportunity slip of making unfavourable reports to their superiors',¹⁴⁷ because 'it is frequently happens that the informer is rewarded by the office of the man he has been the instrument of removing'.¹⁴⁸ As a result of such policies, it can be inferred that mutual suspicion in the Chinese court was even more intense than among the common people. These qualities and failings, therefore, not only became a natural characteristic of all Chinese people, but produced a culture that was extremely cautious of anything new or foreign and hence 'greatly detrimental to the progress of the arts and manufactures'.¹⁴⁹

Despite the tyrannical nature of the Chinese government, the British commentators did inform their readers that the emperor had a distinct way of interacting with his people. On the one hand, he tended to create a divine and idolised image of himself. To achieve this end, the Chinese emperor styled himself not only as the common father of his subjects, but the sole agent between the temporal world below and the Heaven above, as the 'Son of Heaven'. Whenever a propitious event occurred, it was always attributed to 'the joint will of heaven and the emperor of China'.¹⁵⁰ During special festivities, especially on his birthday, the emperor commanded his subjects to perform an act of reverence before an altar on which his name was inscribed, just in the same way as they paid respect to the deities. In order to 'inspire the people with sentiments of respect and duty towards him',¹⁵¹ the emperor seldom showed himself in public, because it was thought that 'A power that acts in secret, and whose influence is felt near and remote at the same time, makes a stronger impression on the mind,

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 262.

¹⁴⁸ Proudfoot, *Biographical Memoir of James Dinwiddie*, p. 52.

¹⁴⁹ Barrow, *Travels in China*, p. 204.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 328.

¹⁵¹ Staunton, *An Authentic Account*, II, 302.

and is regarded with more dread and awful respect'.¹⁵² Only on particular occasions did the emperor of China exhibit himself at the height of his imperial splendour and magnificence. By such means, the reverence that the Chinese felt for their monarch was so much enhanced that Staunton could not help noticing that 'So easily is the delicacy of this people shocked in whatever relates to the person of their exalted sovereign'.¹⁵³ By way of contrast, the emperor also paid much attention to establishing an amiable and benevolent image of himself. In the beginning of every spring, he always held a solemn ceremony with a plough in his hands, with the aim of encouraging the nation to participate actively in farming. When the country was struck by natural calamities, the emperor would not only step forward to pray for the blessing of Heaven, but provide substantial assistance to his people. He believed that it was his duty to open the granaries and remit taxes to those who were visited by misfortune, even though he was 'so jealous of retaining the exclusive privilege of benevolence to his subjects, that he not only rejected, but was offended at, the proposal once made to him, by some considerable merchants, to contribute towards the relief of a suffering province'.¹⁵⁴ When someone was suffering the usual punishment of *bamboo*, the emperor even made sure that 'the culprit may claim the exemption of every fifth blow as the emperor's *coup-de-grace*',¹⁵⁵ so that his fatherly kindness would clearly be felt by his subjects. In addition to these measures, the emperor also ensured that the examination system for officials was fair and impartial. Since these examinations were regarded in China as 'the ascending steps which lead to all the offices and dignities of the state',¹⁵⁶ and were open to all classes of men, the relationship between the government and the common people was greatly enhanced. For one thing, at least in theory, no individual was precluded from attaining high office because of his birth, situation or circumstances, and 'at any rate, the possibility of success is an enjoyment

¹⁵² Barrow, *Travels in China*, p. 241.

¹⁵³ Staunton, *An Authentic Account*, II, 165.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, II, 90.

¹⁵⁵ Barrow, *Travels in China*, p. 255.

¹⁵⁶ Staunton, *An Authentic Account*, II, 483.

even to those who are never likely to obtain it'.¹⁵⁷ For another thing, 'the general persuasion ... that authority had been acquired through merit, must contribute to insure respect and obedience to it'.¹⁵⁸ By these means, the emperor not only presented himself once again as an unbiased Great Father whose affection never overlooked any subject in his empire, but effectively diverted the thoughts of the people away from any criticism of the legitimacy of his government.

Compared to such analytical observations on the Chinese government, society and civilisation made by the leading members of the Macartney mission, the discoveries of the lower-order British visitors to China were presented in a more descriptive fashion. Although, in general, these writers did agree with the other embassy members' major findings about the character of China, it should be noted that their accounts contained relatively more favourable remarks on the country. For example, in terms of China's beautiful landscapes, some of these British travellers never attempted to withhold their compliments. When Holmes first entered the interior of China, he said that 'the country presented a more enlivening prospect, and charming beyond description. I had formed an idea of it before our landing, not unfavourable to the Chinese; but I confess, this exceeded my utmost expectation, in every point of view'.¹⁵⁹ Near the city of Hangzhou, Stephen Else, a member of the British ship *Hindustan*, noted that the prospect was 'as delightful as fancy can conceive'¹⁶⁰ and that a reasonable level of prosperity could be found in this part of China. As for the climate of China, Holmes maintained that 'China is the finest country in the world with respect to its climate and production. ... there is nothing that is common in any other part of the world but is to be found here, and in equal perfection: it is peculiarly happy in the salubrity of the climate'.¹⁶¹ With regard to Chinese material culture, Holmes also admitted that 'In some things, they

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, II, 484.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁹ Holmes, *The Journal of Mr Samuel Holmes*, pp. 125-6.

¹⁶⁰ Else, *Journal of a Voyage*. This journal was not paginated.

¹⁶¹ Holmes, *The Journal of Mr Samuel Holmes*, p. 186.

certainly excel all other people, such as china ware, porcelain, silks, etc.’¹⁶² Moreover, the flat-bottomed boats the British embassy used in China, were ‘the most convenient and commodious that can possibly be conceived’, because ‘the smallest draught of water is sufficient, though they will carry a surprising weight of goods’.¹⁶³ Some of China’s state policies were also appreciated by these British observers. Else believed that agriculture, rather than commerce and industry, produced the ‘only real wealth’ for every nation and was pleased that this principle was ‘perfectly understood’ in China.¹⁶⁴ Edward Winder, one of the under-secretaries of the mission, spoke highly of China’s religious policy. He admired the fact that state offices in China were ‘impartially open to all’ and that religious toleration ‘universally prevails throughout all ranks’.¹⁶⁵ In spite of these positive comments, however, China was not considered to be an ideal place to live for the British. When Holmes was leaving the Chinese empire, he observed that, ‘though China is one of the finest and most desirable countries in the world, yet their manners and way of living bear such a contrast to ours, that few would ever wish to stay with them, that had any prospect of living, though in the lowest style, at home’.¹⁶⁶ From these statements, it can be detected that the approach through which the lower orders on the Macartney mission viewed China was somewhat different from that of the leaders of it. For one thing, material progress did not seem to be the sole criterion for assessing the condition of the Chinese empire. To these observers, it was the difference between China and Britain that rendered the Chinese way of living unadaptable to the British, rather than any other reason that made China an undesirable or unworthy place in which to live. Furthermore, although some of their findings did not appear significant enough to shape their principal images of the Chinese empire, and these lower-ranked commentators

¹⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 187.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*, pp. 123-4.

¹⁶⁴ Else, *Journal of a Voyage*.

¹⁶⁵ Winder, *Account of a Journey in China*. This account is not completely preserved and was not paginated.

¹⁶⁶ Holmes, *The Journal of Mr Samuel Holmes*, pp. 157-8.

did not attempt to make any overall assessment of Chinese civilisation, nevertheless their accounts present a more favourable perception of China. Since these positive comments can hardly be seen in any of the major works written by those serving on the Macartney embassy, it proves once again that, when those authors were making observations on China, their comments and conclusions were undoubtedly so influenced by their personal prejudices that some noteworthy facts and sources of information had been selectively documented or ignored.

Finally, when this very first official British mission to China was drawing to its close, only the heads of the embassy, particularly Macartney, offered any detailed analysis of Britain's future relations with China. Based on the belief that this embassy had created favourable sentiments among the Chinese, it was reaffirmed that patience and perseverance were extremely important to Britain's future relations with the Chinese empire. Macartney maintained that, for the time being, priority should be given to preserving 'the ground we have lately gained'.¹⁶⁷ He stressed that, 'I dare say there are many hasty spirits disposed to go a shorter way, but no shorter way will do it'.¹⁶⁸ Given the extraordinary character of the Chinese government, 'it would certainly require in us great skill, caution, temper and perseverance' to achieve favourable results.¹⁶⁹ Staunton, in this regard, pointed out that the emperor's unprecedented compromise on the kowtow issue was a positive sign to the British, because it demonstrated that 'the mere pleas of custom, however usually and strongly urged by the Chinese, would not stand always against reason, accompanied by temper and perseverance'.¹⁷⁰ On the basis of these arguments, it was suggested that, instead of the plan to establish a permanent ambassadorship in Beijing, the most practical and effective approach to deal with the Chinese government at present was to dispatch a royal minister to reside in

¹⁶⁷ *An Embassy to China*, p. 214.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 210.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁰ Staunton, *An Authentic Account*, II, 219.

Canton. By this means, it was hoped that this minister would not only be able to ‘excuse irregularities and clear up mistakes’ through his intercourse with the local authorities, but to hold direct communication with the imperial court, so as to ‘awe the regency of Canton and keep them within the bounds of justice and moderation’.¹⁷¹ Second, with respect to China’s future, it was Macartney’s belief that a breakup of the Qing Empire would probably take place before too long. He claimed that, ‘Scarcely a year now passes without an insurrection in some of the provinces. It is true that they are usually soon suppressed, but their frequency is a strong symptom of the fever within’.¹⁷² Even though, Macartney added, ‘It is possible ... that the momentum impressed on the machine by the vigour and wisdom of the present Emperor may keep it steady and entire in its orbit for a considerable time longer ... I should not be surprised if its dislocation or dismemberment were to take place before my own dissolution’.¹⁷³ Once such an event occurred, Macartney predicted that it would occasion ‘a complete subversion of the commerce, not only of Asia, but a very sensible change in the other quarters of the world’. Moreover, since entry into the Chinese market would definitely be ‘attempted by all adventurers of all trading nations’, it would eventually induce ‘much rivalry and disorder’.¹⁷⁴ Given Britain’s political, marine and commercial strength at the time, however, it was Macartney’s conviction that Britain could in any case ‘prove the greatest gainer’ in the end and ‘rise superior over every competitor’.¹⁷⁵ Last, but not least, Macartney was also not unprepared for a breakdown in Sino-British relations, even though he was particularly opposed to any action that might give rise to such a contingency. If the Chinese took the initiative by laying an embargo on their commerce with Britain, or by doing the British any material injury, Macartney observed with confidence that,

¹⁷¹ *An Embassy to China*, p. 214.

¹⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 191.

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 239.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 213.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

we certainly have the means easy enough of revenging ourselves, for a few frigates could in a few weeks destroy all their coast navigation and intercourse from the island of Hainan to the Gulf of Pei-chili. ... We might probably be able from Bengal to excite the most serious disturbances on their Tibet frontiers by means of their neighbours there ... we might make a settlement in Lantao or Cow-hee, and then Macao would of itself crumble to nothing in a short time. The forts of the Bocca Tigris might be demolished by half a dozen broadsides, the river would be impassable without our permission, and the whole trade of Canton and its correspondencies annihilated in a season. The millions of people who subsist by it would be almost instantly reduced to hunger and insurrection. They must overturn the country as beggars or as robbers, and wherever they went would carry with them misery and rebellion.¹⁷⁶

In spite of this seemingly belligerent statement, Macartney was by no means an advocate of violent measures against China. As a matter of fact, right next to the above comment, Macartney clearly stated why a breach of the relationship with China would be clearly detrimental to the interests of Britain and its eastern empire. He maintained that, in such an event:

Our settlements in India would suffer most severely by any interruption of their China traffic which is infinitely valuable to them, whether considered singly as a market for cotton and opium, or as connected with their adventures to the Philippines and Malaya.

To Great Britain the blow would be immediate and heavy. Our great woollen manufacture, the ancient staple of England, would feel such a sudden convulsion as scarcely any vigilance or vigour in Government could for a long time remedy or alleviate. ... We should lose the other growing branches of export to China of tin, lead, copper, hardware, and of clocks and watches, and similar articles of ingenious mechanism. We should lose the import from China not only of its raw silk, an indispensable ingredient in our silk fabrics, but of another luxury, or rather an absolute necessary of life: tea.¹⁷⁷

It was because of these considerations, when Macartney was concluding his comments on Britain's future engagement with China, that he solemnly reaffirmed the necessity of avoiding an aggressive course of conduct:

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 210-11.

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 212.

our present interests, our reason, and our humanity equally forbid the thoughts of any offensive measures with regard to the Chinese, whilst a ray of hope remains for succeeding by gentle ones. Nothing could be urged in favour of an hostile conduct, but an irresistible conviction of failure by forbearance.¹⁷⁸

From these lines, it can be clearly shown that, although the resort to force was indeed mentioned in his account, Macartney should rather be considered as an advocate of a peaceful line of action, rather than being the initial advocate or agitator for a British-Chinese war.

In sum, no matter how successful or unproductive the Macartney mission is evaluated in terms of its diplomatic achievements, this first official encounter between Britain and China produced a great deal of detailed first-hand knowledge about China of a kind never offered to the British public before. By and large, these discoveries tended to present an unfavourable image of Chinese civilisation at the time. In particular, the extremely suspicious character of the Chinese government, as well as its governing maxim established on the principle of paternal authority, were seen as the main reasons for China's underdevelopment. Although, at this stage, some senior figures on the embassy had been able to envision a breakup of the Qing empire or a breakdown of Sino-British relations, an aggressive line of action against China was still considered to be rather inadvisable and definitely harmful to the interests of Britain.

III

Conclusion

This chapter has explored some important but understudied aspects of the Macartney diplomatic mission to China. Unlike most of the previous research that focused on the controversy of kowtow or the embassy's political implications, this chapter has investigated, from a perceptual point of view, the underlying contention among the embassy members on

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 213.

the transactions and legacy of the mission. By comparing accounts left by different orders of men who took part in the embassy, it can be shown that some key facts were selectively documented or ignored in order to suit a particular author's own needs and prejudices. Although it can be expected that every commentator will have his own particular standpoint, it is worth noting that some of the perceptions presented by the principal persons in the embassy contain self-serving prejudices and biases that were constructed to justify certain of their views and actions. This chapter has also examined various observations that the embassy made during the course of its visit, especially during the return journey when its participants traversed the interior of China. Through these new discoveries, a variety of first-hand information about China could be presented to the British public for the very first time. This not only signalled considerable progress in the British understanding of China, but laid the foundation for Britain's attitude towards the Chinese empire in the near future.

CHAPTER TWO

British perceptions of China during the Amherst embassy (1816-17)

In 1816, a second British embassy led by Lord William Amherst,¹ arrived in China and an official encounter between Britain and China again took place. This embassy, sent twenty-two years after the completion of the Macartney mission, was Britain's second attempt to improve its commercial and diplomatic relations with the Chinese empire. Compared to the previous embassy, Amherst's mission has long been regarded as even less successful. One historian has even concluded that 'except for creating ill feeling on both sides, nothing was achieved'.² Hence, in contrast to the inaugural British embassy to China, which has been an object of considerable scholarly interest, the Amherst mission has attracted much less attention. Nevertheless, from a perceptual point of view, this seemingly 'minor' event provided the British observers with an opportunity to renew or revise their impressions of the Chinese empire. As the last British embassy of its kind prior to the First Anglo-Chinese War, this mission produced some revised understanding of Chinese affairs, which potentially laid the basis for the subsequent conflicts between the two countries. A review of the Amherst embassy, in this sense, becomes not only necessary but important, regardless of how unsuccessful it was in terms of its official objectives.

The number of available primary sources for Amherst's mission is, rather surprisingly, slightly greater than those for Macartney's. My research has shown that eleven members of the Amherst embassy left more than fifteen accounts of it. Lord Amherst apparently kept a

¹ William Pitt Amherst, 1st Earl Amherst (1773-1857) was the son of Lieutenant-General William Amherst, aide-de-camp to the king, governor of St John's, Newfoundland, and adjutant-general of the army. Amherst succeeded to the title of Baron Amherst of Montreal from his uncle Jeffery Amherst, 1st Baron Amherst and commander-in-chief of the army, who died in 1797 with no issue. Amherst had little political or diplomatic experience before his mission to China, except two years (1809-11) as ambassador-extraordinary to the court of the Two Sicilies. It is not known why Amherst was chosen to lead the embassy. See Amherst, William Pitt, <http://www.oxforddnb.com>; accessed 22 May 2013.

² Li Chien-nung, *The Political History of China, 1840-1928* (Princeton: Van Nostrand, 1956), p.18.

diary during his journey, but this cannot be found, probably because of the shipwreck of the embassy's main ship, the *Alceste*, on its return voyage. Some of Amherst's remarks on the mission, as well as his observations of China, however, can still be found in the India Office Library and Records, held in the British Library.³ Sir George Thomas Staunton, Lord Macartney's page on the first mission and the son of Sir George Leonard Staunton, served as the second commissioner of the Amherst embassy.⁴ As an eminent 'China expert' at the time, Staunton produced several works that relate to the Amherst mission. His *Notes of Proceedings and Occurrences during the British Embassy to Peking in 1816* is a private publication that reveals his personal views on the mission and the Chinese court.⁵ *Miscellaneous Notices Relating to China, and our Commercial Intercourse with that Country* records various occurrences during his long stay in the Chinese empire, not only as an embassy member who visited the imperial court, but as an employee of the East India Company's factory in Canton.⁶ In 1856, Staunton published his memoir, in which he recalled his experiences with Amherst's mission and reinforced some of his arguments of forty years previously.⁷ Henry Ellis, the third commissioner,⁸ published his *Journal of the Proceedings of*

³ British Library, London: India Office Library and Records [hereafter IOLR]: India Office Amherst Correspondence, Lord Amherst's Embassy, 1815-17, vols. 196-8, G/12/196-8. Copies can also be found at The National Archives of the U.K.: Foreign Office, Political and Other Departments [hereafter TNA, F.O.], F.O. 17/3.

⁴ Sir George Thomas Staunton, 2nd Baronet (1781-1859) was a famous sinologist and politician in the first half of the nineteenth century. Staunton was the only Briton who was involved in both Macartney's and Amherst's missions. Staunton possessed a fair amount of knowledge about the Chinese language and served as chief interpreter for the East India Company at Canton since 1808. In January 1816, Staunton was promoted to be chief of the EIC's Canton factory and in July he was appointed to accompany Lord Amherst's embassy to Beijing. See Staunton, Sir George Thomas, in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (hereafter *ODNB*), <http://www.oxforddnb.com>; accessed 22 May 2013.

⁵ George T. Staunton, *Notes of Proceedings and Occurrences during the British Embassy to Peking in 1816* (London: Habant Press, 1824; reprinted, with an introduction by Patrick Tuck, New York: Routledge, 2000).

⁶ George T. Staunton, *Miscellaneous Notices Relating to China, and our Commercial Intercourse with that Country* (London: John Murray, 1822).

⁷ George T. Staunton, *Memoirs of the Chief Incidents of the Public Life of Sir George T. Staunton* (London: L. Booth, 1856).

⁸ Sir Henry Ellis (1788-1855) was the illegitimate son of Robert Hobart, fourth earl of Buckinghamshire (1760-1816). Ellis joined the East India Company in 1805 and served as private secretary to his father from 1812 to 1814 when the latter was president of the Board of Control. Before joining Amherst's embassy,

the *Late Embassy to China* shortly after he returned to Britain.⁹ This work was widely considered as the most official account of the Amherst mission, and more or less an equivalent of Sir George L. Staunton's book on the Macartney embassy. Robert Morrison, who served as the chief translator for Amherst's embassy,¹⁰ published *A View of China*¹¹ and *A memoir of the principal occurrences during an embassy from the British government to the court of China in the year 1816* in London.¹² After he died, his wife Eliza Morrison compiled a two-volume *Memoirs of the Life and Labours of Robert Morrison, D.D.*, which complements Morrison's observations on China in his earlier works.¹³ John Francis Davis, another member of the embassy who had a good command of the Chinese language,¹⁴ authored a number of books on China and its people, such as *Sketches of China*,¹⁵ which includes his journal of the Amherst embassy and *The Chinese: A General Description of the Empire of China and Its Inhabitants*.¹⁶ Apart from these works, some other members of the mission kept dairies of their journey as well, but with specific emphases according to their particular assignments. For instance, Clarke Abel, the chief medical officer and naturalist

Ellis had made some official visits to Sind and Persia. See Ellis, Sir Henry, in the *ODNB*, <http://www.oxforddnb.com>; accessed 22 May 2013.

⁹ Henry Ellis, *Journal of the Proceedings of the late Embassy to China* (London: John Murray, 1817).

¹⁰ Robert Morrison (1782-1834) was the first Protestant missionary to China and an eminent sinologist. He spent more than twenty-five years in China and published widely both in Chinese and in English. Morrison was appointed translator to the East India Company in 1809. He was considered as 'the chief person who opened to his countrymen the road to the knowledge of the language of China'. See Morrison, Robert, in the *ODNB*, <http://www.oxforddnb.com>; accessed 22 May 2013.

¹¹ Robert Morrison, *A View of China, for philological purposes: containing a sketch of Chinese chronology, geography, government, religion and customs* (London: Black, Parbury, and Allen, 1817).

¹² Robert Morrison, *A Memoir of the Principal Occurrences during an Embassy from the British Government to the Court of China in the year 1816* (London: Hatchard & Son, 1820).

¹³ *Memoirs of the Life and Labours of Robert Morrison, D.D.*, ed. Eliza Morrison (2 vols., London: Longman, 1839).

¹⁴ Sir John Francis Davis, 1st Baronet (1795-1890) was appointed writer in the East India Company's factory at Canton in 1813. Since then his career was closely associated with the Chinese affairs. Davis later served as the Governor of Hong Kong between 8 May 1844 and 21 March 1848.

¹⁵ John Francis Davis, *Sketches of China; Partly during an Inland Journey of Four Months between Peking, Nanking, and Canton* (2 vols., London: Charles Knight, 1841).

¹⁶ John Francis Davis, *The Chinese: A General Description of the Empire of China and Its Inhabitants* (2 vols., London: J. Murray, 1857).

with the embassy, published his *Narrative of a Journey in the Interior of China* in 1818.¹⁷ John Macleod, a surgeon aboard the *Alceste*, wrote a *Narrative of a Voyage in His Majesty's Late Ship Alceste*.¹⁸ Basil Hall, the commander of HMS *Lyra*, released his *Narrative of a Voyage to Java, China and the Great Loo-Choo Island* in 1840.¹⁹ Besides these published accounts, some manuscript journals can also be found, such as the *Henry Hayne Dairy 1816-1817*, written by Amherst's private secretary Henry Hayne, which is preserved in Duke University's *China through Western Eyes* microfilm series.²⁰ These narratives, in general, are not as comprehensive as the others, but they prove to be useful every now and then with regard to some particular findings of the embassy.

Despite the existence of these surviving and accessible materials, modern research on the second official encounter between Britain and China is very limited. No major historical publication deals specifically with this incident. Most studies relating to this period are rather descriptive and tend to interpret Amherst's experiences as even more humiliating than Macartney's, with little new material to add.²¹ Even the more recent work, *Asian Empire and British Knowledge: China and the Networks of British Imperial Expansion*,²² and an article entitled 'Narrating the Far East: commerce civility and ceremony in the Amherst Embassy to

¹⁷ Clarke Abel, *Narrative of a Journey in the Interior of China in the years 1816-1817* (London: Longman and Hurst, 1818).

¹⁸ John Macleod, *Narrative of a Voyage in His Majesty's Late Ship Alceste to the Yellow Sea, along the Coast of Corea, and through its numerous hitherto undiscovered islands, to the island of Lewchew* (London: John Murray, 1817).

¹⁹ Basil Hall, *Narrative of a Voyage to Java, China and the great Loo-Choo Island* (London: Edward Moxon, 1840).

²⁰ Adam Matthew Microform Publications: Henry Hayne, *Henry Hayne Dairy 1816-1817* (4 vols.), *China through western eyes: manuscript records of traders, travellers, missionaries and diplomats, 1792-1942* (1996).

²¹ For example, see Hosea Ballou Morse, *The Chronicles of the East India Company Trading to China, 1635-1834* (5 vols., Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1926), III, 256-306; Alain Peyrefitte, *The Collision of Two Civilisations: The British Expedition to China in 1792-4* (London: Harvill, 1993), pp. 504-11; Christopher Hibbert, *The Dragon Wakes: China and the West, 1793-1911* (New York: Penguin Books, 1984), pp. 54-69; A.E. Grantham, *A Manchu Monarch: an interpretation of Chia Ching* (Arlington, VA: University Publications of America, 1976), 154-201; Li, *The Political History of China*, pp. 17-18.

²² Ulrike Hillemann, *Asian Empire and British Knowledge: China and the Networks of British Imperial Expansion* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

China (1816-1817)',²³ failed to recognise this mission as an important reason for the deterioration of Britain's attitude towards China in the pre-Opium War era. This chapter will delve further into the sources available, in order to present the various views of China occasioned by Amherst's embassy. In addition, this mission will be set in a wider historical context, which links it to the previous encounter of 1793 as well as the later disputes in the 1830s. Only when these long-term changes are investigated, can the origin of the Sino-British confrontation from 1840 onwards be better understood.

I

The occasion of Amherst's mission

The prevailing explanation for the occasion of the Amherst embassy is clear and straightforward. Christopher Hibbert maintains that 'neither the merchants at Canton nor the British government were content to let matters rest where the failure of Lord Macartney's mission had left them; and on the death of the old Emperor Ch'ien-lung [Qianlong] in 1799 hope was revived that a satisfactory trade agreement might be negotiated'.²⁴ Alain Peyrefitte claims that 'the British, having vanquished Napoleon, now had the means – and the need – to try one last diplomatic approach',²⁵ so as to place Britain's commercial and political relations with China on a secure footing. These arguments have indicated the similarities between the two British missions, but have overlooked the complexity of the launch of the second embassy, particularly with regard to the different expectations entertained by the East India Company and the British government.

In the two decades after the Macartney embassy, there was no sign that the assurance Macartney had allegedly gained on the improvement of British trading conditions was

²³ Eun Kyung Min, 'Narrating the Far East: commercial civility and ceremony in the Amherst Embassy to China (1816-1817)', in *Interpreting Colonialism*, ed. B.R. Wells and P. Steward (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2004), pp. 160-80.

²⁴ Hibbert, *The Dragon Wakes*, pp. 55-6.

²⁵ Peyrefitte, *The Collision of Two Civilisations*, p. 506.

producing results. No trade barriers were lifted, nor were the tariffs and duties reduced. According to the British citizens in Canton, they were in a position that 'neither protected by the physical force of armies, nor by that moral security which is derived from the plighted faith of treaties'.²⁶ Their commerce with China also continued to be overseen by the 'highly jealous, despotic, and arbitrary'²⁷ government of Canton. For the East India Company, its trade monopoly in India was terminated in 1815. As a result, the commerce with China, the EIC's only remaining monopoly trade, became more important than ever to the Company. Given the perceived character of the local Chinese authorities, the EIC's Select Committee at Canton believed that, in order to maintain its commerce there, they were seriously in need of 'a clear signal showing that they had the full support of their sovereign'²⁸ and, to achieve this end, 'no other resource remained ... but a direct appeal to the court of Pekin'.²⁹ Under such circumstances, the EIC's Court of Directors in London pleaded with the British government for a royal ambassador to be sent to Beijing. The Amherst embassy, in consequence, was formed at the expense of the East India Company.

It can be seen that the Amherst mission was largely initiated by the EIC's anxiety about the preservation of its China trade, rather than any broader design of the British government to develop further its relations with the Chinese court. For the EIC, the trade in Canton was its only concern, because experience had shown that nothing more could be expected under the current circumstances. According to the Secret Commercial Committee of the Company, the most immediate cause of this embassy was very specific, i.e., 'the insolent, capricious, vexatious proceedings which the local Government of Canton has for some time past held towards the Company's Representatives there, by which they have obstructed, and

²⁶ Staunton, *Miscellaneous Notices*, p.192.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ Hillemann, *Asian Empire and British Knowledge*, p.76.

²⁹ Staunton, *Miscellaneous Notices*, pp. 227-8.

embarrassed the conduct of the Company's commerce'.³⁰ Staunton even stated in this regard that the embassy 'was sent out for the single purpose of settling the Canton disputes and re-establishing the trade'.³¹ This sentiment, however, did not entirely coincide with the expectations of the British government. Although British authorities in London indeed supported the plan of another royal embassy to China, they wished that, in addition to the EIC's goal of defending its commerce in Canton, 'every opportunity should be taken to enquire how the purchase of British manufactured goods in China could be *increased*'.³² John Francis Davis, in this respect, noted in his journal that:

It was curious to observe the difference between the instructions received from the government and the recommendations emanating from the Court of Directors. The former implied that we went simply in search of whatever we could pick up, ... The Company said, "Have most regard to the effect that the embassy is to produce at Canton; complain of the conduct of the local authorities to our trade; ..." ³³

Although the intention of expanding British trade in China was not entirely contrary to the main objectives of the mission, the slight difference between the British government's and the EIC's expectation for the second embassy turned out to be significant as the mission proceeded.

In July 1816, when Amherst and his embassy reached the Lemma Islands, which were just off the China coast, they were joined by a group of the EIC's employees in Canton. George T. Staunton, president of the Select Committee at the time, was appointed as the second commissioner and minister plenipotentiary of the embassy. Other persons who had a command of the Chinese language, i.e., Robert Morrison, John Francis Davis, Francis Toone,

³⁰ Letter from the Secret Commercial Committee to the Right Honble Lord Amherst, 17 Jan. 1816, in Morse, *The Chronicles*, III, 284.

³¹ Staunton, *Memoirs*, p.65.

³² IOLR, Factory Records, G/12/196. Letter from Lord Castlereagh to Lord Amherst, 1 Jan. 1816. Italics added.

³³ John Francis Davis, *Sketches of China* (London, 1841), I, 55-6.

Thomas Manning and Alexander Pearson, formed a translation team for the rest of the mission. The addition of these EIC's staff members resulted in a major difference between the two British embassies. When Macartney was visiting China, no one in his mission had had prior experience of that country. Unassisted with any 'local inside knowledge',³⁴ Macartney had to make most of the decisions himself. Amherst, however, was not as experienced as Macartney in foreign affairs. Since these EIC staff members had had ample opportunities to deal with the Chinese authorities at Canton, Amherst was well disposed to solicit opinions from these so-called 'China experts'. Meanwhile, it can be detected that Staunton, unlike his father, was very eager to stress that his own advice was pivotal to every major decision of the embassy. It was Staunton's belief that, 'from my local experience, and from habits of long and deep reflection upon it, I ought to be fully prepared to offer a well-grounded opinion'.³⁵ In his *Miscellaneous Notices*, Staunton even implied that Amherst's opinion was in no way superior to his, while all decisions ought to have been made collectively. He wrote:

the *principle* upon which this embassy was constituted, was extremely judicious. – The appointment of a commission in which a nobleman was to preside, with two members of the select committee for his assessors, combined two very essential requisites upon the occasion, which it was impossible to find centred in any one individual, in an equal degree.³⁶

Moreover, because this mission was dispatched chiefly for the wellbeing of the EIC's merchants in Canton, Staunton argued that serious attention should also have been paid to the opinions of other EIC's representatives. To justify this standpoint, he asserted that,

³⁴ Hillemann's research deals substantially with the relations between local inside knowledge and the making of Britain's empire in Asia. For example, see Hillemann, *Asian Empire and British Knowledge*, p. 77.

³⁵ Staunton, *Notes of Proceedings*, p. 31.

³⁶ Staunton, *Miscellaneous Notices*, pp. 232-3. Italics in the original. The initial arrangement was that John Elphinstone and Staunton, both members of the EIC's factory at Canton, would serve as the second and third commissioners. By the time the embassy arrived, however, Elphinstone had already resigned as president of the select committee at Canton and had decided to withdraw from the mission. As a result, Staunton was advanced to the second place as deputy to the ambassador. Ellis, originally the secretary to the embassy and a former Bengal Company servant, succeeded to the vacancy as third commissioner.

It [the embassy] grew so entirely out of the measures which had been adopted by the Company's authorities there, to that end, and was so especially designed to strengthen their hands, and to obtain, if possible, the emperor's confirmation of the provincial adjustment which they had already obtained, that any scheme of an embassy which had not included persons who were locally, and in the fullest manner acquainted, both with what had been done, and with what was still required, would, however complete in other respects, have been obviously worse than useless.³⁷

The reason why Staunton attached so much importance to his own advice and that of other EIC staff was that he did not think the Amherst embassy arrived at a good time. Staunton contended that, the Company requested a royal mission to be dispatched, 'when the alarm for the safety of the trade was at the highest, with a just and natural anxiety, unquestionably, to avert a danger of so serious a character, as that which seemed to be impending'.³⁸ This situation had changed considerably, however, when the Select Committee at Canton was informed that an embassy was on its way. For this reason, Staunton claimed that, 'had the measure however been postponed for six months, it very probably would never have been adopted at all; for it would have become evident ... that the peculiar ground for attempting to re-open a diplomatic intercourse with the court of Peking ... no longer existed',³⁹ and that 'on the other hand, a great many new circumstances and events had come into operation, which were calculated very much to discourage the attempt'.⁴⁰ Due to these concerns, Staunton was quite worried that the currently acceptable condition of the Canton trade would be undermined by the new embassy. In accord with his notion that 'The tide of court favour at Peking was certainly very strong against foreign connections of every kind, in the year 1816',⁴¹ Staunton maintained that the main purpose of the Amherst mission was 'not to propose any innovation, but merely to secure and consolidate, and to restore, in the event of

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p.233.

³⁸ Staunton, *Notes of Proceedings*, p. vii.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. vii.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. viii.

⁴¹ Staunton, *Miscellaneous Notices*, p. 231.

its being found to have been again suspended, the ordinary commercial intercourse between the two countries'.⁴² In particular, he deemed it inappropriate to undertake the embassy 'with any special view towards the attainment of additional privileges, such as the opening of a new port for the extension of our commerce, or any other of the wild and visionary projects that have been sometimes attributed to it'.⁴³ Since those with local knowledge all agreed that at present the embassy was unlikely to obtain any additional benefits from the Chinese court, Staunton declared that the paramount objective should be 'If it were found, that no *good* could be done; at least, to take especial care to do no *harm* – Not to *lose* any of the ground that the select committee had gained – not to *frustrate* the success of the line of policy they had adopted'.⁴⁴

In reference to Staunton's view, there is no evidence that Lord Amherst or any other non-EIC member of the embassy ever raised a straightforward objection. Nevertheless, although they indeed showed respect for the advice of these 'China experts', they were neither as committed to the instructions of the EIC, nor as convinced that no positive good could be achieved by this mission. Probably due to the perceptions he gained as a result of the Macartney embassy, it appears that Amherst was less prepared for the difficulties he might encounter during his visit to China's imperial court. For instance, as for the negotiations preceding the ambassador's approach to the imperial audience, Amherst claimed that 'decency and regularity of the proceedings'⁴⁵ can be shown from the reports of Macartney's embassy, and that everything relating to court ceremonies was 'arranged and conducted with order, decorum and deliberation'.⁴⁶ In general, the Qing government's reception of the previous British mission was regarded by Amherst in the following light:

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 239.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, pp. 237-8.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 240. Italics in the original.

⁴⁵ IOLR, Factory Records, G/12/197/284-5. Letter from Amherst to George Canning, 8 Mar. 1817.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, G/12/197/284.

At that time every thing was orderly and regular. Time was allowed for due and decorous preparation. The convenience of individuals was consulted as well as the honor of the Ambassador. A mutual understanding followed all matters of dispute and discussion. Whatever might in reality be intended, appearances at least were maintained, and the dignity of the Emperor of China and the King of England were alike consulted.⁴⁷

In line with this view, a favourable impression of the Chinese emperor also added to Amherst's relative optimism. Even though Macartney and his retinue had arrived at the imperial court in 1793, the vast majority of interested Britons were still left with an image of the Chinese monarch that was envisaged rather than learned at first hand. Prior to Amherst's embassy, both the British government and the EIC's servants at Canton still entertained a somewhat enlightened perception of the Chinese sovereign.⁴⁸ This impression was apparently derived from the opinions of early Catholic missionaries in China as well as from the views of some members of the Macartney embassy. Based on this positive assumption about the emperor's character, the British, including the EIC's employees at Canton, attributed the difficulties in Canton entirely to the fault of the local Chinese authorities. They believed that the misconduct of these officers was concealed from the Chinese emperor and, hence, once their oppressive actions against foreign merchants were communicated to His Imperial Majesty, the grievances in Canton would soon be redressed. Based on this belief, it was clearly stated, in the EIC's instructions to Amherst, that the anticipated outcome of the mission was 'the establishment of the Company's trade upon a secure, solid, equitable footing, free from the capricious arbitrary aggressions of the local Authorities, and under the protection of the Emperor, and the sanction of Regulations to be appointed by himself'.⁴⁹ It can be seen that, at this stage, the British had almost taken for granted the favour and kindness

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, G/12/197/293-4.

⁴⁸ When Staunton met the Qianlong emperor as Macartney's page, he was only twelve. The emperor showed much favour to him on that occasion and Staunton also had a favourable impression of the Qianlong emperor.

⁴⁹ Letter from the Secret Commercial Committee to the Right Honble Lord Amherst, 17 Jan. 1816, in Morse, *The Chronicles*, III, 285.

of the Chinese sovereign. This confidence placed upon the Jiaqing emperor, however, was considerably revised as the Amherst mission progressed.

II

The kowtow dispute renewed

The Amherst embassy travelled on the Chinese mainland for approximately four months, but the most significant intercourse with the Qing government only lasted twenty days or so. As soon as this contact began, the British visitors realised that the kowtow dispute was going to be renewed. Yet, unlike what occurred on the Macartney mission, the Chinese court under the Jiaqing reign seemed even more determined about the performance of this ceremony. To achieve this end, serious negotiations between China and Britain were conducted on three different occasions, each of which was held by very senior officials of the Chinese government and overseen by the supreme authority, the emperor himself. In order to understand better the perceptions produced as a result of the second British-Chinese encounter, a brief introduction to its official proceedings is necessary.

The first major negotiation on the kowtow issue took place in Tianjin on 13 August 1816 – only four days after Amherst's mission set foot on Chinese soil. On this occasion, an imperial banquet was prepared by two royal legates, Soo (Su Leng'e) and Kwang (Guanghui), at the command of the Jiaqing emperor. This event was designed not only to welcome the arrival of the British envoys, but to provide them with an opportunity to rehearse the kowtow ceremony. For this purpose, a table covered with yellow silk was laid as a symbol of the Imperial Majesty's presence and *sangui jiukou*⁵⁰ was supposed to be paid by the British delegation. Although, according to the instructions given by the British government, much

⁵⁰ Technically, 'kowtow' only denotes the performance of three simple genuflections, a mode of greeting widely practised in China on both public and private occasions. The court ritual that gave rise to the dispute, strictly speaking, was called *sangui jiukou*. It was the utmost form of ceremony in China and implied thrice kneeling and nine times bowing the head to the ground.

latitude was left to the ambassador's discretion with regard to the observation of Chinese court ritual, Amherst, at this stage, was determined not to prostrate himself before any representative of the Chinese sovereign. Instead, he agreed to uncover his head and pay some reverential low bows, but without giving any clear promise on what ceremony he was going to perform in the presence of the emperor himself.

The second test of Amherst's willingness to comply with the Tartar ceremony⁵¹ was conducted in Tongzhou, twelve miles from the capital. This time, two mandarins of even higher rank – Duke Ho (He shitai), brother of the empress and president of the board for foreign affairs, and Duke Moo (Muke deng'e), president of the tribunal of ceremonies – were deputed by the Jiaqing emperor to meet the British delegation. They were ordered to instruct, rather than to consult with, the British envoys on the forms of homage to be practised. In the first of the two meetings held, the dukes adopted a haughty and intimidating tone. They maintained that under no circumstances would the Chinese court dispense with its established usages. When Amherst referred to Macartney's example of performing the European ceremony to the Qianlong emperor, Duke Ho asserted that, for one thing, the emperor had declared that he himself had witnessed Macartney's performance of *sangui jiukou* in 1793; for another, no matter what form of respect Macartney had paid to the previous monarch, that precedent was not to regulate proceedings on the present occasion. Five days later, when the two parties met for the second time, the dukes' attitude had become more courteous. Duke Ho first asked what the British side expected from this mission. After Amherst informed him of the various wishes entertained by the EIC and the British government, Duke Ho suggested that all these expectations might be satisfied once the British envoys agreed to comply with the kowtow ceremony.⁵² Under this circumstance, Amherst replied that some further

⁵¹ It was argued by some Chinese mandarins that the kowtow was more of a Tartar than a Chinese ceremony. See Morrison, *A Memoir*, p. 34.

⁵² IOLR, Factory Records, G/12/197/267. Letter from Amherst to George Canning, 28 Feb. 1817.

deliberations were needed before he could provide a final answer. When Amherst solicited opinions on this subject from Staunton and Ellis, however, contrasting advice was put forward by the second and third commissioners. Ellis was inclined to go ahead with the ceremony to secure Chinese trade concessions, while Staunton insisted that the Chinese would respect the British only if the British stuck to what they had said and done in the past. Although Amherst himself was more disposed to agree with Ellis, he eventually decided to 'shew deference to an opinion [advanced by Staunton and] founded on long observation and on local experience'.⁵³ Accordingly, Amherst declared in a short note to Duke Ho that he would adhere to Macartney's precedent of not performing kowtow.

After passing this note to Duke Ho, the Amherst embassy began to prepare for an immediate return journey, because they no longer expected that the emperor would be willing to meet the British ambassador. To everyone's surprise, however, the British delegation was suddenly urged to proceed without delay to Yuen-min-yuen (Yuan-ming-yuan), the imperial palace in which the final stage of the kowtow dispute took place. This unexpected news created a great deal of confusion within the British embassy. When Amherst asked if his message was misunderstood by the Chinese authorities, Legate Kwang amid the hassle stated that the Tartar ceremony would be dispensed with as a signal of favour to the British.⁵⁴ After an exhausting overnight journey, Amherst and his commissioners were ushered into a small ante-chamber, where Ellis claimed to have 'witnessed a scene ... unparalleled in the history of diplomacy'.⁵⁵ In this room, Ellis noted that, spectators of all ages and ranks 'rudely pressed upon us to gratify their brutal curiosity, for such it may be called, as they seemed to regard us rather as wild beasts than mere strangers of the same species with themselves'.⁵⁶ At the same time, the British envoys were notified that the date of the proposed audience had been

⁵³ *Ibid.*, G/12/197/271. Same letter.

⁵⁴ Davis, *Sketches of China*, I, 141.

⁵⁵ Ellis, *Journal of the Proceedings*, p. 177.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 178.

changed. With neither their proper attire nor the king's letter to the Chinese emperor, Amherst and the commissioners were ordered to attend the imperial audience immediately. When Amherst refused this unexpected injunction because of 'fatigue, inanition, and deficiency of every necessary equipment',⁵⁷ Duke Ho became so impatient that he even gripped Amherst's arm to indicate an intention to use force. Although Amherst shook him off at once and no further violence was employed by either party, the kowtow dispute finally ended in a mutually unpleasant manner. A few hours later, the emperor, incensed by Amherst's refusal to attend the audience, issued an order for the embassy's immediate departure from his court. The official proceedings of the Amherst mission were terminated.

It can be seen from the above that the kowtow issue was not only a central cause of dispute during the second British-Chinese encounter, but was also a controversial subject within the Amherst embassy. Due to the different views of the mission's ultimate objectives, conflicting views were advanced by the leaders of the embassy as to whether they should comply with the Chinese court ritual or not. For Amherst and Ellis, since the government clearly stated that it was inadvisable to 'let any trifling punctilio stand in the way of the important benefits which may be obtained by engaging the favourable disposition of the Emperor and his Ministers',⁵⁸ their attitudes towards kowtow were more flexible. In particular, with Duke Ho's favourable promise in mind, they tended to believe that too much emphasis on the ceremonial details would be injurious to the overall aims of the embassy. For this reason, a compromise on formality was considered not entirely unacceptable. Ellis maintained in this regard that,

the sole chance of success to the ulterior objects of the embassy exists in producing a favourable impression upon the mind of the Emperor; and this can

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ Letter from the Right Honble Lord Castlereagh to the Right Honble Lord Amherst, Jan. 1816, in Morse, *The Chronicles*, III, 281.

only be effected by complying with the particular usages of the court and nation, as far as a due sense of our own dignity, combined with considerations of policy, will permit.⁵⁹

Although, Ellis admitted that, the kowtow ceremony was certainly disagreeable to the sense of honour and propriety of every British visitor, 'it could scarcely be deemed advisable to sacrifice the more important objects of the embassy to any supposed maintenance of dignity by insisting upon such a point of etiquette, in such a scene'.⁶⁰ Amherst, as head of the mission, basically concurred with Ellis in this point of view. He pointed out that, once the Chinese court was offended by the unbending stance taken by the British envoys, it was possible that 'not only former grievances would not have been removed, but new misunderstandings would have arisen; and new evils would have been incurred'.⁶¹ On the other hand, Amherst contended that 'a prospect was held out to us of positive good by a compliance with the Emperor's wishes'.⁶² Since 'the Emperor's statement of his own recollection of Lord Macartney's proceedings made it difficult to urge an opposite and contradictory account of them', he believed that 'a yielding on this point might be made the subject of personal compliment and courtesy to His Imperial Majesty'.⁶³ By these statements, it can be seen that Amherst was in some sense attempting to show that he was not biased against either the EIC's or the British government's interpretation of the embassy's ultimate objectives. Instead, he justified his standpoint not only on the grounds of the British government's desires, but also in the interests of the EIC. On the one hand, Amherst was apprehensive that any insistence on not performing kowtow might induce the emperor to treat the EIC's trade ungraciously in future. On the other hand, in order to achieve the 'positive good' he desired, he deemed it

⁵⁹ Ellis, *Journal of the Proceedings*, pp. 52-3.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 50-1.

⁶¹ IOLR, Factory Records, G/12/197/269. Letter from Amherst to George Canning, 28 Feb. 1817.

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ *Ibid.*, G/12/197/269-70. Same letter.

worthwhile to keep that prospect alive by making a reasonable concession to the Chinese emperor.

Ellis's contention on the propriety of performing kowtow, as well as Amherst's efforts to support this opinion, however, were not acceptable to Staunton, the second commissioner of the embassy, who possessed profound local experience. In conflict with the above views, Staunton, first of all, asserted that, 'judging from my general knowledge and experience of the Chinese character', compromise on the court ritual 'would not be likely to promote the attainment of any of the objects we have in view'.⁶⁴ In particular, he maintained, based on the example of the Dutch embassy in 1795,⁶⁵ it had actually been confirmed that the performance of kowtow would not 'in any way ... benefit our national and commercial interests'.⁶⁶ Second, with respect to Amherst's apprehensions about the EIC's interests at Canton, Staunton concluded that 'our perseverance in the course we have pursued will not entail any serious or permanent injury to our interests'.⁶⁷ Again, based on his local knowledge, Staunton maintained that 'It is not agreeable to the Chinese character to have recourse to violent measures, or to push matters to extremities unnecessarily, especially when they have (as I may safely say, in this case) no color or ground for proceeding'.⁶⁸ To prove this, he referred to the Russian embassy in 1806. Although in that year the Russian ambassador refused to kowtow and was hence rejected by the Jiaqing emperor, that event 'did not occasion any interruption of the commercial intercourse between the two nations'.⁶⁹ Third, concerning the aim of

⁶⁴ Staunton, *Notes of Proceedings*, pp. 31-2.

⁶⁵ In January 1795, a Dutch embassy led by Isaac Titsingh (1745-1812) arrived in Beijing. Unlike the Macartney mission, members of the Dutch embassy did not refuse to perform kowtow. It, however, did not help the Dutch achieve any of their commercial or diplomatic objectives. On the contrary, this embassy was treated in a more disgraceful manner than the Qing court's reception of Macartney's mission. More details about Titsingh's embassy can be found in André Everard Van Braam, *An authentic account of the embassy of the Dutch east-india company, to the court of the emperor of China, in the years 1794 and 1795* (London: R. Phillips, 1798); J.J.L. Duyvendak, *The Last Dutch Embassy to the Chinese Court, 1794-1795* (Leiden: Brill, 1938).

⁶⁶ Staunton, *Notes of Proceedings*, p. 32.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 100.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 100-1.

achieving certain 'positive good' beyond Canton, Staunton alleged that it was certainly an unrealistic assumption that favourable actions would result from such a concession. He stated that,

I am fully sensible of the importance of the objects of the present mission; but I cannot bring myself to believe that their attainment would be in the smallest degree be promoted by the compliance in question; and the mere reception, (it could be hardly be termed honorable reception) of the Embassy, would, I think, be too dearly purchased by such a sacrifice.⁷⁰

As a result of these considerations, Staunton came to the conclusion that 'a compliance ...will be unadvisable, even though the refusal should be attended with the hazard of the total rejection of the embassy'.⁷¹ Moreover, 'under such very singular circumstances, the mere ceremonies of a court reception, had they taken place, would have been nothing compared to the moral effect which the judiciously sustained proceedings of the British Mission would be calculated to produce'.⁷²

Apart from these arguments, it is interesting to observe how Staunton, in the minority of the embassy's three-man leadership, managed to convince the other two of his viewpoint. When the answer to the kowtow question was shortly to be confirmed in Tongzhou, Staunton stressed that, because the embassy was sent out to China 'solely and entirely for the sake of the local interests of the Company', it was 'not unnatural that the opinion of the persons connected with that interest should preponderate'.⁷³ For this reason, he stressed that, with regard to a subject of such importance, not only were the attitudes of the envoys important, but the advice of all the EIC representatives in the embassy should be seriously considered. In particular, Staunton noted that, among the five members of the EIC staff who accompanied him, four of them 'had resided nine or ten years in China, and possessed such acknowledged

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 32.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

⁷² Staunton, *Memoirs*, p. 67. This view was also shared by Davis, see Davis, *Sketches of China*, I, 56-7.

⁷³ Staunton, *Miscellaneous Notices*, p. 211.

talents, judgment, and local experience, as must necessarily entitle their opinions to considerable weight'.⁷⁴ The fifth man, Davis, 'though a young servant of the company, had displayed talents, and evinced a zeal in his application to the study of the language, which entitled his opinions to an attention beyond his years'.⁷⁵ On these grounds, Staunton was allowed to consult with these men individually on this particular matter. As might have been expected, all of them, either firmly or conditionally, turned out to agree with Staunton that it was unwise to comply with the kowtow ceremony under the present circumstances.⁷⁶ By these means, it can be seen that Staunton artfully turned his minority position in the dispute with Ellis and Amherst into a six-to-two advantage. Through Staunton's repeated insistence on the weight and extent of so-called 'local knowledge', Amherst, at length, was obliged to give up the idea of performing kowtow and, probably with it, the chance of achieving any 'positive good'.

Although it sounds like it was the embassy's collective decision to proceed according to Staunton's advice, it appears that not everyone in the mission was truly convinced by Staunton's arguments. In particular, previous scholarship on the Amherst embassy has overlooked an underlying debate that occurred between Ellis and Staunton after the no-kowtow resolution had been reached. From Staunton's accounts, it can be discovered that a central aspect of his attitude was to prove that he helped the embassy make a very correct decision in 1816. Even four decades later, Staunton did not forget to refer to various sources in his memoir, in order to support this point of view. Most remarkably, he selected some passages from one of Ellis's books, in which Ellis had stated:

⁷⁴ Staunton, *Notes of Proceedings*, p. 102.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.* It should be noted that although these EIC staff members did have richer 'local' knowledge compared to other members of the embassy, Staunton did not point out that their extended experience in China was restricted only in Canton.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 102-3.

I do not in the least blame myself for having surrendered my opinion to the experience of Sir George Staunton ... I must confess that I could not have found another person to whose character and acquirements I would have preferred yielding the guidance of my actions.⁷⁷

This statement was taken by Staunton as proof that Ellis had willingly yielded his unprofessional opinion to Staunton's considerable local knowledge, but a wider and closer examination of the two gentlemen's accounts suggests that Ellis had never really accepted Staunton's assertions.

First and foremost, although Ellis did indeed mention that he did not feel regret for complying with Staunton's suggestion, his account of this was conveyed in a quite different tone to that which appeared in Staunton's memoirs. Ellis, in fact, wrote in his official journal that:

I have naturally felt deep regret at the prospect of being denied reception [at the Chinese court] from a continued refusal to comply with the wishes of the Chinese, and yet I do not in the least blame myself for having surrendered my opinion to the experience of Sir George Staunton. I am ready, when called upon to act, to yield crude notions to experienced opinion, but regarding the question as matter of speculation, my sentiments remain unchanged;⁷⁸

To elaborate on this point, Ellis not only questioned 'whether a contrary result would have been too dearly bought by sacrificing the distinction between nine prostrations of the head to the ground upon two knees, and nine profound bows upon one knee',⁷⁹ but also maintained that, even without regard to the major objectives of the embassy, 'I shall still be inclined to

⁷⁷ Cited by Staunton, see Staunton, *Memoirs*, pp. 68-9. Staunton did not give the exact name of the account from which he quoted. He only noted that these passages were from 'Vol. i. p. 233' and 'Vol. ii. p. 195' of Ellis's 'published narrative'. Although Ellis's *Journal of the Proceedings* was reprinted in two volumes in 1818, these passages cannot be found on the pages.

⁷⁸ Ellis, *Journal of the Proceedings*, p. 151.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 153.

believe, that the irritation produced by protracted contest has been, in some measure, an obstacle to their favourable consideration'.⁸⁰

Second, it can be seen from the evidence above that Ellis suggested that the inflexible and uncooperative stance which the British envoys adopted in their negotiations was harmful to the success of the mission. This view produced another underlying debate between the second and the third commissioners of the embassy. In contrast to what Ellis stated, it was Staunton's conviction that, when dealing with the Chinese court, the British had not been resolute enough, rather than being overly inflexible. He maintained that, despite the fact that many people were in favour of the policy that questions relating to Chinese court ceremony should be determined on the spot, 'the delay, which ensued in consequence, was fatal',⁸¹ because

although the point was at length given up by the Chinese, or, at least, professed to be so, on the day before the intended audience, the tardiness of this concession compelled them to have recourse afterwards to a degree of indecorous and unexampled haste, which, as is well known, produced a crisis in the affairs of the embassy, which rendered that concession, even if it had been sincerely made, of no avail.⁸²

Ellis, in his journal, made it very clear that he was opposed to this view. He claimed that, 'I cannot but regret this inevitable multiplication of subjects of ceremonial discussion, for I consider every victory upon these points as a diminution of the chances of success upon the more material objects of the embassy'.⁸³ Although his opinion was not based on any prior knowledge and experience, concerning the kowtow question, it had always been Ellis's belief that 'the time employed in contending for the manner in which the embassy is to be received, and the temper generated by even successful inflexibility, are not calculated to dispose the

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

⁸¹ Staunton, *Miscellaneous Notices*, p. 233.

⁸² *Ibid.*

⁸³ Ellis, *Journal of the Proceedings*, p. 108.

mind of the Emperor, or his ministers, to listen favourably to propositions in which they do not see any reciprocal advantage'.⁸⁴ Moreover, Ellis added that, 'the dismissal of the embassy, without access being obtained to the imperial presence, would be a confirmation to the present and future Viceroys of Canton, that their own interest is the only check to their extortion and injustice'.⁸⁵ Because of these considerations, Ellis's personal opinion on this issue was never influenced by Staunton's efforts at persuasion. In concluding his explanation, Ellis stated distinctly that:

should the reception or rejection of the embassy depend upon an adherence, on the present occasion, to the mode observed in the case of all former European ambassadors admitted to an audience, except Lord Macartney, I should have no hesitation in giving up the maintenance of the single exception as a precedent.⁸⁶

Furthermore, Ellis cast a great deal of doubt on the value of the local knowledge which Staunton was so proud of possessing. The third commissioner was also sceptical about the allegedly 'extensive acquaintance with the language'⁸⁷ of the other 'China experts', who were simply, in Ellis's opinion, '*more or less* acquainted with the Chinese language'.⁸⁸ Most important, Ellis argued that this local knowledge was obtained only from Canton. Since the situation in Beijing was vastly different, experiences gained in Canton might not necessarily be applicable to every occasion elsewhere in China.⁸⁹ For these reasons, Ellis claimed that he was '*uninfluenced* and unaided by local knowledge',⁹⁰ a statement which probably implies that, in his view, the so-called 'local' knowledge, if insufficient, might rather mislead than assist the possessor's judgment. To further support his perspective, Ellis took every

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 109.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 53. 'Viceroy (*Zongdu*)' is a Chinese term that refers to the governor-general of one or more provinces. Viceroy of Canton is normally the governor-general of Guangdong and Guangxi provinces.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

⁸⁷ Staunton, *Miscellaneous Notices*, p. 242.

⁸⁸ Ellis, *Journal of the Proceedings*, p. 58. Italics added.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 52.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 151. Italics added.

opportunity to note the instances when Staunton failed to deliver the right message. For example, Ellis recorded that, when, amid the haste in Tongzhou, the embassy was unofficially informed that the kowtow had already been dispensed with by the emperor, ‘Sir George had no doubt that the point was conceded, and that we might be perfectly satisfied’.⁹¹ This belief soon proved to be utterly erroneous. As for Staunton’s interpretation that the kowtow implied political submission, Ellis was also suspicious. Instead, Ellis was more inclined to perceive the kowtow as mere formality and part of Chinese court conventions. Ellis noted that he was informed by a Chinese official that, ‘His Majesty ... was not greater, nor we [the British] lower, by the performance; that the ko-tou did not constitute us tributaries; and that there was a material difference in the treatment of Envoys from tributary states particularly in the point of sitting upon cushions’.⁹² In another conversation, Ellis reported that the embassy’s conducting officer, Chang (Zhang Wuwei), observed that:

he was aware our resistance arose from a belief that the ko-tou [kowtow] was an admission of political dependence, but in this we were mistaken; that if he met a friend of superior rank, he went upon his knees to salute him; that however he neither considered himself a servant, nor did his friend pretend to be his master; the ko-tou was merely a court ceremony, and the Emperor considered it rude in the Ambassador to refuse compliance.⁹³

Although these statements might well be untruthful allegations made by the Chinese authorities, Staunton and other EIC representatives never attempted to disprove them, but chose to ignore these views in their accounts. Because of his lack of understanding of Chinese customs, Ellis was certainly unable to provide a more definite interpretation of the implications of performing or not performing the kowtow. His effort to challenge the authority of Staunton’s expert knowledge of Chinese customs does, at any rate, offer a new perspective

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 173.

⁹² *Ibid.*, p. 228.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, p. 155.

on the Amherst embassy. Similarly, this renewed dispute over the kowtow ceremony, no matter whether it was between the two countries or within the embassy itself, gave the British observers opportunities to revise their existing perceptions of China and Chinese affairs.

III

A capricious despot

One great difference between the Amherst and Macartney embassies was the contrasting images of the Chinese emperor that they presented. In 1793, the British visitors to China mainly concluded that it was a few prejudiced Tartar ministers who undermined the success of the mission, while the emperor himself was a benevolent and compassionate character. This impression, however, was completely rejected by members of the Amherst embassy. In order to explain the embassy's failure to secure trade privileges from the imperial government, as well as to account for the dishonourable treatment that the embassy suffered in Yuen-min-yuen, most of the criticisms following the Amherst embassy were directed against the Jiaqing emperor, the Qianlong emperor's son and successor.

As with Macartney and G. L. Staunton, Amherst and G. T. Staunton, as heads of the embassy, paid particular attention to explaining why their missions had failed to achieve the desired goals. Although, on the issue of kowtow, Amherst and Staunton might hold different views, they agreed that 'the personal character of the monarch'⁹⁴ was the primary reason for the failure of their embassy. In this regard, Staunton maintained that, 'the emperor's violence and precipitation must ... be considered as the main cause of what has happened. ... his conduct throughout has certainly been ungracious in the extreme, and totally unlike that of his predecessor, upon the occasion of the former embassy'.⁹⁵ In a similar vein, Amherst argued that, 'my want of success is not to be attributed to want either of zeal or discretion in the

⁹⁴ IOLR, Factory Records, G/12/197/295. Letter from Amherst to George Canning, 8 Mar. 1817.

⁹⁵ Staunton, *Notes of Proceedings*, p. 144.

performance of my duty'.⁹⁶ The real reason for the mission's failure was, Amherst believed, that the Jiaqing emperor, 'whose reign has been frequently and very lately disturbed by insurrections', was less ready to 'dispense with outward fame of respect than his Father, whose reign was long and victorious, and who, being firm in the possession of real power and authority, might attach less consequence to any shew of external homage'.⁹⁷ This explanation was generally adopted to explain why the Amherst mission had failed to gain any concession in 1816, but it could not account for some specific occurrences, such as the hasty departure to Yuen-min-yuen, despite the ambassador's refusal to kowtow, as well as the unexpected summons to an immediate imperial audience. With these extraordinary events in mind, the British commentators developed a new image of the Chinese sovereign as a capricious despot.

The origin of this impression can be traced back as far as the embassy's first landing on Chinese soil. In Tianjin, Amherst was first told that the emperor demanded the British ambassador to leave his musical band behind when he proceeded to Beijing, but this order was soon countermanded without prior notice. Ellis commented on this event that, 'The objection made by the Emperor to the band is only so far important as it marks the capricious weakness of his character, and shews that he may be expected to adopt measures without any apparent or indeed assignable reason'.⁹⁸ A few days later, after the British envoys had encountered disorder in the early negotiations, as well as the insults in Yuen-min-yuen, the favourable perception of the Chinese sovereign that they inherited from previous European observers was weakened further. In particular, the emperor's rejection of the embassy, immediately after a sleepless and exhausting overnight journey, ignited so much indignation across the British delegation that no one was willing to withhold his anger toward such an inhumane order. Davis, in this regard, claimed that, 'This certainly was a barbarous, not to

⁹⁶ IOLR, Factory Records, G/12/197/381. Letter from Amherst to George Canning, 21 Apr. 1817.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, G/12/197/387. Same letter.

⁹⁸ Ellis, *Journal of the Proceedings*, p. 115.

say brutal, measure, considering that we had only just arrived from a most fatiguing night journey. ... The insult offered had been so gross'.⁹⁹ Clarke Abel, who found it impossible to explain what had occurred 'in any probable chain of cause and effect', wrote that, 'We could only conjecture that we had been hurried to and from Yuen-min-yuen, and subjected to all kinds of indignity and inconvenience, to suit the will of a capricious despot'.¹⁰⁰ Moreover, by contrast with the Macartney mission, the Amherst embassy's criticism of the Chinese court centred almost exclusively on the emperor himself, rather than on any of his mandarins. The British travellers believed that every transaction between the embassy and the Chinese government was manipulated by the Jiaqing emperor, while all his mandarins were simply fulfilling the duties imposed upon them. Henry Hayne noted in this respect that, 'We all felt much for the situation of the Mandarins attached to us, having had great reason to be perfectly satisfied with their whole conduct toward us, and at the same time extremely zealous in the cause of their Emperor'.¹⁰¹ Ellis fully concurred with Hayne on this point. He maintained that, 'we must consider ourselves fortunate in the Mandarins with whom we had to transact business ... the rupture must be attributed to the personal character of the Emperor, who is capricious, weak, and timid, and the combined effect of these feelings will account for his pertinacity'.¹⁰²

This production of the Chinese sovereign's unfavourable image, however, did not cease with the dismissal of Amherst's mission. Instead, it was considerably reinforced by a series of happenings afterwards. In the beginning of the embassy's return journey from Beijing to Canton, Amherst was concerned that the emperor's displeasure would result in much inconvenience for his embassy.¹⁰³ Yet, upon his return to Tongzhou, Amherst received a visit from Legates Soo and Kwang, who informed him of the emperor's proposal for a partial

⁹⁹ Davis, *Sketches of China*, I, 155.

¹⁰⁰ Abel, *Narrative of a Journey*, p. 11.

¹⁰¹ Hayne, *Henry Hayne Dairy*, pp. 44-5.

¹⁰² Ellis, *Journal of the Proceedings*, p. 122.

¹⁰³ IOLR, Factory Records, G/12/197/296. Letter from Amherst to George Canning, 8 Mar. 1817.

exchange of presents.¹⁰⁴ This attempt to keep on good terms with the British, together with the kindness with which the mission was treated during the rest of the return journey, was considered by Amherst as ‘a sort of reparation for its abrupt dismissal from Yuen-min-yuen’.¹⁰⁵ Nevertheless, since neither an explanation for the rejection nor a clearly stated willingness to preserve good relations with Britain was communicated to the British ambassador, the supposed graciousness of the Chinese sovereign did not generate much good will on the part of the British. On the contrary, the Jiaqing emperor’s quick change of mind was seen as proof of both his caprice and his weakness, as well as an example of his inconsistent style of government. Ellis stressed that:

This weak and capricious monarch, soon after the flagrant outrage had been committed under the impulse of angry disappointment, may be supposed to have become alarmed at the consequences of his own violence, and the habitual notions of decorum belonging to Chinese character and usage resuming their influence, produced the partial reparation.¹⁰⁶

Although this interpretation was not founded on solid evidence, to the British, it was the most credible explanation of what had transpired on the Chinese side.

In addition, the negative image of the Jiaqing emperor was further confirmed by the contradictory accounts he provided to explain the dismissal of the British embassy. Although the sovereign had never clarified to the British what induced him to reject their mission, he did issue a few accounts to different readerships in China on this subject. On 4 September 1816, the *Pekin Gazette* (京报; *Jing Bao*), a state-run bulletin for officers of the Chinese government, released an imperial edict, in which the emperor attributed the unpleasant

¹⁰⁴ The Jiaqing emperor proposed to accept three items from the British – the portraits of the King and Queen, a case of maps and a collection of prints and drawings. In return, he wished to present to the British ambassador with a white agate *jouyee* or sceptre, a string of sapphire beads and a box of embroidered purses. The selection of these items was supposed to be an observance of the maxim of Confucius, ‘give much, but receive little’.

¹⁰⁵ IOLR, Factory Records, G/12/197/305-6. Letter from Amherst to George Canning, 22 Mar. 1817.

¹⁰⁶ Ellis, *Journal of the Proceedings*, p. 425.

dismissal of the Amherst embassy to the false reports of his ministers, especially Duke Ho. In line with his usual cultivated image of a benevolent monarch, the Jiaqing emperor lamented that, 'If, at that time, Ho-she-tay [Duke Ho] had addressed to me a true report, I, the Emperor, would certainly have issued my commands, and have changed the period of the audience, in order to correspond with their intentions, in thus coming ten thousand lees to my court'.¹⁰⁷ In another edict addressed to the viceroy of Jiangsu, Anhui and Jiangxi, the emperor enjoined government officers in this area not only to treat the British with civility and attention, but he also personally offered a more detailed explanation for the dismissal of the embassy. Although, in this document, the Chinese sovereign dwelt less on the culpability of his ministers, his general sentiments on this issue do not seem to have changed. Blame was still placed on the misconduct of a few individuals who had engaged with the British mission, rather than the actions of the emperor himself or anyone else. The British observers were by and large satisfied with these two edicts when they obtained them through unofficial channels. In spite of the usual contemptuous tone in which they were addressed, Amherst claimed that, 'He [the Chinese emperor] at least absolves me and those who were associated with me from having been instrumental to our own dismissal'.¹⁰⁸ Davis added that, 'inasmuch as it was a public notification that the emperor was sorry for what had passed, [it] was a very good supplement to the exchange of presents at Tung-chow, and placed our affairs on the best footing that they now admitted of'.¹⁰⁹ These optimistic views, however, were considerably changed when the British envoys later found out that there was another different imperial interpretation for what had occurred. Upon his arrival at Canton, Amherst received from a source in Macao a copy of the emperor's edict to the viceroy of Canton. This edict was dispatched only two days after the one which had appeared in the *Pekin Gazette*, but it

¹⁰⁷ Extract from 'the *Pekin Gazette* on the 13th Day of the 7th Moon of the 21st year of Kea-king [Jiaqing], September 4, 1816', quoted in Ellis, *Journal of the Proceedings*, p. 501.

¹⁰⁸ IOLR, Factory Records, G/12/197/310-11. Letter from Amherst to George Canning, 22 Mar. 1817.

¹⁰⁹ Davis, *Sketches of China*, I, 205.

contained an entirely different account of the incident. In contrast to the previous two edicts, the Jiaqing emperor was completely silent about the conduct of his ministers. Instead, he pointed out that the dismissal of the embassy was caused by the British ambassador's refusal to observe Chinese court etiquette in the matter of the kowtow. This edict greatly surprised the British envoys, especially because the two contradictory explanations had both been produced by the sovereign's own hand within such a short period of time. Although it can be speculated that the latter account was created in order to prevent any voice for change being expressed by the foreign residents in Canton, the inconsistency between the two explanations nevertheless greatly strengthened the belief that the present Chinese emperor possessed a capricious and arbitrary character. It was conjectured by Ellis that, 'either at the suggestion of ministers adverse to the semblance of concession to foreigners, or from the returning haughtiness of national feeling and personal character, it was determined by the Emperor to justify his violence by a false statement'.¹¹⁰ Since 'the edicts were neither addressed, nor were they supposed to have come to the knowledge of the Ambassador', Ellis maintained that, 'they are therefore only important as evidences of the general disposition of the Chinese government, or as instances of fluctuation in a mind known to be at once timid and capricious'.¹¹¹

Furthermore, based on this belief in the Jiaqing emperor's capricious character, the British observers were convinced that the Chinese sovereign, as well as his courtiers, had no wish to pay any respect to truth. Prior to the embassy's departure from Canton, Amherst received a letter from the emperor to George III, via the Prince Regent, in which His Imperial Majesty stated that he accepted the 'profound and sincere devotedness' of the British nation, despite Amherst's failure to communicate it properly.¹¹² This letter was considered as such 'a

¹¹⁰ Ellis, *Journal of the Proceedings*, p. 425.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 426.

¹¹² A translation of this letter can be found in Morse, *The Chronicles*, III, 284.

very false and distorted account of all the transactions of the Embassy'¹¹³ that it proved 'the Emperor's disregard to truth and consistency'.¹¹⁴ In particular, the Jiaqing emperor's assertions that Macartney had performed the kowtow ceremony during his embassy and that Amherst had first promised to comply with it, but afterwards refused to do so, were condemned as 'unblushing falsehoods'.¹¹⁵ The appearance of this letter also reminded the recent British visitors to China of other untruthful statements made by Chinese government officials. Morrison, when translating one of Duke Ho's reports, discovered that Duke Ho used to inform the emperor that the British ambassador was practising the kowtow with reverence on a daily basis. Morrison found this report without a doubt 'a statement founded on a positive untruth'.¹¹⁶ Amherst recalled that contradictory allegations on Macartney's compliance with kowtow were also made by Legate Soo on different occasions.¹¹⁷ Since Legate Soo's rank was much inferior to that of Duke Ho's, Amherst supposed that there was a 'system which seems generally to prevail in China of framing reports from inferiors, not so much with a regard to truth, as to what is conceived to be the wishes of their superiors'.¹¹⁸ Inasmuch as the Jiaqing emperor 'is said to be as capricious, as his commands are arbitrary and his power extensive', Amherst believed 'this system may perhaps operate much [more] strongly towards the Sovereign'.¹¹⁹ By these discoveries and speculations, the caprice of the emperor was not only confirmed once again, but was also deemed to be the underlying reason for the general disregard for truth that permeated his government.

It can be observed from the above that the Amherst embassy created a vastly different image of the Chinese sovereign from that which had developed two decades previously as a result of the Macartney mission. Unlike the Qianlong emperor, who was perceived to be

¹¹³ Abel, *Narrative of a Journey*, p. 210.

¹¹⁴ Ellis, *Journal of the Proceedings*, p. 427.

¹¹⁵ Abel, *Narrative of a Journey*, pp. 210-11.

¹¹⁶ Morrison, *A Memoir*, p. 65.

¹¹⁷ IOLR, Factory Records, G/12/197/226-7. Letter from Amherst to George Canning, 12 Feb. 1817.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, G/12/197/216. Same letter.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*

amicable and caring for the wellbeing of the British, the Jiaqing emperor was represented as a capricious despot, as well as being the very reason why the mission had failed to achieve its objectives. Despite such treatment, however, Amherst's embassy was given greater liberty of movement during its return journey through the interior of China. As a consequence of the new opportunities that this journey provided, these British travellers were able to explore China as never before, as well as being in a position to confirm or develop their existing impressions of the Chinese empire.

IV

Renewed and revised impressions on China

After Amherst's embassy departed from Tongzhou, its treatment gradually improved. Until it reached the province of Canton, a decent level of honour and convenience was provided by the Chinese government. In comparison with the treatment of the Macartney mission, whose freedom of movement was strictly constrained because of the suspicion of the Qianlong emperor's court, the Amherst embassy enjoyed 'a greater degree of liberty than had been granted to any former embassy'.¹²⁰ These British travellers were allowed not only to ramble about in various Chinese cities, towns and rural areas, but also able to have contact with different ranks of Chinese people, such as artisans, merchants and others in the middle and lower ranks of Chinese society. After their four-month passage through the interior of China,¹²¹ even the so-called 'China experts', such as Staunton and Davis, admitted that their

¹²⁰ IOLR, Factory Records, G/12/197/281. Letter from Amherst to George Canning, 8 Mar. 1817.

¹²¹ Amherst's return route to Canton was different from that of Macartney's. Instead of continuing to the end of the Grand Canal, Amherst and his party transferred at Gua-zhou to the renowned Yang-tze River. They then sailed 285 miles to join the Po-yang Lake, from thence the embassy returned to the route on which Macartney had travelled. The Jiaqing emperor ordered the British mission to be conducted along this course, because it was supposed to be the shortest route between Beijing and Canton. Nevertheless, due to adverse weather conditions, this journey took longer than expected. It hence provided the Amherst embassy with abundant opportunities to explore the interior of China, including some parts that had never been visited by any Europeans. For this reason, Davis considered it as 'the fortunate occasion' of this mission. See Davis, *Sketches of China*, II, 29.

curiosity had been ‘very much satisfied’.¹²² In consequence of this unique opportunity that allowed these British travellers to observe the Chinese empire so closely, a range of new knowledge and new impressions were gained. The previous British perceptions of China, accordingly, were both renewed and revised to a considerable extent.

An important discovery of Amherst’s embassy was that China was a civilisation in decay during the reign of Jiaqing. Staunton, as the only person who had travelled with both British missions, maintained that, ‘there can be little doubt that the prosperity of this empire has been on the decline under the government of the present emperor, that is, since the period at which it was visited by Lord Macartney’s embassy’.¹²³ Staunton discovered that ‘in most points, our present views and estimation of the country and inhabitants, seem to differ from those which were formed by the former party, for the worse’¹²⁴ and he believed that it could be attributed to ‘the different state of the imperial finances at the two periods’.¹²⁵ Given the fact that the Jiaqing emperor was even compelled to discontinue the refurbishment of his own garden for want of funds,¹²⁶ Staunton was convinced that the Chinese empire was indeed declining under the present monarch. To prove this, Staunton recorded every sign of poverty and dilapidation that he discovered throughout the long journey. As a result, terms such as ‘decay’, ‘decline’, and ‘ruinous’ can be frequently found in his journal. Staunton even claimed that ‘almost every public building we have seen in our route, has exhibited to us more or less evidence of the poverty or negligence of the government’.¹²⁷ For example, in order to illustrate the destitution common in the Chinese countryside, Staunton wrote:

¹²² Staunton, *Notes of Proceedings*, p. 477. See also Davis, *Sketches of China*, II, 157.

¹²³ Staunton, *Notes of Proceedings*, p. 157.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 205.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 69.

¹²⁶ Staunton read the news from the *Pekin Gazette*, in which acknowledgements of and allusions to the emperor’s fiscal condition could be found. See Staunton, *Notes of Proceedings*, p. 69.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 157.

These hills are perfectly barren, and destitute even of trees – no signs whatever of cultivation or inhabitants, except at their feet near the river, or in the lowest parts of the intervening vallies. At one, we passed on our left a ruined pagoda of nine stories – It seemed wholly abandoned, and had no house or religious establishment of any kind in its vicinity. ... Some spots had very much the appearance of the entrance of mines which, being no longer worked, had been neglected, and closed up.¹²⁸

With regard to an average city in Jiangxi Province, he recorded that,

Within the walls we found no improvement in the style of the houses, or any shops that attracted our attention – the walls were low and ruinous ... a range of buildings ... in the style of a large joss-house, but at present in a ruinous state, and wholly untenanted ... the tribunals of the Nan-gan-foo or governor, ... it is certainly at present the poorest and most ruinous ... The governor's tribunal and residence, was a lofty and extensive, but neglected pile of building. The tribunal of the Hien ... appeared in so ruinous a state as to be scarcely habitable ... several stone pilloos ... seemed to denote that this city had once existed in a state of comparative splendor, from which it had latterly declined.¹²⁹

This image of a dilapidated China introduced by Staunton did not differ from the views expressed by other members of the embassy. On the contrary, many of them concurred with Staunton's findings, even though they had not, as he had, visited China two decades before. Ellis, Staunton's major opponent in the kowtow debate, when passing Tsing-heen (Qing xian), noted that 'the walls and the town itself are falling to decay'.¹³⁰ In viewing a pagoda near the city of Nanchang, Ellis also commented that it was 'in exceedingly bad proportions' and 'evinced the decay of architecture among the Chinese'.¹³¹ Davis, subsequent to his visit to Wu-yuan, an imperial residence of the Qianlong emperor, did not conceal his disappointment about what he saw. He entered into his *Sketches of China* that, 'Like almost everything of the kind that we had seen in the country, this once decorated abode was in a sad state of dilapidation and ruin and calculated to produce no other emotions than those of

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 380.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 435-7.

¹³⁰ Ellis, *Journal of the Proceedings*, p. 218.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 364.

melancholy'.¹³² After Able paid a visit to the celebrated city of Guazhou, similar scenes were also noted and described in his narrative. Abel wrote that,

The city of Qua-tchow [Guazhou] did not answer the expectations raised by its advantageous situation. Its streets exhibited no characters of opulence, and its walls were in ruins. In the days of Kien-Lung [Qianlong], it flourished under imperial favour; ... Since these golden days in the history of Qua-tchow, as its governor informed Mr Morrison, the Fung-shway [Feng-shui], or "fortune of the place," had gradually declined.¹³³

Based on their conviction that China was in decay, these British travellers became increasingly disenchanted with the state of Chinese civilisation. Although, at the beginning of the Amherst mission, the embassy was still divided into 'those who landed with an impression that the Chinese were to be classed with the civilized nations of Europe' and others who 'ranged them with the other nations of Asia',¹³⁴ this difference had changed dramatically by the end of the mission. A general consensus on the backwardness of China emerged and this by and large ended the previous divergence of opinion. This unfavourable perception of the Chinese empire, first of all, derived from the unrefined image of its people. Upon their arrival on the China coast, members of the Amherst embassy were soon 'astonished to find the fishermen in their boats as naked as savages, without appearing conscious of shame. Sometimes they wore a jacket over their shoulders, but had no clothing for the lower part of the body'.¹³⁵ During their travels through the Chinese interior, it was also a common view that 'poor boys to the age of twelve or thirteen were generally naked, standing, running about in promiscuous crowds'.¹³⁶ In light of these impressions, the Chinese were more and more presented to the readers of their accounts as a barbarian-like people, insomuch that, in the accounts of these British travellers, they were frequently compared with

¹³² Davis, *Sketches of China*, II, 2-3.

¹³³ Abel, *Narrative of a Journey*, p. 11.

¹³⁴ Ellis, *Journal of the Proceedings*, p. 197.

¹³⁵ Morrison, *A Memoir*, p. 8.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

animals rather than with other human beings. For instance, when Basil Hall gave the local shipmen some dollars as presents, he noted that ‘The captain and his crew assembled in a ring, and turned over the pieces from hand to hand, just as I have seen a group of monkeys do when puzzled with some new object’.¹³⁷ The residences of ordinary Chinese people, in Abel’s opinion, were ‘miserable beyond any thing which England can exemplify’ and ‘more like the dens of beasts than the habitations of men’.¹³⁸ Based on these discoveries, ‘dirt, squalidness, and extreme poverty’ were identified as the ‘leading characteristics’ of the Chinese populace.¹³⁹ In particular, their unhygienic living conditions were highlighted by the British observers. Abel found that, in addition to the shortage of clean water and the ubiquity of mosquitoes in many parts of China,¹⁴⁰ ‘The Chinese are less fastidious than perhaps any other people in the choice of their food’.¹⁴¹ Whenever dead pigs or rotting vegetables were thrown overboard from the British ships, there were always some Chinese people rushing to pick them up and eat them afterwards. The Chinese were also believed to be a people ‘utterly insensible to bad smells’.¹⁴² When surrounded by the curious crowds at Tianjin, Ellis recalled that, ‘there literally prevails a compound of villainous stench, and this constitutes one of the principal inconveniences of the crowd that gather round us’.¹⁴³ On a visit to the famous ‘Bath of Fragrant Water’ near Nanjing, Ellis claimed that ‘the stench is excessive; altogether I thought it the most disgusting cleansing apparatus I had ever seen and worthy of this nasty nation’.¹⁴⁴ On the same occasion, Abel noted that, ‘There appeared no intention of renewing the water [which] thus become saturated with dirt ... The steam arising from it, however fragrant to the senses of the Chinese, was to mine really intolerable, and drove me away

¹³⁷ Hall, *Narrative of a Voyage*, p. 8.

¹³⁸ Abel, *Narrative of a Journey*, p. 87.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 75, 128.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 230.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 232.

¹⁴³ Ellis, *Journal of the Proceedings*, p. 205.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 301.

before I could ascertain in what manner the baths were heated'.¹⁴⁵ By such multi-sensory examinations, the Chinese people's want of cleanliness, as well as their general image as an unrefined people, was further confirmed.

The British travellers' disenchantment with Chinese civilisation was intensified by the poor condition of the public infrastructures in China. According to the accounts provided by the members of Amherst's embassy, the majority of the streets in Chinese cities were 'imperfectly paved, narrow, and saturated with bad smells'.¹⁴⁶ The road Amherst took in Tongzhou, from his residence to the audience hall of Duke Ho, was so 'dirty and slippery' that 'the poor creatures who carried the chairs were up to the knees in water'.¹⁴⁷ The express way, which the Chinese promised to be of superior construction, turned out to be simply 'a broad road of hewn granite, which was evidently very old, and in so ruined a state that it might have been referred to [in] the days of *Yaou* and *Shun*'.¹⁴⁸ Even the imperial canal, which was renowned 'as an example of the immense power of human labour and human art',¹⁴⁹ was proved to be much overrated, because most of it was 'only a natural river, modified and regulated by sluices and embankments'.¹⁵⁰ In a similar way, the vehicles that the Qing government provided for the use of Amherst's embassy were also extremely uncomfortable. The boats were said to be 'ill constructed for comfort in cold weather'¹⁵¹ and the junks for conveying supplies were 'the most clumsy looking vessels imaginable'.¹⁵² The Chinese carts were also deemed to be 'the most execrable machines imaginable'.¹⁵³ Riding in these carriages, Morrison noted that, 'without constant effort to hold by the sides of the

¹⁴⁵ Abel, *Narrative of a Journey*, p. 159.

¹⁴⁶ Ellis, *Journal of the Proceedings*, p. 157.

¹⁴⁷ Morrison, *A Memoir*, pp. 31-2.

¹⁴⁸ Davis, *Sketches of China*, I, 144. Italics in the original.

¹⁴⁹ Abel, *Narrative of a Journey*, p. 153.

¹⁵⁰ Davis, *Sketches of China*, I, 249.

¹⁵¹ Staunton, *Notes of Proceedings*, p. 143.

¹⁵² Abel, *Narrative of a Journey*, p. 71.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 94.

carriage, a person's head was thrown first on one side and then on the other'.¹⁵⁴ During the exhausting overnight travel from Tongzhou to Yuen-min-yuen, Davis expressed his regret at having exchanged his horse for one of these 'wretched little Chinese tilted carts', because 'the convulsive throes of this primitive machine, without springs, on the ruined granite road, produced an effect little short of lingering death; and the only remedy was to get out as often as possible and walk'.¹⁵⁵ Morrison observed that it was probably due to the poor transport available in China that Amherst's British-made carriage attracted so much admiration from the Chinese natives and was widely recognised by them as 'proper for the Emperor'.¹⁵⁶

In addition to such civilian facilities, the British visitors also commented on the state of the Chinese military. Many military posts in China, as with other public buildings, were considered to be in need of repair. In particular, the British observers found it amusing and absurd that some watch-towers in Shandong province, formed entirely of mats, were painted to imitate brick or stone. This was regarded by Davis as 'a most unequivocal proof of the unwarlike habits of the nation'.¹⁵⁷ The British also discovered that 'the art of war must be in a very low state'¹⁵⁸ in China. Through contacts with various Chinese soldiers and mandarins, the British travellers found that, bodily strength and courage were still seen by them as the only qualities that were required for military advancement. Bows and arrows, indeed, were the most frequently used weapons of Chinese military men. Most of the matchlocks that the British saw in China were 'truly wretched and appeared rusted through, so as not to be fired without danger'.¹⁵⁹ When Chinese soldiers, most of whom were 'of a very poor and inefficient description',¹⁶⁰ were using these weapons, 'they immediately retreat upon applying the match, squatting down at a short distance with their backs turned; the iron tube is always

¹⁵⁴ Morrison, *A Memoir*, p. 38.

¹⁵⁵ Davis, *Sketches of China*, I, 148-9.

¹⁵⁶ Morrison, *A Memoir*, p. 38.

¹⁵⁷ Davis, *Sketches of China*, I, 248.

¹⁵⁸ Ellis, *Journal of the Proceedings*, p. 253.

¹⁵⁹ Davis, *Sketches of China*, I, 90.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 91.

placed upright, so that every possibility of danger from the wadding is guarded against'.¹⁶¹

All these findings, in consequence, led the Amherst embassy to believe that the Chinese were indeed an unwarlike nation.

The British observers' unfavourable perception of Chinese civilisation was reinforced by their discoveries about the knowledge and characteristics of the Chinese people. As with the Macartney mission, members of Amherst's embassy were convinced by their experiences that the Chinese were indeed so ignorant that the Europeans 'can learn nothing from China'.¹⁶² Shortly after the embassy landed in China, Morrison realised that, although he had marked all the baggage in Chinese characters, the boatmen and porters were unable to read.¹⁶³ Davis also noticed that the military mandarin attached to his boat could not even write in Chinese as well as he did and that this man's 'general ignorance on every subject (beyond the use of his pipe and his bowl of rice), made it vain to hope for any information from him'.¹⁶⁴ When Abel, the naturalist, was collecting plants or examining stones during the journey, he was often laughed at by the natives and the escorting soldiers, as if he did so only to satisfy his peculiar curiosity. When Abel spoke to some of these people, he found the British to them were like 'inhabitants of another world', because 'Our features, dress, and habits, were so opposed to theirs, as to induce them to infer that our country, in all its natural characters, must equally differ from their own. "Have you a moon, and rain, and rivers in your country?" were their occasional questions'.¹⁶⁵ Along with this profound ignorance, the British observers also discovered that the Chinese had a deep conviction of China's superiority over all other nations. In the vicinity of Shandong's northern frontier, the British envoys met the judge of Beizhili, a loquacious Tartar man who had a certain amount of knowledge about the world beyond China. Although he was 'better informed respecting the geography and history of European states, than any

¹⁶¹ Ellis, *Journal of the Proceedings*, p. 202.

¹⁶² Morrison, *A View of China*, p.121.

¹⁶³ Morrison, *A Memoir*, p. 13.

¹⁶⁴ Davis, *Sketches of China*, I, 186.

¹⁶⁵ Abel, *Narrative of a Journey*, p. 141.

other Chinese with whom the Embassy became acquainted', ¹⁶⁶ this gentleman spoke of Britain as a country 'depending altogether on commerce ... great by sea, but weak by land'. ¹⁶⁷ He also asserted that, in contrast to the inferior position and status of Britain, 'the Chinese empire was in the center of the universe, and the supreme head of all nations'. ¹⁶⁸ For this reason, due homage should by all means be paid by the British ambassador to the emperor of China in order to win concessions for British traders at Canton. Otherwise, the judge was afraid that 'it might prove the absolute ruin' ¹⁶⁹ of the British nation. To the British observers, this understanding of Britain as well as of Sino-British trade was so poor that 'ignorance and conceit were perhaps never more strongly combined'. ¹⁷⁰ Owing to their unique sense of self-importance, the Chinese were found to be very reluctant to recognise anything foreign that appeared to be superior to their own designs. In terms of the different attitudes that the Chinese and the British adopted towards modern science and technology, Davis maintained that,

they are too proud to learn any thing about us, while we foreigners of course never lose an opportunity of studying them in every relation of life, and have availed ourselves to some purpose of the opportunities, (scanty as these may have comparatively been,) which years of intercourse afforded us. That "power" which consists in "knowledge," therefore, preponderates on our side. ¹⁷¹

In addition to their investigations into the Chinese people's knowledge, members of the Amherst embassy also attempted to examine the spiritual state and general character of the Chinese nation. To begin with, it was discovered that, compared to the serious and exalted religious beliefs in Europe, religion in China 'has all the looseness and vanity with less of the

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 144.

¹⁶⁷ Staunton, *Notes of Proceedings*, p. 141.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 163.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 162.

¹⁷⁰ Davis, *Sketches of China*, I, 179.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 109.

solemnity and decency of ancient Polytheism'.¹⁷² According to the observations of these British travellers, there were neither particular dates set aside for public worship, nor did the Chinese attend temples congregationally. The majority of the Chinese population were utterly unselective in the deities to which they paid respect, so long as they believed that the practice would help avert mischief from them. Most of the priests in China were found to be uninstructed themselves, as well as largely illiterate. As mere performers of ceremonies, they neither preached like their counterparts did in Europe, nor were these persons treated by their followers with the reverence that was 'justly and reasonably due to the respectable ministers of religion in all countries'.¹⁷³ In view of these facts, Morrison, as the first Protestant missionary in China, claimed that,

The general principles of our religion give a tone of elevation and dignity to the human mind which is not felt here. ...They do not associate under something approaching equality for the worship of their gods. ...The multitudes of people in this country are truly, in a moral and religious view, as 'sheep without a shepherd'.¹⁷⁴

Based on such images, the characteristics of the Chinese people were interpreted as 'selfish, cold-blooded and inhumane'.¹⁷⁵ Morrison argued that the professed moral maxims of the Chinese were actually 'ineffectual in regulating their minds and conduct'.¹⁷⁶ Since the Chinese were never 'nice about a strict adherence to the truth',¹⁷⁷ they could, in fact, be 'complaisant and servile, or insolent and domineering, according to circumstances'.¹⁷⁸ For instance, 'When interest or fear do not dictate a different course, they are to the strangers, haughty, insolent, fraudulent and inhospitable'. Moreover, 'A merchant will flatter a foreign

¹⁷² Ellis, *Journal of the Proceedings*, p. 438.

¹⁷³ Macleod, *Narrative of a Voyage*, p. 151.

¹⁷⁴ *Memoirs of the Life*, I, 447-8

¹⁷⁵ Morrison, *A View of China*, p.125.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 122.

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁸ Morrison, *A Memoir*, p. 67.

devil (as they express it), when he has something to gain from him; then he can be servile enough; particularly if he is not seen by his own countrymen'.¹⁷⁹ For this reason, it was found that most of the Chinese were 'distrustful to a high degree' and that there was 'a considerable prevalence of scepticism' in Chinese society.¹⁸⁰ Abel, in this regard, pointed out that, particularly in the trading part of the Chinese community, 'the principle of cheating is so legitimated amongst them by the general practice and toleration of their countrymen, as to be considered rather as a necessary qualification to the successful practice of their calling, as an immoral quality'.¹⁸¹ Because of what constantly occurred to the Amherst embassy, Abel added that, 'If giving false weight, charging centuple prices, and substituting bad articles for good, form a species of theft, it is not confined to the sea-coast, but is practised all over the empire of China, and is not only tolerated but applauded, especially when foreigners are its victims'.¹⁸² Based on all these findings and experiences, when it came to the general character of the Chinese, Ellis contended that they were, 'half civilized, prejudiced',¹⁸³ and 'without exaggeration', a 'nefarious' people.¹⁸⁴ As for China's position compared to other civilisations in the world, Ellis concluded that, although it was 'superior to the other countries of Asia in the arts of government and the general aspects of society', China was undoubtedly 'inferior by many degrees to civilized Europe in all that constitutes the real greatness of a nation'.¹⁸⁵ On the question of whether the Chinese could be defined as barbarians, Morrison came up with the following statement:

If "barbarity" or being "barbarous" expresses something savage, rude and cruel, the present inhabitants of China do not deserve the epithet; if it expresses a cunning selfish policy, endeavouring to deceive, to intimidate, or to brow beat, as

¹⁷⁹ Morrison, *A View of China*, p.125.

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁸¹ Abel, *Narrative of a Journey*, p. 232.

¹⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 113.

¹⁸³ Ellis, *Journal of the Proceedings*, p. 388.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 384.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 429.

occasion may require, connected with an arrogant assumption of superiority on all occasions, instead of cultivating a liberal, candid, friendly intercourse with men of other nations, they are barbarians.¹⁸⁶

These arguments put forward by Ellis and Morrison fairly represent the common perception of the Amherst embassy. It can be clearly seen that the previous disagreements previously expressed on this subject had changed dramatically by the end of this second British embassy. A consensus on the half-civilised image of China was generally reached by the British observers who participated in the Amherst embassy.

To account for the backwardness of Chinese civilisation, members of the Amherst embassy agreed with Lord Macartney and his earlier mission that the depraved government of China was the primary cause. Since, during their return journey, they were given many opportunities to visit Chinese cities and villages as well as to communicate with random Chinese people, in comparison with their predecessors, these British travellers on the Amherst embassy were able to gather much more first-hand evidence to deepen this impression and to confirm earlier prejudices. In particular, according to their findings, these observers revealed that the suspicious government of China had deliberately designed some policies in order to suppress the natural sentiments and pursuits of its subjects. First of all, although the leading characteristics of the Chinese appeared to be prejudiced and inhuman, it was discovered that they were rather the consequence of the government's narrow policies, than the natural disposition of the whole nation. They maintained that the Qing government attached much importance to restricting contacts between foreigners and the Chinese people. The country's foreign trade was hence restricted to the port of Canton. Although the Macartney embassy had been permitted to pass through the interior of China, its members had not been allowed to make real contact with the local inhabitants. Because of such restrictions, the previous western impressions of the Chinese people and the state of Chinese society were

¹⁸⁶ Morrison, *A Memoir*, p. 67.

drawn mainly from evidence gained at Canton. This allowed Hall to admit that ‘it is obviously as unfair to judge of the Chinese by such data, as it would be to estimate the character of the English from such materials as Rotherhithe and Wapping might afford’.¹⁸⁷

Over the centuries, in those regions, such as Canton, where frequent engagements with foreign people had taken place, or amongst those social classes whose professions and activities involved contact with foreigners, a belief in the inferiority of all foreign nations and a distrust of their good intentions had been promoted by the Chinese authorities. In consequence, a deep prejudice as well as a serious contempt of foreigners had been inculcated in the minds of the Chinese people. Despite this, members of the Amherst embassy found that, ‘in places remote from Canton, and where it is not the policy of the local authorities to discourage all inquiry, there is no jealousy or apprehension of strangers’.¹⁸⁸ When they travelled to some places which had ‘probably never before been visited by any Europeans’,¹⁸⁹ these British visitors often discerned and benefited from the cheerful disposition and hospitality of the local inhabitants. This can be supported by plenty of examples found in the accounts produced by members of the Amherst mission. For example, Able noted that:

I was often enabled to get amongst them apart from my friends and usual attendant soldiers, and always found them mild, forbearing, and humane.¹⁹⁰ ... especially when they were peasants, [they] afforded a pleasing contrast in their simple manners and civil treatment of strangers, to the cunning designs of the salesmen of Tung-Chow, and the brutal importunity of the courtiers of Yuen-Ming-Yuen.¹⁹¹

Ellis added that, when he entered the dwellings of some local residents, ‘No dislike is shewn by the people in general to natural inquisitiveness; on the contrary, our momentary intrusions

¹⁸⁷ Hall, *Narrative of a Voyage*, p. 10.

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

¹⁹⁰ Abel, *Narrative of a Journey*, p. 232.

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 130.

have been met by invitations to sit down'.¹⁹² Particularly, in contrast with the prevailing impression that the Chinese were guarded in their relations with foreigners, these friendly natives either pressed them to partake of their meals or supplied them with tea, or even invited these visiting strangers to examine the yards and outer apartments of their houses.¹⁹³ According to these experiences, members of the Amherst mission were further persuaded that it was the policies of the Chinese government that greatly transformed the real disposition of its people, and they were able to build up impressions which were in essence 'rather favourable than otherwise to the Chinese character'.¹⁹⁴

In addition to its efforts to restrict the nation's contact with foreign peoples, the Chinese government was also found to be promoting tensions and difficulties within the country's hierarchical society. On the one hand, the populace in China was placed in awe of the government, because, under the powerful hand of that authority, government officials 'have the knack of rendering life very miserable, and assume the power of bambooning, torturing, fining (or squeezing), and every species of oppression short of death'.¹⁹⁵ Throughout their journey, the British travellers witnessed a number of cases where Chinese men and women were bamboosed or face-slapped due to trifling mistakes. Random poor people were also seen to be forced by the embassy's attendant officials to work without charge for the fleet.¹⁹⁶ In consideration of these facts, it was believed that, 'China does not enjoy *liberty*. Her government is a military despotism. ... The strong arm of power intimidates them'.¹⁹⁷ In consequence, the Chinese people were seriously discouraged from discussing affairs of state, or forming any societies which might seek to influence or oppose the government. Moreover,

¹⁹² Ellis, *Journal of the Proceedings*, pp. 163-4.

¹⁹³ Abel, *Narrative of a Journey*, pp. 119-20; Ellis, *Journal of the Proceedings*, pp. 164, 283; Hall, *Narrative of a Voyage*, pp. 10, 12, 14, etc.

¹⁹⁴ Hall, *Narrative of a Voyage*, p. 10.

¹⁹⁵ Macleod, *Narrative of a Voyage*, p. 153.

¹⁹⁶ Examples can be found in Abel, *Narrative of a Journey*, p. 138; Morrison, *A Memoir*, pp. 16, 60-2; Davis, *Sketches of China*, I, 193, 292; Macleod, *Narrative of a Voyage*, p. 153, etc.

¹⁹⁷ Morrison, *A Memoir*, p. 67. Italics in the original.

since according to the criminal code of China, ‘an ineffectual attempt to save the life of another, under the slightest shade of suspicion, is followed by the punishment of death’,¹⁹⁸ the Chinese were found unwilling to give assistance even if they saw someone’s life was at risk. Instead of taking this as an example of the Chinese people’s inhumane character, the British commentators attributed it to the ‘absurd and unjust principles upon which the Chinese laws are administered by the mandarins’.¹⁹⁹ Macleod, for example, clearly stated that, ‘It is lamentable to observe that the institutions of any nation should have the effect of deadening every feeling of sympathy, and of exciting, instead of discouraging, “man’s inhumanity to man;” but such is the case in this country’.²⁰⁰ On the other hand, the mandarins themselves were also not free from concern about their own self-preservation. Their offices and lives were totally subject to the will of the monarch, insomuch that ‘not only the more important measures of government, but the most trifling details of office, depend for their execution upon the supposed irresistibility of the imperial power’.²⁰¹ In particular, the British were informed that ‘in the event of any suspicion of a collusion with foreigners’, the emperor’s ‘single word was sufficient to consign them [the mandarins] to death’.²⁰² For the Amherst embassy, this perception explained the sharp contrast between the attendant officers’ extremely reserved manner in the vicinity of Beijing and the good temper they manifested during the rest of the time. In the early stages of the return journey, Amherst believed that ‘Being now at so short a distance from the Capital, it appeared probable that most questions would be decided by an immediate appeal to the Emperor himself’.²⁰³ Probably for this reason, the mandarins appeared quite cautious about entering into any formal conversation with the British envoys and nothing could induce them to accept any presents. Nevertheless,

¹⁹⁸ Abel, *Narrative of a Journey*, p. 236.

¹⁹⁹ Staunton, *Notes of Proceedings*, p. 182.

²⁰⁰ Macleod, *Narrative of a Voyage*, p. 156.

²⁰¹ Ellis, *Journal of the Proceedings*, p. 241.

²⁰² Davis, *Sketches of China*, I, 168.

²⁰³ IOLR, Factory Records, G/12/197/256-7. Letter from Amherst to George Canning, 28 Feb. 1817.

it was observed that ‘as we receded from the neighbourhood of Peking, the mandarins had become more frequent and less reserved in their visits, very readily accepting any presents that were made them’.²⁰⁴ On the basis of these discoveries, the British observers were led to believe that, just as with the Chinese populace, the government officials in China were entirely at the mercy of their sovereign. Their liberty and natural sentiments were greatly restricted and constrained by the power and caution of the Chinese emperor.

Last but not least, the government of China was viewed by these British observers as the chief obstacle to the Chinese people’s pursuit of knowledge and wellbeing, as well as to the progress of Chinese civilisation. To justify this conclusion, Macleod maintained that, the Chinese government not only made its people believe ‘themselves at the summit of perfection’, but also established ‘the absurd tyranny of fettering the human understanding, by forbidding all innovation and improvement’.²⁰⁵ For instance, although some Chinese people did indeed have an interest in astronomy, the study of the human frame, western medical practices, and so on,²⁰⁶ the Chinese government prohibited the masses from undertaking such studies. Instead, it narrowed their ideas ‘by compelling their attention, and attaching importance, entirely to the observance of useless forms and ceremonies’,²⁰⁷ and ‘by admitting of no deviation from one contracted path, even in the simplest transactions of life’.²⁰⁸ In particular, as Barrow had pointed out two decades previously, Davis agreed that the Chinese government ‘habitually inculcate[d] *a respectful demeanour* on the part of young people towards their elders’.²⁰⁹ The benefits of such institutions were considered to be so apparent in their effects, because ‘In no country of the world does a quiet, easy subordination so

²⁰⁴ Davis, *Sketches of China*, I, 248-9. See also Ellis, *Journal of the Proceedings*, p. 247; IOLR, Factory Records, G/12/197/317-8. Letter from Amherst to George Canning, 22 Mar 1817.

²⁰⁵ Macleod, *Narrative of a Voyage*, p. 159.

²⁰⁶ Examples can be found in Abel, *Narrative of a Journey*, pp. 216-7.

²⁰⁷ Macleod, *Narrative of a Voyage*, p. 160. In this respect, the British travellers were informed that even the Chinese emperor was subject to various forms of court ritual, so that in some ways the monarch himself was also ‘a slave to ceremony’. See Davis, *Sketches of China*, II, 23.

²⁰⁸ Macleod, *Narrative of a Voyage*, p. 160.

²⁰⁹ Davis, *Sketches of China*, I, 38. Italics in the original.

extensively prevail as in China', where the 'inexperience and headstrong passion of youth' were repressed without inspiring resistance.²¹⁰ Moreover, these British commentators also contended that measures taken by the Chinese government were hostile to the welfare of the people and restricted the development of China's civilisation. For one thing, during their travel in the Chinese interior, members of the Amherst embassy discovered that, although China's foreign trade was restricted to Canton, there was actually much demand and eagerness on the part of the Chinese people to trade with the British.²¹¹ For another thing, in those places where greater engagement with westerners took place, particularly in Canton, the British travellers claimed that they were able to discern a distinct air of opulence that was hard to see in the rest of China. Ellis noted in this regard that:

Canton, from the number and size of the vessels, the variety and decorations of the boats, the superior architecture of the European factories, and the general buzz and diffusion of a busy population, had, on approaching, a more imposing appearance than any Chinese city visited by the present embassy; nor do I believe, that in the wealth of the inhabitants at large, the skill of the artificers, and the variety of the manufactures, it yields, with the exception of the capital, to any city in the empire. ... The whole effect of foreign commerce is here concentrated and displayed, and the employment which the European trade affords to all classes of the inhabitants diffuses an air of general prosperity, not to be expected where this powerful stimulus does not operate.²¹²

With regard to this phenomenon, these British travellers were convinced that it was 'owing greatly to hints furnished by our examples'²¹³ rather than being due to any positive influence exerted by the local government. To prove this, examples were given to demonstrate that the communities around Canton had benefited remarkably from modern technology introduced by the British. Abel noted in his narrative that:

²¹⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹¹ Examples can be found in Staunton, *Notes of Proceedings*, p. 40; Ellis, *Journal of the Proceedings*, p. 14; Abel, *Narrative of a Journey*, p. 6, etc.

²¹² Ellis, *Journal of the Proceedings*, p. 408. Ellis also suggested herein that 'The traveller who only sees Canton will be liable to form an exaggerated opinion of the population and wealth of China'.

²¹³ Davis, *Sketches of China*, II, 149.

The small pox, which for centuries has at different periods made dreadful havock all over the empire, is likely soon to be extirpated by the benign influence of vaccination establishing under the auspices of Mr Pierson the principal surgeon of the British factory. ... Native vaccinators have been appointed and educated under the eye of Mr Pierson, and are taking from him the labour of inoculating the lowest class of Chinese. I witnessed their operations in a temple near the British factory, on some of the children of the hundreds of anxious parents who flocked to procure the preservation of their offspring from the small pox, at that time prevalent at Canton. If the paternal government of China can free itself from national prejudices, it will erect a monument of gratitude to the discovery of Jenner, and the services of Pierson.²¹⁴

In contrast to such positive benefits arising from contact with a more advanced civilisation, the British observers lamented that similar changes had been rendered impossible in the rest of the empire by the policies of the Chinese government. For this reason, the common belief was further strengthened that the Chinese ‘have had for some thousand years a dawn of civilization’, but, ‘from the operation of the most narrow-minded principles’, it ‘has never brightened into day’.²¹⁵ Accordingly, the suspicious Chinese government, as the designer of such restrictive principles, was confirmed as the primary cause of China’s backwardness and stagnant civilisation.

V

Beyond the mission

On 20 January 1817, the Amherst embassy left Canton for Macao. Its intercourse with various Chinese authorities finally terminated. From this moment on, members of the embassy were able to draw up their overall assessments of their experiences in China, as well as proposing new ideas for the future development of British-Chinese relations. At the conclusion of their journey, some of these British commentators chose to record their genuine

²¹⁴ Abel, *Narrative of a Journey*, pp. 218-9.

²¹⁵ Macleod, *Narrative of a Voyage*, p. 158.

feelings as they took their leave of China. Ellis, for example, could not conceal his disappointing experience of travelling through China, which was an extremely uninteresting country in his opinion. He noted that:

curiosity was soon satiated and destroyed by the moral, political, and even local uniformity; ... Were it not therefore for the trifling gratification arising from being one of the few Europeans who have visited the interior of China, I should consider the time that has elapsed as wholly without return. I have neither experienced the refinement and comforts of civilized life, nor the wild interest of most semi-barbarous countries, but have found my own mind and spirit influenced by the surrounding atmosphere of dullness and constraint.²¹⁶

In a similar manner, Davis maintained that this visit to China had not proved to be a very rewarding trip. He claimed that:

our protracted stay in the interior of the empire had rather tired us of our Chinese life, than reconciled us to it. At the same time, I believe there was not one of the party but was well content to have purchased such rare opportunities of observation and enquiry, at the expense of some personal discomfort, and occasionally not a little mental irritation.²¹⁷

At variance with these rather adverse comments, Amherst and Staunton, as heads of the embassy, shed more positive light on the official proceedings of the mission. Their observations, however, were apparently made with the intention of justifying their own opinions and actions. Amherst, in his letter to George Canning, admitted the embassy's 'want of success',²¹⁸ but refused to acknowledge that it was caused by his own lack of ability or indiscretions. Instead, Amherst insisted in another letter that 'the personal character of the two Emperors may have principally influenced the events of the present and preceding

²¹⁶ Ellis, *Journal of the Proceedings*, p. 440.

²¹⁷ Davis, *Sketches of China*, II, 159.

²¹⁸ IOLR, Factory Records, G/12/197/381. Letter from Amherst to George Canning, 21 Apr. 1817.

Embassy'.²¹⁹ Moreover, contrary to the common notion that the embassy's dismissal from Yuen-min-yuen was an unfortunate occurrence, Amherst asserted that it was 'the most fortunate circumstance which has attended the present Embassy'.²²⁰ To account for this opinion, Amherst maintained that, on the one hand,

Had the negotiation broken off, as it was likely to do, at Tong-choo-foo [Tong-zhou-fu] on the point of ceremony, I think that not only much serious inconvenience might have been felt on our journey to Canton, but that the important concerns of the East India Company at that place might have experienced, more or less directly, the effects of the Emperor's displeasure.²²¹

On the other hand, however, he stressed that:

the precipitate and unwarranted rejection of the Embassy from the Palace gates has left an injury to repair even in the eyes of the Chinese themselves the rules of hospitality have been violated. Possibly some apprehension may be entertained of the manner in which the transactions will be viewed in Great Britain; and as I have attributed the honorable treatment of the Embassy on its return, and the proposal for a partial exchange of presents to a wish for reparation in the only way, which the pride of the Emperor would allow, so I shall ascribe to the same motive any further proposal, if it shall be made, for the acceptance of the remainder of the presents, as well as any better security which may be afforded, and I will not despair of its being afforded, to the stability of the trade at Canton.²²²

By comparison, Staunton, as the pivotal person who had done so much to shape the embassy's decision on the kowtow controversy, was more reluctant to accept the mission's 'want of success'. Instead, he tended to regard the results of this mission in a most favourable manner. For example, in his *Miscellaneous Notices* published in 1822, Staunton asserted that, 'The author flatters himself, ... that, taking together the direct and indirect effects of the embassy, some considerable good has been accomplished by it. – Those, at least, who judge

²¹⁹ Morse, *The Chronicles*, III, 264. This quote is taken from a letter from Lord Amherst to Sir T. Metcalfe, but Morse did not date it.

²²⁰ IOLR, Factory Records, G/12/197/379. Letter from Amherst to George Canning, 21 Apr. 1817.

²²¹ *Ibid.*

²²² *Ibid.*, G/12/197/379-80. Same letter.

of events by their result, ought to accept of the state of the trade at Canton, at this present time, as no mean evidence in its favor'.²²³ Thirty-four years later, in his *Memoirs*, Staunton reaffirmed this belief by attributing the peaceful state of Canton trade between 1817 and 1834 to the positive impact of the Amherst embassy. He asserted with confidence that, 'although this mission has often been stigmatised as a failure, it was practically, perhaps, the most successful of any that had ever been sent to Peking by any European power; for it was followed by a longer interval of commercial tranquillity, and of freedom from annoyance, than had ever been experienced before'.²²⁴ Staunton's claim was shared by Davis, who was also disposed to evaluate the achievement of the embassy from the subsequent state of the British or EIC's trade at Canton. Davis believed that, 'the resistance made by the embassy to the haughty conduct of the Peking court was the best possible result that could have been obtained', while 'the mere reception, followed by the supercilious dismissal of the mission, would have been far too dearly purchased by compliances which a former British ambassador very wisely refused'.²²⁵ Moreover,

The impression produced by the spirit and firmness which had just been displayed, even under the personal frown of the despot, continued long to exercise its influence at Canton; and if such *temerity* in foreigners surprised the ignorant Chinese, it was at the same time calculated to remove some portion of their silly prepossessions concerning the universal supremacy of the celestial empire. The effects, at least, were visible in the rapid increase of our valuable intercourse with Canton.²²⁶

Along with these overall assessments of Amherst's mission, these British observers also seriously analysed the lessons they had learned from their embassy experience. First, the grounds for sending another royal embassy to China in the near future were seriously challenged. Amherst, based on his experiences during the embassy, suggested that China's

²²³ Staunton, *Miscellaneous Notices*, p.192.

²²⁴ Staunton, *Memoirs*, pp. 67-8.

²²⁵ Davis, *Sketches of China*, II, 161.

²²⁶ *Ibid.*

current financial circumstances, combined with the character of the present emperor, rendered such a mission unwelcome to the Chinese. He maintained that,

The disordered state of the Imperial Finances would make it an object to save the expense attending the transport of a numerous company of persons from one extremity of the Empire to the other; and the same reason added, I believe, to the personal fears and jealousies of the Emperor would probably retrench a great part of the train of any future Ambassador.²²⁷

Ellis also pointed out that it was actually not very sensible to attempt to strengthen Britain's commercial links with China by sending out another complimentary embassy. He contended that,

Royal embassies, avowedly complimentary, but really directed to commercial objects, are perhaps, in themselves, somewhat anomalous, and are certainly very opposite, not only to Chinese feelings, but even to those of all Eastern nations; among whom trade, although fostered as a source of revenue, is never reputed honourable.²²⁸

In light of such advice given by the ambassador and the third commissioner, we can understand why the Amherst embassy did indeed become the last mission of its kind that Britain sent out to the imperial court of China.

Second, from their daily contacts with officials of the Chinese government, members of the Amherst embassy accumulated some useful knowledge on how to deal with the Chinese authorities in future. In particular, it was discovered that, under most circumstances, in order to achieve an objective in China, the best way to do so was simply to ignore government authorities and not request formal approval before proceeding to business. For example, as had frequently happened on their return journey when the British had desired to land and walk for exercise or to satisfy their curiosity, the most effective approach was to 'go straight

²²⁷ Letter from Amherst to George Canning, 21 Apr. 1817, IOLR, Factory Records, G/12/197/378-9.

²²⁸ Ellis, *Journal of the Proceedings*, pp. 437-8.

forward, without putting difficulties into the people's heads, by seeming to imagine any permission necessary'.²²⁹ For this reason, Hayne was fully convinced that 'by experience we have found beyond a doubt, that to obtain an end in China, is to ask no question, and if there is no real objection, it will pass unnoticed'.²³⁰ Experience had also shown, 'At least during this voyage, whenever we began by soliciting leave to walk into the country or to look at anything, our request was almost invariably refused'.²³¹ By contrast, these British observers also found that, on those occasion when British interests were neglected, such as when daily supplies were deficient or unevenly furnished, it was important for the British to make their voice heard, and if necessary, to express their demands in a resolute manner. Davis maintained in this regard that it was a well-proven fact that every time the British remonstrated strongly and officially, their grievances were not only soon redressed, but were, on most occasions, handled with greater care and attention. Hence, to produce a favourable response, a 'determined step was the more requisite'.²³²

Finally, the various experiences drawn from the minor aspects of the embassy seemed to have influenced some of the subsequent broader ideas which British observers proposed should be adopted in future British-Chinese relations. Most remarkably, according to the advice coming from the members of the Amherst mission, it was advisable to demonstrate a more powerful and steadfast image of Great Britain to the imperial court of China. Ellis, for instance, suggested that if 'it still be deemed advisable to assist our commerce by political intercourse',²³³ the British authorities should look to their possessions in Hindostan and Nepal, whose boundaries proximate to Tibet, and use 'the supreme government of Bengal as the medium of that intercourse'.²³⁴ By this means, he expected that

²²⁹ Hall, *Narrative of a Voyage*, p. 11.

²³⁰ Hayne, *Henry Hayne Dairy*, p. 68.

²³¹ Hall, *Narrative of a Voyage*, p. 11.

²³² Davis, *Sketches of China*, II, 143.

²³³ Ellis, *Journal of the Proceedings*, p. 438.

²³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 438.

there the representative of armed power will encounter its fellow; and if ever impression is to be produced at Peking, it must be from an intimate knowledge of our political and military strength, rather than from the gratification produced in the Emperor's mind by the reception of an embassy on Chinese terms, or the moral effect of justifiable resistance terminating in rejection.²³⁵

Macleod, in this regard, advocated more coercive measures. He wrote with assurance that, 'The removal of our trade for a single year, and the appearance of a few of our lightest cruisers on their coasts, would throw the whole of this *celestial* empire into confusion',²³⁶ because

they are not prepared for the loss that would occur in the one case, nor to meet the tumult and convulsion that would be excited by the destruction of their fisheries and coasting trade in the other. So feeble is their naval power, that, after warring with the pirates for many years, who chased their vessels up the river, and sacked the towns and villages within a few miles of Canton, they were at last obliged to compromise with them, bribing the whole to be quiet, and making their chiefs *first-chop* mandarins.²³⁷

Although some similarity can be drawn between this statement and Macartney's aggressive comments in 1794,²³⁸ it is worth noting that, unlike Macartney, no preference for forbearance was supported by Macleod at this time. On the contrary, next to the above passage, Macleod quoted a remark by Krusenstern, a Russian navigator who had experienced similar vexation in China and had alleged that 'the forbearance and mistaken lenity of the greater civilized powers have emboldened these savages, not only to consider as barbarians all Europeans, but actually to treat them as such'.²³⁹ With reference to this statement, it can be observed that not only was China again being viewed as an isolated 'other' from the civilised European countries, but Macleod was implying that the wrong approach had been adopted by western

²³⁵ *Ibid.*

²³⁶ Macleod, *Narrative of a Voyage*, p. 142. Italics in the original.

²³⁷ *Ibid.* Italics in the original.

²³⁸ Macartney's comments can be found in *An Embassy to China*, pp. 210-1.

²³⁹ Macleod, *Narrative of a Voyage*, p. 142.

nations in their relations with China. Although plans to demonstrate British power and resolution were not yet under serious consideration at this stage, the previous effort to curry favour with the Chinese emperor had been shown to be ineffective and unpromising.

In conclusion, although the Amherst mission failed to fulfil its original objectives, it was still significant if we take into account its contribution to the developing British perceptions of China. Since better opportunities were provided to the British observers on this second embassy to explore the interior of the country and to communicate more fully with the Chinese government and people than ever before, renewed and revised impressions of China were obtained. In particular, owing to the revised opinions of the Chinese emperor and the unrefined state of Chinese civilisation, those unfavourable impressions that already existed with regard to Chinese politics and society were further strengthened. Compared to the reign of Qianlong, China was now regarded as being in serious decay under his successor. This sovereign, who was seen as a capricious despot, and his style of government, were seen to be the primary cause of China's present backwardness. Moreover, based on this revised opinion of Chinese affairs, China was increasingly envisioned as an isolated 'other' that could not be communicated with by the normal diplomatic means used in relations with the civilised countries of Europe. Accordingly, the despatch of another complimentary embassy was considered to be an inappropriate way to conduct Britain's future relations with China. Instead, a demonstration of Britain's power and firmness was deemed more effective in achieving the desired commercial objectives. For these reasons, the Amherst embassy should not be viewed simply as a clear diplomatic failure. It not only promoted new developments in British attitudes to China, but in some senses laid the foundation for important future changes in British-Chinese relations.

PART II

CHAPTER THREE

The debate on the EIC's monopoly: British perceptions of China in the early 1830s

When Lord Amherst and his embassy were traversing the interior of China, they were not aware that significant changes were taking place quietly along the coast. Most of these changes originated from the East India Company Act 1813 (also known as the Charter Act of 1813), by which Parliament renewed the Company's charter for a further twenty years, but deprived the EIC of its commercial monopoly in India except for the tea trade and trade with China.¹ This partial opening of the Indian trade had far-reaching effects on Britain's intercourse with the East. Among others, a remarkable consequence was that British capital and enterprise poured into India in the next two decades and thereby brought a considerable number of British private merchants unprecedentedly close to China. Thought to be highly lucrative, access to the China trade had been a constant objective for many of these *laissez-faire*-minded traders. Although, in theory, they were still prohibited from having direct intercourse with trading communities in China, some of these merchants had succeeded in approaching China by different means. They either paid the Company a great deal of money for a license to conduct the so-called 'country trade',² or they bypassed the EIC's control by signing up with foreign trading companies, in order to transact their business openly at Canton under other European flags.³ Since, following the Amherst mission, no more royal embassies were dispatched from Britain to the Qing court, these British merchants who

¹ Arthur B. Keith, *A Constitutional History of India 1600–1935* (London: Methuen, 1936), pp. 128-9.

² The 'country trade' began in the late eighteenth century, but significantly expanded after the Charter Act of 1813.

³ Michael Greenberg, *British Trade and the Opening of China 1800-42* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1951), pp. 25-8.

traded with China gradually replaced diplomatic visitors as the main interpreters of China's image.

In the beginning, these private merchants, who claimed to be 'free traders', were not able to pose any serious challenge to the EIC. Nevertheless, the rapid increase in the volume of their trade, which nearly doubled between 1817 and 1830,⁴ gradually changed this situation. Particularly, in parallel with the EIC's regular commerce with the Hong merchants, these British country traders developed a highly lucrative 'unauthorised trade'⁵ with the Chinese unlicensed merchants, who clandestinely engaged in foreign trade, mainly of opium, along China's southeastern coast. At a time when the Company was struggling to find a market for British goods in China so as to defray the cost of its growing import of tea, it was mainly this trade conducted by the country traders that offered a solution to the long-lasting commercial deficit problem. Hence, as Greenberg states, 'its vital role as the indispensable means of providing funds at Canton for the tea investment and furnishing a channel of remittance from India to England'⁶ gave these newly-arrived merchants growing influence in China.

Despite the considerable influence they had, the private merchants of Britain were still subject to some constraints in their commerce with China. Compared to the servants of the EIC, they did not have the military, financial and administrative backing that the Company provided for its factory in Canton. This circumstance made the private merchants' position less secure in China, especially for those Britons who 'adopted' other nationalities in order to reside in Canton during the offseason. Since the business of the country traders was not safeguarded by the government of either side, nor by the EIC representatives at Canton, their commercial activities were in constant jeopardy. For this reason, from the country traders'

⁴ [John Crawford], 'Voyage of Ship Amherst', *The Westminster Review*, 20 (1834), 23.

⁵ Instead of 'illegal trade', the term 'unauthorised trade' is applied by the anonymous author of *The Foreign Trade of China Divested of Monopoly, Restriction, and Hazard by Means of Insular Commercial Stations* (London: Effingham Wilson, 1832), see pp. 39-43, 71-7.

⁶ Greenberg, *British Trade and the Opening of China*, p. 16.

standpoint, both the EIC and the Chinese monopolies were obstacles to the extension of their commerce. It had long been their desire that one day these constraints would be removed.

It was, however, too early for the country traders to anticipate either of these restrictions being removed in the 1810s and early 1820s. For one thing, after two unsuccessful embassies, the British government adopted a ‘hands-off’ policy which gave the Company considerable freedom to conduct its Chinese affairs as it saw fit. For another, the EIC, at this time, still possessed significant influence over Britain’s commerce with China, even though its trading supremacy was increasingly being challenged. The Company’s trade, through the medium of Hong merchants, was after all the only authorised form of commerce between Britain and China. Its representatives at Canton were also regarded by the Chinese as the most reliable partners, who were not only responsible for the conduct of the Company’s own servants, but also for the behaviour of all British subjects trading with China. This, unavoidably, included some ‘free traders’, who were in essence ‘a turbulent lot who gave a good deal of trouble’,⁷ and whose irregularities often brought the Company into disfavour with the Chinese. In this context, until the termination of EIC’s China monopoly in 1834, it was the Company’s Select Committee at Canton that stood between the British country traders and the Chinese authorities. Both sides believed that it was the EIC’s duty to act on behalf of each of them against the unlawful behaviour of the other, but, in fact, whenever a serious dispute occurred, the committee had no effective power to place a check on either side.

A serious dispute of this kind did not break out until the very late 1820s. From the end of Amherst’s embassy in 1817, there was only a short period when the Select Committee continued its relatively firm stance towards the local authorities of Canton. As soon as the report about the embassy reached London, the EIC’s Court of Directors strongly disapproved of the posture previously taken by its representatives in China. Shortly after that, they decided

⁷ Greenberg, *British Trade and the Opening of China*, p. 21.

to prohibit their servants at Canton from remonstrating on their own initiative with the Chinese government, unless clear-cut guidance from London was first received. For the EIC's directors, the absolute priority in China was the continuance of the valuable tea trade. With the purpose of securing this trade, they deemed it necessary to adopt a policy of conciliation in the EIC's intercourse with the Chinese. In their letters to Canton, the Court of Directors affirmed that it was the Select Committee's duty to observe the utmost caution in order to avoid any possible dispute with the Chinese government, while any deviation from this instruction would invite the court's 'serious displeasure'.⁸ According to this order, the Company's representatives at Canton were obliged to restrain their personal irritation with the Chinese government. In consequence, there followed twelve years of relative harmony in relations between the two countries and, during this period, the EIC's China trade continued without any notable interruption.⁹

Despite the policy of conciliation laid down for the EIC's agents, the 'free traders' on the China coast were under no such restraint. As the country trade continued to grow, they gradually realised that the 'oppressive and corrupt system'¹⁰ of the Chinese government was indeed a great obstacle to their commerce. These traders believed that nothing was to be gained by obedience to the Chinese. Instead, much might be obtained 'by means of an appeal to their fears'.¹¹ Owing to this attitude, the private merchants wished the EIC, since it was understood by the Chinese as the highest British authority in China, to act more aggressively on their behalf against the local Chinese authorities. This plea was, clearly, in opposition to

⁸ IOC, *Court's Secret Letters*, XXXI, Court to Committee, 8 May 1818, in Herbert John Wood, 'Prologue to War: Anglo-Chinese Conflict 1800-1834', unpublished PhD dissertation (University of Wisconsin, 1938), p. 371.

⁹ It can be shown here that the relative tranquillity in this period was not necessarily occasioned by the positive impact of the Amherst embassy, as maintained by Staunton.

¹⁰ *Petition to the House of Commons from British Subjects Residing in China* (also known as 'Canton Petition'), 24 Dec. 1830, in *China Trade and Empire: Jardine, Matheson & Co. and the Origins of British Rule in Hong Kong 1827-1843*, ed. Alain Le Pichon (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 556. This petition was originally published in *The Canton Register*, 18 Dec. 1830, 3 (25).

¹¹ Anon., *The Foreign Trade of China Divested of Monopoly, Restriction, and Hazard by Means of Insular Commercial Stations* (London: Effingham Wilson, 1832), p. 12.

the instructions emanating from London. As the Select Committee was unable to offer any assistance in this regard, much dissatisfaction with the Company was stimulated among the British private merchants. With the rapid growth of the country trade, this displeasure with the EIC increased correspondingly during the course of the 1820s. As a consequence, the private merchants' attitude towards the EIC openly 'gave place to one of rivalry if not of hostility'.¹²

In 1829, the Sino-British trade came to a turning point. Due to the spread of bankruptcy among the Hong merchants, which gave rise to the question of debts to the EIC's merchants, serious trade friction broke out between the EIC and the Chinese commercial communities. The attitude of the Select Committee towards the Chinese authorities hence became strained. Although some members were still disposed to adhere to the policy of conciliation, the majority tended to accept the views of the country traders. They agreed that, in order to establish British-Chinese trade on a more secure footing, the Committee's dissatisfaction with the Chinese government could no longer be endured and a complete change of China policy was imperative. Accordingly, in 1829 and 1831, without informing the Court of Directors in advance, the EIC's agents at Canton strongly petitioned the local authorities, demanding a reform of China's commercial system. When the Court of Directors was later notified of this action, it not only strongly rebuked the majority of the Select Committee for their noncompliance with the standing order, but demoted those held responsible and reaffirmed the importance of adhering to the policy of conciliation.¹³ Particularly, in response to the committee's claim that they were 'the representatives, not only of the East-India Company but of the *British nation*,'¹⁴ the Court of Directors solemnly pointed out that 'you are not the

¹² Greenberg, *British Trade and the Opening of China*, p. 40.

¹³ Letter from the Court of Directors of the East-India Company to the Select Committee of Supercargoes in China, 13 Jan. 1832, in R. Montgomery Martin, *The Past and Present State of the Tea Trade of England, and of the Continents of Europe and America* (London: Parbury, Allen, 1832), pp. 212-18.

¹⁴ Letter from the Select Committee to the Court of Directors, 6 Jan. 1831, in *ibid.*, p. 216. Italics in the original.

representatives of the British nation, but of the East-India Company'.¹⁵ This declaration of the Select Committee's role in China contrasted with the will and interests of the country traders.

Notwithstanding this clear direction given about its future conduct, there was, at this time, a real possibility that the future of Britain's China trade would no longer depend on the attitude of the Company. This was because, once again, the charter of the East India Company was on the point of expiring and, after twenty years of continued growth in 'free trade', the call for the termination of EIC's China monopoly became overwhelming. The private merchants, in coalition with a group of opinion formers back home, not only petitioned Parliament for full commercial freedom in China, but waged a pamphlet war against the EIC. This debate on the EIC's monopoly and Britain's future China policy went hand-in-hand with a controversy over rival images of China. In order to defend their respective standpoints, the EIC and the free trade advocates raised vastly different images of the Chinese government, society and people to suit their own purposes. Although the termination of the EIC's China monopoly has been examined in various contemporary studies,¹⁶ this underlying debate about China's images remains little researched.

I

The EIC on its monopoly and the image of China

As a result of the rise of the country trade, the East India Company was no longer the only actor who directly encountered the Chinese 'on the spot'. Their employees at Canton, hence, ceased being the only voices that presented images of China and the China trade. In the early

¹⁵ Letter from the Court of Directors of the East-India Company to the Select Committee of Supercargoes in China, 13 Jan. 1832, in *ibid.*, p. 216.

¹⁶ For example, see Anthony Webster, *The Twilight of the East India Company: The Evolution of Anglo-Asian Commerce and Politics, 1790-1860* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2009), pp. 84-103; Greenberg, *British Trade and the Opening of China*, pp. 18-40; Hosea Ballou Morse, *The Chronicles of the East India Company trading to China 1635-1834* (5 vols., Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1926), IV, 342-68.

1830s, with respect to the abolition or extension of the EIC's trade monopoly in China, the private merchants, backed up by a number of supporters at home who saw the same interests and opportunities, challenged the Company in a variety of ways. An anti-EIC propaganda campaign was hence triggered across the British empire. In order to defend their position in China, first and foremost, the EIC and its advocates endeavoured to justify the economic necessity of its trading monopoly.

According to the propaganda issued by the country traders, since the India trade was opened in 1813 based on the doctrine of free trade, it was unreasonable to maintain the EIC's China monopoly.¹⁷ Opposed to this argument, the Company's main justification was that 'however true in general' this theory sounded, 'the peculiar circumstances' of the China trade rendered these principles of international commerce 'wholly inapplicable' to the case of China.¹⁸ To account for this point of view, the EIC's campaigners pointed out that, first of all, it would be unrealistic to expect that the opening of China trade from the British side could produce any material effect, so long as 'the institution of the local monopoly among the Chinese Hong merchants remains unaltered'.¹⁹ In this respect, Henry Ellis, the third commissioner of Amherst's mission who now spoke in favour of the EIC,²⁰ maintained that:

The peculiar circumstances under which the trade of foreigners is placed by the laws of China, ... have led me to reject, as fallacious, the anticipations of those who consider the surprising effects produced in India by unrestricted intercourse, as indicative of equal results in China.²¹

For this reason, Ellis believed that, under the present circumstances, 'it is impossible to admit

¹⁷ [Crawfurd], 'Voyage of Ship Amherst', *The Westminster Review*, 20 (1834), 23.

¹⁸ *The Asiatic Journal*, Dec. 1829, 28, 684-5, George Staunton, 'Considerations on the China Trade'.

¹⁹ Henry Ellis, *A Series of Letters on the East India Question, addressed to the Members of the Two Houses of Parliament*, second edition (London: John Murray, 1830), p. 35.

²⁰ During the Amherst embassy, Ellis disagreed with Staunton, who directly represented the interests of the Company, on a range of issues. Ellis himself also worked 'six years in the civil service of the East India Company' and his mind 'has been more or less directed to the subject of Indian affairs for more than twenty years'. See *ibid.*, p. 1.

²¹ Ellis, *A Series of Letters*, p. 60.

that the opening of China trade can be affected'.²² Moreover, 'until some change takes place in both these respects, the extension of the British trade contemplated by the merchants and manufacturers who have petitioned parliament on the subject, is hopeless'.²³

Based on the unique nature of the China trade, the EIC's supporters continued to maintain that, since, under the current system, 'The China trade is at present carried on with profit and with a certain degree of security',²⁴ there was an 'absolute necessity for an undisturbed continuance of the Company's factory at Canton'.²⁵ It was stated that, through its lawful and extensive commercial activities, the EIC had, over the decades, developed a wholesome system that:

diffuses the profits and advantages of a great and well-regulated commerce, in equitable proportions, directly or indirectly, over the whole of the British community; first, by its regular and secure contributions to the revenue... secondly, by its satisfactory abundant supply of an universally desired article of daily, consumption; thirdly, by its distinguished success in extending the sales and maintaining the credit of British manufactures and productions;²⁶

Moreover, due to their long-lasting trade with the Hong merchants, the Company's representatives at Canton were said to have developed considerable power and influence. Particularly, 'by the extent of their dealings, the unerring regularity of their transactions, their proverbial probity, and the duration of their connections with China',²⁷ these British merchants were believed to have possessed 'high character and augmented influence'²⁸ in the minds of the natives. As a consequence, the EIC was not only able to secure 'the best supply of its merchandize at the cheapest rate',²⁹ but acquired the legitimate means of 'either

²² *Ibid.*, p. 35.

²³ *Ibid.*, pp. 37-8.

²⁴ Martin, *The Past and Present State*, p. 10.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 131.

²⁶ Staunton, 'Considerations on the China Trade', *The Asiatic Journal*, 28 (Dec. 1829), 690-1.

²⁷ Anon., 'The American Commerce with China', *The Asiatic Journal*, 27 (Jan. 1829), 2.

²⁸ Staunton, 'Considerations on the China Trade', *The Asiatic Journal*, 28 (Dec. 1829), 683.

²⁹ Anon., 'The American Commerce with China', *The Asiatic Journal*, 27 (Jan. 1829), 3.

favouring or counteracting the views of the Chinese government', as well as of 'influencing the proceedings of the licensed Chinese merchants'.³⁰ For instance, in terms of the EIC's tea trade, not only was the price unified, but the British were given the right of selection before all the tea was brought to market. Furthermore, to a great extent, all forms of foreign trade in China '[had] been greatly benefited by means of that influence'.³¹ Even the private merchants' country trade was in a sense 'under the protection of the Company's trade', because 'by the influence of the Company, searches of country ships have been prevented, and difficulties in the prosecution of their transactions removed'.³²

In addition to these statements on the Company's positive impact, the EIC's supporters emphasised that the Company was the only party which was able to guarantee 'the present prosperity and comparative security of the China trade'.³³ In opposition to the free traders' assertion that it was time to leave the China trade to the unrestricted application of individual enterprise, advocates of the EIC insisted that, given the uniqueness of this trade, nothing could prevent 'the exercise of arbitrary and dictatorial powers over the trade, on the part of the Chinese merchants, but the present system'.³⁴ To prove this, they endeavoured to create an image that the whole international trade in China would be endangered if the current EIC system ceased to operate. Ellis, for example, pointed out that:

There can be no doubt that, in the first instance, the announcement that the East India Company were no longer the representatives of the British nation, and were no longer responsible for the conduct of persons trading to China, would shake the confidence of the Chinese; and that no consul, with the usual powers attached to the office, could establish for himself the confidence and influence now attached to the Company's factory. All that might be lost in these respects by the supercargoes, would be turned to the advantage of the local government and of the

³⁰ Staunton, 'Considerations on the China Trade', *The Asiatic Journal*, 28 (Dec. 1829), 686.

³¹ Report of the Select Committee of the House of Commons on the Affairs of the East India Company: China Trade (1830), in Martin, *The Past and Present State*, p. 131.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ Staunton, 'Considerations on the China Trade', *The Asiatic Journal*, 28 (Dec. 1829), 690.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 686.

Hong merchants, and consequently to the injury of the foreign trade in general.³⁵

Martin added that, from an imperial perspective, the termination of the EIC's China monopoly might give rise to even greater detrimental effects. He claimed:

that instant change would, most probably, be productive of ruin to the Indian, as well as to the English, Chinese commerce; and that with a diminishing government revenue, increasing public burthens, a possibility of general war, and a variety of taxes pressing on the industry and comfort of the people.³⁶

To justify further this claim that an alternative mode of commerce in China was not going to be beneficial to the British nation, the experience of American merchants was brought to bear in order to show that 'though exclusive privileges may be prejudicial, *to throw open the English China trade might prove still worse in its consequence*'.³⁷ It was maintained that, although the America traders in China, unlike the British country traders, were 'unfettered on one side by monopoly',³⁸ they were, in the meantime, unable to 'maintain either their pretensions as traders, or to protect the life of an American subject through the official authority of a consul'.³⁹ For this reason, these American traders were practically at the mercy of the Chinese Hong merchants and, 'as might be expected, very jealous of the superior influence possessed by the Company's factory',⁴⁰ by which 'the absurdity of the Chinese laws is mitigated, the extortion of the Mandarins resisted, and the combination of the Hong merchants and tea-dealers prevented'.⁴¹ To the EIC and its supporters, the predicament of American traders evidently showed that, while the system of a Chinese monopoly

³⁵ Ellis, *A Series of Letters*, p. 43.

³⁶ Martin, *The Past and Present State*, p. 4.

³⁷ This quotation is said to be from 'a celebrated modern and liberal writer, who resided eight years in China, and travelled a great deal in the country', in Martin, *The Past and Present State*, p. 10. Italics in the original.

³⁸ Ellis, *A Series of Letters*, p. 38.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 43-4.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 41.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 61.

remained unchanged, the trade of private merchants in China would by no means prosper. On the other hand, the East India Company acted, in fact, as ‘a most valuable protection to all British interests’,⁴² rather than as an obstacle to the extension of British-Chinese commerce. Since ‘by the present constitution and instrumentality of the East India Company, a vast empire is administered ... without charge on the national resources; a trade with a government remarkable for jealousy of foreigners, and for indifference to foreign commerce, is conducted with certainty and advantage’, the EIC’s advocates firmly believed that it would be ‘impossible to treat lightly such important benefits’ and ‘most unwise to deal hastily with the system by which they are secured’.⁴³

Nevertheless, in an era when criticism of the EIC’s administration in India and of its negative impacts on the economy was considerable, arguments in favour of the Company needed to be supported from other standpoints. In particular, in order to justify the assertion that it was impossible to apply the theory of free trade to the unconventional case of China, the peculiarity of Chinese commercial and political culture was highlighted by the EIC’s advocates. The complete otherness of the Chinese government, people and society was hence greatly strengthened in this campaign. To start with, the pro-EIC campaigners asserted that the long history of China’s self-contained economy had persuaded the Chinese to believe they stood ‘in no need of intercourse with other countries’.⁴⁴ As the Qianlong emperor had clearly pointed out in this letter to King George III, ‘we [the Chinese] have never valued ingenious articles [from Britain], nor do we have the slightest need of your country’s manufactures’.⁴⁵ For this reason, it was maintained that the Chinese did not value external trade as much as Europeans did. Since ‘The attention of the government has, from the earliest ages, been

⁴² Martin, *The Past and Present State*, p. 127.

⁴³ Ellis, *A Series of Letters*, pp. 56-7.

⁴⁴ Martin, *The Past and Present State*, p. 6.

⁴⁵ Imperial edict from the Qianlong emperor to King George III of Britain, in *An Embassy to China: Being the journal kept by Lord Macartney during his embassy to the Emperor Ch’ien-lung 1793-1794*, ed. J.L. Cranmer-Byng (London: Longmans, 1962), p. 340.

directed to render the intercourse between the different provinces of the empire easy and secure',⁴⁶ the Chinese empire had long been 'enjoying within its own territories all the necessities and conveniences, and most of the luxuries of life'.⁴⁷ Because of this highly developed internal trade, it was believed that 'the resources of that Empire had been abundantly developed by her native inhabitants, long before even an idea of British connection existed'.⁴⁸ As a result, throughout Chinese history, 'neither the necessities of the people, nor the policy of the government, have looked to commerce with other nations as a main source of individual wealth, or of imperial revenue'.⁴⁹

Moreover, the Chinese empire's political isolation, as well as its caution against foreigners, was also seen as the product of China's unique culture and history. The EIC's advocates maintained that it was because 'the Chinese had acquired the art of living in a state of high mental cultivation and social enjoyment ... long before they could have the remote idea of intercourse' with foreign nations,⁵⁰ that the empire of China 'openly and arrogantly' had proclaimed 'its total independence of every nation in the world' during much of its history.⁵¹ This unique situation was believed to have resulted from the fact that the benefits of international communication had never been cultivated in China. Instead, 'the safety of the state is considered to rest upon an insulation of the national existence'.⁵² On the basis of this attitude, communication with foreign nations, unlike in European countries, was deemed in China as 'having a positive tendency to corrupt the morals and derange the harmony of those institutions, political and domestic'.⁵³ For this reason, 'To restrict intercourse with foreigners, nationally and individually', quite simply became 'the great maxim of state policy in

⁴⁶ Ellis, *A Series of Letters*, p. 28.

⁴⁷ Martin, *The Past and Present State*, p. 6.

⁴⁸ Thomas Fisher, 'Statistical Notices of China', *The Gentleman's Magazine*, 103 (Apr. 1833), 296.

⁴⁹ Ellis, *A Series of Letters*, p. 29.

⁵⁰ Fisher, 'Statistical Notices of China', *The Gentleman's Magazine*, 103 (Apr. 1833), 296.

⁵¹ Martin, *The Past and Present State*, p. 7.

⁵² Ellis, *A Series of Letters*, p. 28.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

China'.⁵⁴

Furthermore, not only were China's diplomatic views, but many of its domestic institutions were interpreted in the light of China's cultural differences. For example, the principle of strict subordination and control in the Chinese government, as well as the laws of China, which 'have their foundation in the edicts of the Emperors' and in essence 'repugnant to justice',⁵⁵ were regarded as signs of China's backwardness in the opinion of many westerners. Contrary to this common view, Staunton spoke from his local experience that, 'however despotic and oppressive the operation of this principle may appear in our eyes, in those of the Chinese it has invariably been considered as one of the first requisites of a good government, and one of the surest tests of a civilized people'.⁵⁶ Since this principle pervaded not only the government of China, but also the Chinese people's domestic lives, Staunton further stated that, in fact, 'in the same manner as the magistrate controls and is responsible for the conduct of the inhabitants of his district, the master of each family is supposed to control, and required to be responsible for, his relations, connections, and dependents'.⁵⁷ By pointing out these facts in a genuine Chinese context, it seems that Staunton, as someone who had considerable experience in China, was suggesting that it was China's cultural 'otherness', rather than its backwardness, that differentiated the Chinese from the British people. Since, after all, 'this immense Empire' was 'so efficiently governed' by its own unique means,⁵⁸ the fairness of the unfavourable judgments that the free traders made of Chinese institutions were questionable.

Based on these 'different' perceptions of Chinese culture and institutions, it can be seen from the EIC's campaign that, in contrast to the critical image of the Chinese government presented by many of the free traders, a certain degree of reverence was shown for Chinese

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

⁵⁵ Thomas Fisher, 'Statistical Notices of China', *The Gentleman's Magazine*, 103 (May 1833), 392.

⁵⁶ Staunton, 'Considerations on the China Trade', *The Asiatic Journal*, 28 (Dec. 1829), 678.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ Thomas Fisher, 'British Connexion with China', *The Gentleman's Magazine*, 1 (Feb. 1834), 123.

laws and usages. Instead of promoting a rather barbaric image, the Chinese were seen by the EIC's supporters as a 'highly civilized and polished',⁵⁹ or at least 'semi-civilized',⁶⁰ people, who had a clear right to regulate their own affairs. As the EIC's Court of Directors made very clear in its instructions to the Select Committee:

We cannot, in fairness, deny to China the right which our own nation exercises as she sees fit, either by prohibiting, restraining, or subjecting to certain laws and regulations its commercial dealings with other countries. China must be considered free in the exercise of her affairs, without being accountable to any other nation;⁶¹

In terms of the application of the so-called 'natural' law of free trade to the case of China, the EIC's advocates denied that the British private merchants had a legitimate right to demand that China open its ports on these grounds. As Martin wrote, the principle of 'free trade', first and foremost, depended on 'the disposition, wants, or reciprocal feelings of a separate, and perhaps, rival or hostile state'.⁶² Moreover,

freedom in *politics*, and freedom in *commerce*, are two distinct things; that they are not ... at every period called for by all countries; and that, although political liberty is essentially requisite in domestic commerce, and highly advantageous in foreign trade, particularly for a manufacturing community such as that of England, yet, that it is not considered *paramountly* necessary by every nation.⁶³

In line with these principles, the EIC's advocates strongly disagreed with some private merchants that a more coercive line of action should be employed in Britain's future relations with China. In order to justify their view that a conciliatory approach needed to be maintained, they not only asserted that, 'any attempts to force upon this singular people an

⁵⁹ Fisher, 'Statistical Notices of China', *The Gentleman's Magazine*, 103 (May 1833), 392.

⁶⁰ Martin, *The Past and Present State*, p. 128.

⁶¹ Letter from the Court of Directors to the Select Committee, 13 Jan. 1832, in Martin, *The Past and Present State*, p. 214.

⁶² Martin, *The Past and Present State*, p. 5.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 9. Italics in the original.

unacceptable intercourse with us, by outraging their laws or institutions, would ... only render profitable intercourse with them more difficult',⁶⁴ but promoted a peaceful and reasonable image of the Chinese people and their government. For instance, Fisher claimed that, 'The educational bias of the Chinese disposes them on all occasions to appeal to reason', an attitude which induced the Chinese to develop a disposition towards 'mildness and urbanity, with a wish to show that their conduct is reasonable, and generally a willingness to yield to what appears to be so'.⁶⁵ Even the government of China, according to the same author, was 'at the utmost pains to make it appear to the people that its conduct is reasonable and benevolent on all occasions' and 'by the experience of many ages', it had found that 'it is necessary for them to do so'.⁶⁶ This interpretation of the Chinese people's natural willingness to appeal to reason, obviously, corresponded with the EIC's conventional view that a forceful course of action was on no account helpful to British commerce with China, when, conversely, 'a temperate and judicious appeal on the most objectionable points' might 'effect a modification of those provisions'.⁶⁷ To the EIC and its advocates, this peaceful and reasonable image of the Chinese became another reason why Britain's commercial intercourse with the Chinese empire could be improved only 'by evincing a disposition to respect their regulations',⁶⁸ rather than by challenging that authority or by holding them in sheer defiance.

Finally, it can be observed that as the EIC was presenting a seemingly objective and genuine perception of China's cultural otherness, it was, at the same time, suggesting the peculiarity of China was beyond the comprehension of anybody else. For example, one of the EIC's representatives openly stated that:

⁶⁴ Fisher, 'Statistical Notices of China', *The Gentleman's Magazine*, 103 (May 1833), 392.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 389, Fisher, 'Statistical Notices of China'.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ Letter from the Court of Directors to the Select Committee, 13 Jan. 1832, in Martin, *The Past and Present State*, p. 213.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 214.

We alone are acquainted with the Chinese people; We alone have established any relations with the Chinese government. That people is incomprehensible by any but our servants; that government hates and despises all foreigners, except only our supercargoes of the factory at Canton.⁶⁹

These statements clearly show that the EIC's advocates were attempting to portray the Company as the exclusive authority in interpreting and dealing with Britain's commercial relations with China. In fact, by its introduction of China's cultural otherness, it can be maintained that the EIC was disposed to promote a two-fold impression of China. First, in spite of China's uniqueness, the Chinese empire, as a sovereign state, was by no means too depraved to be respected. Second, China's peculiarities, in fact, were not entirely inexplicable as long as a deep understanding of China's history and culture was mastered. Nevertheless, it was also because China was so distinct from western nations, that the EIC and its advocates maintained that commercial and diplomatic relations with the Chinese needed to be conducted by those professionals who were equipped with profound local experience, that is by the EIC alone. Since over past decades, the East India Company had accumulated abundant knowledge about this unique nation and, at the same time, had achieved a 'progressive amelioration in the circumstances of our commercial intercourse with the Chinese people',⁷⁰ there was certainly no reason to abolish such a system that had proved 'upon trial so safe and so efficacious'.⁷¹ As Staunton confidently affirmed, although there seemed no immediate danger to British-Chinese commerce at present, past experience indicated that 'the means by which it has been averted are excellent' and, therefore, on all accounts, the current EIC system should 'be diligently traced, and carefully adhered to'.⁷²

⁶⁹ Anon., *The Foreign Trade of China*, pp. 8-9.

⁷⁰ Staunton, 'Considerations on the China Trade', *The Asiatic Journal*, 28 (Dec. 1829), 680.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 684.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 682.

II

The Free trade advocates on the EIC's monopoly and the image of China

While the East India Company was sparing no effort to justify its trade monopoly in China, it was operating in a context of an ever-growing challenge posed by free trade theory. Assisted by this attitude, advocates of free trade contended that it was 'the extreme of tyranny to deprive the public of the rights and privileges'⁷³ to trade with the Chinese empire. For this reason, the renewal of the EIC's charter, which was in essence 'granting to the 2,500 partners of the East India Company, and refusing to the other 25 millions of British subjects'⁷⁴ a right to which every individual was entitled, was on no account reasonable, justifiable or acceptable. In this context, British private merchants, together with some evangelical missionaries in China and other supporters of a *laissez-faire* attitude, created an anti-monopoly environment which aimed to abolish the EIC's charter. They not only propagated the idea that the removal of the EIC's China trade monopoly 'would be an undoubted advantage to the commerce and manufactures of Britain',⁷⁵ but widely contested the Company's arguments in favour of its commercial monopoly. In particular, it was pointed out that, in order to mislead the public, the EIC and its campaigners had purposely presented some false, or very biased, views of the China trade.

To begin with, in opposition to the EIC's statements about its positive impacts on the China trade, it was maintained that the Company's actual records, 'so far from showing what

⁷³ [John Crawford], 'East India Company – China Question', *The Edinburgh Review*, 104 (1831), 282. John Crawford (1783-1868) was a Scottish orientalist and colonial administrator in southeast Asia. He paid multiple visits to the southeast Asia archipelago and acquired an extensive knowledge of the Malay and Javanese languages. Although Crawford had never been to China, he had many contacts with British merchants in China and was recognised in Britain as an oriental expert. Crawford was also known as 'a lifelong advocate of free trade policies' (<http://en.wikipedia.org>; accessed 22 May 2013) and a key figure of the free traders' campaign against the EIC's China trade monopoly. In the early 1830s, Crawford acted as 'the paid agent of the Calcutta merchants in their disputes with the company'. See Crawford, John, in the *ODNB*, <http://www.oxforddnb.com>; accessed 22 May 2013.

⁷⁴ [Crawford], 'East India Company – China Question', *The Edinburgh Review*, 104 (1831), 281-2.

⁷⁵ Anon., 'The East-India Question', *The Asiatic Journal*, 1 (1830), 116.

they assert, show the very reverse of it'.⁷⁶ Crawford stated that, unlike what the Company's supporters had claimed, 'the trade of the East India Company', in fact, 'affords no very satisfactory prospect either for the investment of additional capital, on the part of the merchant, or for augmentation of the public revenue on the part of the State'.⁷⁷ For example, in terms of the Company's tea trade, not only was the price of the EIC's teas 'raised to so exorbitant a pitch', but those teas that were so overcharged were 'in no respect superior in point of quality to those used in the United States and the Continent'.⁷⁸ With regard to the EIC's performance in the past two decades, it was asserted that:

They show that the supply of tea is, in proportion to the population of the United Kingdom, considerably less than it was twenty years ago. They show that within the same time the exports of British produce and manufactures to China have fallen off from a million sterling per annum to much less than one-half of that amount. ... the same records show that the nation has been taxed during the currency of the present charter to the extent of 40,000,000*l.* sterling, in consideration of this monopoly which by the Company is modestly stated to have been exercised not for its own exclusive interest 'but likewise for the benefit and advantage of England and of India'.⁷⁹

In addition to this direct attack on the Company's economic 'contribution', the free trade advocates also pointed out that the EIC had intentionally exaggerated the strictness of the Chinese monopoly, in order to persuade the public to believe that so long as China's Canton system remained unchanged, it would be meaningless to remove the restrictions only on the British side. Moreover, the restrictions presented by the Chinese were not as significant as the Company had claimed. In particular, the EIC's campaigners were accused of having concealed the importance of the 'unauthorised trade',⁸⁰ which was widely conducted by the

⁷⁶ [John Crawford], 'Voyage of Ship Amherst', *The Westminster Review*, 20 (1834), 45.

⁷⁷ [John Crawford], *Chinese Monopoly Examined* (London: James Ridgway, 1830), p. 39.

⁷⁸ [Crawford], 'East India Company – China Question', *The Edinburgh Review*, 104 (1831), 292.

⁷⁹ [Crawford], 'Voyage of Ship Amherst', *The Westminster Review*, 20 (1834), 45.

⁸⁰ Technically, the 'unauthorised trade' can be divided into two branches. The first refers to the illegal traffic that was carried on at the mouth of the Canton river. The second is that conducted by the Chinese themselves, with Chinese vessels sailing between several ports of China (including Canton) and Siam, the

country traders on the China coast. According to the supporters of free trade, in the controversy over the renewal or abolition of the EIC's charter, the Company had been trying to fix public attention exclusively on the authorised trade conducted between itself and the Chinese Hong merchants. These observers contended that it was because the EIC was fully aware that once the specifics of the unauthorised trade were revealed to the public, 'the Company's monopoly of the *British market* would be considered doubly unjust and injurious to the nation'.⁸¹ No matter how hard the EIC had attempted to hide the truth, it was undeniable that the China trade was by no means so restrictive as the EIC described it in its own propaganda. As a matter of fact, although, in theory, the country traders' commerce in China was not sanctioned by the Qing government, it had been openly operating to such an extent that a substantially 'free' trade on the Chinese side had already been established. In spite of the so-called Chinese monopoly, which was presented by the EIC as an insurmountable obstacle to the application of the free trade principle,

Individuals are, however, at perfect liberty to deal with any Hong merchant ... or with any *outside merchant*, that is, with any Chinese merchant not belonging to the Hong. So that, though there are only eight or ten Hong merchants at Canton, there is, notwithstanding, quite as extensive a choice of merchants with whom to deal in that city as in Liverpool or New York.⁸²

As a result of this considerable commercial freedom, the scale of the unauthorised trade had greatly exceeded the Company's regular trade, so that its total volume in the early 1830s even reached 'nearly three times as great as the Company's entire trade put together'.⁸³ Moreover, against the EIC's contention that serious trade disputes would arise because of the private

Philippine islands, Borneo, Singapore, Java, etc. See Anon., *The Foreign Trade of China*, p. 40. To the British country traders, this term mainly meant the former mode of trade.

⁸¹ Anon., *The Foreign Trade of China*, p. 41. Italics in the original.

⁸² [John Crawford], *Observations on the Influence of the East India Company's Monopoly on the Price and Supply of Tea; and on the Commerce with India, China, etc.* (London: Longman, Rees, Orme, Brown, and Green, 1831), p. 26. Italics in the original.

⁸³ [Crawford], 'Voyage of Ship Amherst', *The Westminster Review*, 20 (1834), 45.

merchants' want of discipline or experience, Crawford declared that this opinion was utterly 'futile and visionary'.⁸⁴ He insisted that this unauthorised trade had actually been conducted with great order and mutual confidence. On the one hand, the facilities and efficiency that the port of Canton provided to the country traders were regarded as 'decidedly superior in both these respects to London'.⁸⁵ On the other hand, in past decades, 'the private traders have never experienced the slightest inconvenience from any tumults between their sailors and the natives',⁸⁶ nor had other western independent traders, such as the Americans, Dutch and Danes, who had already been 'free' traders, ever met any 'interruption or obstacle of any sort' when they traded with the Chinese.⁸⁷

It can be seen from such arguments that, in the opinions of the free traders, the EIC had been promoting an incorrect, or at least incomplete, image of the China trade by grossly ignoring the unauthorised trade and exaggerating the difficulties created by the Chinese monopoly. Given the dynamic of this important trade, however, the EIC's monopoly in China, instead of the Canton commercial system, turned out to be the major constraint on the application of *laissez-faire* principles, as well as the extension of individual commercial enterprises into the Chinese empire. In order further to prove that it was worthwhile to free the China trade from the monopoly of the EIC, the free trade campaigners continued to challenge other images of China presented by the Company, such as the peculiarity of the Chinese people and the necessity to respect the Chinese government and its laws. In particular, a clandestine voyage to some northern ports of China, which was dispatched by

⁸⁴ [Crawford], 'East India Company – China Question', *The Edinburgh Review*, 104 (1831), 306.

⁸⁵ Quote of Joshua Bates, an American merchant, in [Crawford], *Observations on the Influence*, p. 20. Crawford conducted a number of interviews with different individuals who had traded or resided in China. The vast majority of the views he included in his work were in agreement with Crawford's own observations on the China trade.

⁸⁶ *The Edinburgh Review*, 104 (1831), 306, [Crawford], 'East India Company – China Question'.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 294. Same article.

the EIC's Select Committee in 1832, provided solid support for the free traders' arguments.⁸⁸ Although the chief objective of this voyage was to gather intelligence on the practicability of opening trade with these ports,⁸⁹ discoveries from this journey, especially those made by Hugh Hamilton Lindsay,⁹⁰ who was in charge of this voyage, and the Prussian missionary Charles Gützlaff,⁹¹ greatly reinforced the free traders' claim that the Chinese were by no means a 'peculiar' nation.

Contrary to the EIC's assertion that China's unique history and cultural otherness had rendered ideas of international communication, in both commerce and politics, unacceptable to the Chinese, campaigners for free trade maintained that the universal laws of commerce and international relations were found to be entirely relevant to the case of China. This point of view was bolstered by the following claims: first, just as with the British, the Chinese were in fact '*a highly commercial people*'.⁹² During the voyage along the China coast, the travellers had accumulated much evidence that the local inhabitants were not only 'able and

⁸⁸ Since this voyage was dispatched by the select committee in defiance of the Chinese imperial prohibition, its connection with the EIC was concealed from the Chinese. Its main ship, the *Amherst*, was chartered from a private British firm, but, according to the EIC's convention, no opium was allowed to be carried aboard. It is worth mentioning that this voyage was originally disapproved of by the EIC's senior officials in London, but, as stated before, at this time the select committee did not entirely agree with the Court of Directors in some respects. In private, members of the select committee were more inclined to concur with the country traders. They sometimes took their own initiatives in China regardless of the instructions from London.

⁸⁹ This clandestine voyage was later proved to have far-reaching influence on Sino-British relations. Some major ports that were visited in 1832, such as Amoy (Xiamen), Fuzhou, Ningbo and Shanghai, were shortly forced to open for trade according to the Treaty of Nanjing in 1842.

⁹⁰ Hugh Hamilton Lindsay (1802-81), who worked for the East India Company at Canton from 1820, was a key figure who actively participated in the discussion of China's image and Britain's China policies in the early encounters of the two countries. His views and activities can be found in Robert Bickers, 'The Challenger: Hugh Hamilton Lindsay and the rise of British Asia, 1832-1865', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, sixth series, 22 (2012), 141-69.

⁹¹ Charles Gützlaff (1803-51) served as an interpreter and physician during this voyage. He was a central figure in the British intercourse with the Chinese at this time. Gützlaff commanded a good knowledge of not only the written language but some oral dialects of China. Despite being a Prussian, he very frequently associated himself with the British and often claimed the latter as 'us'. Gützlaff had a strong desire of converting the heathens of Asia and was dedicated to publishing the gospel to the Chinese people. More information about Gützlaff's experience in China can be found in Jessie Gregory Lutz, *Opening China: Karl F.A. Gützlaff and Sino-Western Relations, 1827-1852* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans, 2008).

⁹² [Crawford], *Observations on the Influence*, p. 14. Italics in the original.

willing to trade', but 'desirous of an extended intercourse with foreigners'.⁹³ According to Gützlaff, the natives whom he met generally appeared 'anxious to gain a livelihood and accumulate riches'⁹⁴ and they sometimes 'complained bitterly of the system of exclusion'.⁹⁵ Lindsay also noted that even some mandarins, who were supposed to suppress unlawful contacts between foreigners and local Chinese people, had acknowledged in private that vast advantage 'would be desirable from foreign intercourse'.⁹⁶ In this respect, a remarkable case occurred in the vicinity of Amoy, where the admiral of a local station gave clear signs that he wished to purchase some opium, but 'seemed to be much disappointed when we had none to sell'.⁹⁷ These first-hand experiences in China enabled Crawford to claim with confidence that:

It appears quite certain that the Chinese, a money-making and money-loving people, are as much addicted to trade, and as anxious as any nation on earth to court a commercial intercourse with strangers. The government and its officers perhaps not less anxious for foreign commerce than the people themselves, could they see their way to admit it without danger.⁹⁸

Second, instead of being a hostile population, the Chinese were seen to be in essence a friendly and 'kind-hearted race of people',⁹⁹ who desired free intercourse with foreigners. During the course of the voyage, 'the kindness with which the common people are disposed

⁹³ [Crawford], 'Voyage of Ship Amherst', *The Westminster Review*, 20 (1834), 37-8.

⁹⁴ Charles Gützlaff, *Journal of Three Voyages along the Coast of China, in 1831, 1832, & 1833* (London: Frederick Westley and A.H. Davis, 1834), p. 136. As the title of this book suggests, Gützlaff actually made three voyages up the China coast. The one with the EIC was the second trip. Prior to this, he made his initial expedition in a Chinese junk from Bangkok to Tianjin. Shortly after the voyage with EIC, Gützlaff sailed in the trading ship *Sylph* from Canton all the way up to Jinzhou, which is in Chinese Tartary. In comparison, most of Gützlaff's chief findings about China were from the second voyage.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 172.

⁹⁶ Lindsay's Report, in *Report of Proceedings on a Voyage to the Northern Ports of China, in the Ship Lord Amherst: extracted from papers, printed by order of the House of Commons, relating to the trade with China* (London: B. Fellowes, 1833), p. 211.

⁹⁷ Gützlaff's Report, in *Report of Proceedings*, p. 278.

⁹⁸ [John Crawford], 'Chinese Empire and Trade', *The Westminster Review*, 21 (1834), 254.

⁹⁹ A correspondent in China, 'Intercourse with China', *The Asiatic Journal*, 13 (1834), 104.

to receive strangers'¹⁰⁰ was carefully noted by the foreign visitors, so that it appeared to them that 'the Chinese are not the jealous and suspicious race they have been generally imagined'.¹⁰¹ On the contrary, 'the Chinese character in its true light', was 'that of friendliness and kindness towards foreigners'.¹⁰² For example, Gützlaff noted in his journal that, although some natives 'lived in the most wretched hovels imaginable, and were filthy and rude in appearance', their hospitality 'formed a striking contrast to their extreme poverty, for they invited us into their dirty hovels, and shared with us their scanty supper'.¹⁰³ Particularly, as one of the very few quotations cited from conversations with the Chinese people, the following statement was minutely recorded by the Prussian missionary: 'How gladly ... would we, if permitted, [have] cultivated amicable intercourse with you! But we are always forbidden to obey the impulse of our hearts!'¹⁰⁴ With the assistance of these vivid images, advocates of free trade were further convinced that 'whatever peculiarities may attach to the Chinese, an antipathy ... to strangers is not one of them'.¹⁰⁵

Third, the Chinese people, in general, held an open attitude towards knowledge about the external world. In particular, they were believed to be very keen to possess information about Christianity and the character of the British people. This impression was formed chiefly because, during the journey up the China coast, Gützlaff and Lindsay distributed among the local inhabitants various pamphlets, which included different religious tracts, a brochure entitled *A Brief Account of the English Character*,¹⁰⁶ as well as some scientific and moral booklets. Since all these tracts were widely sought after whenever the foreigners distributed

¹⁰⁰ [Crawfurd], 'Chinese Empire and Trade', *The Westminster Review*, 21 (1834), 254.

¹⁰¹ Lindsay's Report, in *Report of Proceedings*, p. 11.

¹⁰² Gützlaff, *Journal of Three Voyages*, p. 301.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, pp. 210-12.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 172.

¹⁰⁵ [Crawfurd], *Observations on the Influence*, p. 26.

¹⁰⁶ This brochure authored by the head of the EIC's select committee, Charles Marjoribank, was initially not allowed by the select committee to be distributed. Lindsay, however, disregarded this prohibition and insisted on circulating it so as 'to remove deep-rooted prejudice, and to wipe out the stain of barbarism endeavoured to be indelibly fixed upon the English'. See A correspondent in China, 'Intercourse with China', *The Asiatic Journal*, 13 (1834), 104. For more details about the tracts distributed, see Lindsay's Report, in *Report of Proceedings*, p. 44.

them, it was interpreted as a positive sign that ‘There exists among the people of China an unquenchable thirst after knowledge’.¹⁰⁷ To Gützlaff, who was dedicated to spreading the word of God among the Chinese population, the demand for the Gospels ‘not only affords an inviting field, but presents claims – *claims* which ought not to be disregarded’.¹⁰⁸ For this reason, he deemed it ‘truly distressing’ that the Chinese people were ‘anxious for the word of eternal life, but unable to obtain it’.¹⁰⁹ The Chinese were therefore seen as ‘victims’ who were really in need of ‘a moral renovation’.¹¹⁰ Hence, it was lamentable that ‘the worship of the only living and true God has been thereby excluded from this vast empire’.¹¹¹

While holding these views that the Chinese people had no antipathy to commerce, strangers or foreign knowledge, the free trade advocates nevertheless maintained that the Chinese government, as well as the laws of China, did not deserve respect. Most important was their claim that the current Chinese government did not promote the interests or express the voice of the people. As with the observers on the Macartney embassy, these campaigners for free trade in the early 1830s tended to interpret the Qing government as a case of very few Tartar conquerors ruling over many millions of Han Chinese. In the country traders’ petition to Parliament, they clearly stated that, in China, ‘so many millions of comparatively civilized human beings were subdued by its bitterest enemies, and yielded implicit obedience to a tribe of rude and ignorant barbarians’.¹¹² Lindsay even contended that ‘the mere will of a despot ... for the last century ... separate near 400,000,000 of human beings from all communication with their species’.¹¹³ On the basis of these images, the government of China was represented as a suspicious body that paid ‘unceasing attention’ to ‘limiting the intercourse between

¹⁰⁷ A correspondent in China, ‘Intercourse with China’, *The Asiatic Journal*, 13 (1834), 104.

¹⁰⁸ Gützlaff, *Journal of Three Voyages*, p. 141. Italics in the original.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 155.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. xxvii.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

¹¹² Canton Petition, 24 Dec. 1830, in *China Trade and Empire*, p. 555.

¹¹³ Lindsay’s Report, in *Report of Proceedings*, p. 211.

foreigners and Chinese'.¹¹⁴ To prove this claim, the Tartar ruling class was believed to be 'disliked by the people, and living in constant fear of rebellion which may drive them out of China'.¹¹⁵ Since 'They know, though reluctant to admit it, that some barbarians are more warlike than themselves ... and that in the event of a war with them, they themselves would be an unequal match for them',¹¹⁶ the present government of China regarded foreigners 'with constant suspicion',¹¹⁷ and made every effort to 'exclude barbarians from all intercourse with the inhabitants of the middle kingdom'.¹¹⁸ For this reason, to promote 'a sort of national antipathy' between its subjects and foreign residents in China became 'the main object of the Chinese government'.¹¹⁹ This government, on the one hand, gave foreigners 'the worst ideas of the stupid and treacherous natives',¹²⁰ while, on the other hand, endeavoured to prepossess its people, particularly in Canton, against foreigners by 'representing them as addicted to the most revolting crimes, with no other object than to stamp them in the eyes of the people as a barbarous, ignorant, and depraved race, everyway inferior to themselves, thereby exciting the lower orders to treat them with habitual insolence'.¹²¹ To account for their belief that the local contempt of foreigners in Canton was more the result of the government's prejudiced policy than the natural disposition of the people, travellers on the voyage maintained that, outside the province of Guangdong, 'instead of the rudeness and insult which is but too frequent near Canton, we had met with nothing but expressions of friendship and good will'.¹²² Moreover, 'whenever beyond the reach of government', the Chinese people always became 'solicitous to cultivate friendship with strangers'¹²³ and, in general, 'foreigners in China were better

¹¹⁴ Anon., *The Foreign Trade of China*, p. 13.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

¹¹⁶ Gützlaff, *Journal of Three Voyages*, p. 6.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁸ Gützlaff's Report, in *Report of Proceedings*, p. 270.

¹¹⁹ Lindsay's Report, in *Report of Proceedings*, p. 85.

¹²⁰ Gützlaff, *Journal of Three Voyages*, p. 231.

¹²¹ Canton Petition, 24 Dec. 1830, in *China Trade and Empire*, pp. 556-7.

¹²² Lindsay's Report, in *Report of Proceedings*, p. 10.

¹²³ Gützlaff, *Journal of Three Voyages*, p. 195.

liked the less they were known'.¹²⁴ Such evidence, once again, strengthened the idea that politics in China was, in essence, a 'government of the few' against 'the interests of the many'.¹²⁵ Instead of being such a respectable institution as presented by the EIC, the government of China was an obstacle that stood between foreigners and the vast majority of the Chinese people, both of whom were desirous of free communications.

Based on this unfavourable image of the Chinese government, the laws of China were perceived by the free trade advocates as equally unworthy of respect. With regard to 'the Chinese laws of exclusion',¹²⁶ Gützlaff wrote that, 'it was not our wish to oppose the laws of the empire, but we could not believe that there were any laws *compelling* to such misanthropy'.¹²⁷ In consequence, Gützlaff created an impression that the unnatural laws of China were in opposition to the divine law of the God. He contended that, 'All mankind are created and upheld by the same God ... therefore have a natural right to claim fellowship. The refusal of it is a transgression of the divine law of benevolence, which is equally binding upon all the nations of the earth'.¹²⁸ With the introduction of this image, the Chinese people were seen to be constantly under the 'the thralldom of Satan'¹²⁹ and in need of being rescued. All negative aspects of China, such as the poverty and moral depravity of the Chinese populace,¹³⁰ were therefore attributed to one universal cause – the harmful effects of the Chinese laws, which not only brought 'ruin and impoverishment'¹³¹ to the Chinese nation, but reduced these people to 'nothing more than semi-barbarians'.¹³²

¹²⁴ Lindsay's Report, in *Report of Proceedings*, p. 33.

¹²⁵ [Crawford], 'Chinese Empire and Trade', *The Westminster Review*, 21 (1834), 256.

¹²⁶ Gützlaff, *Journal of Three Voyages*, p. 305.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 253. Italics in the original.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 1-2.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 124.

¹³⁰ See Marjoribanks, *Letter to the Right Hon. Charles Grant*, pp. 26-7; *The Asiatic Journal*, 13 (1834), 105, A correspondent in China, 'Intercourse with China'; Gützlaff, *Journal of Three Voyages*, pp. xxvii-xxxiii, 1-2, 135, 140-1, 174-5.

¹³¹ Marjoribanks, *Letter to the Right Hon. Charles Grant*, p. 27.

¹³² A correspondent in China, 'Intercourse with China', *The Asiatic Journal*, 13 (1834), 105. It is worth noting that unlike the EIC's campaigners, the free trade advocates tended to categorise the Chinese civilisation as 'semi-barbaric' or 'barbaric', rather than 'semi-civilised' or 'civilised'.

In addition, other laws of China, which were designed to regulate the country's internal affairs, were also seen to be highly questionable. Gützlaff observed that many theoretical laws of China 'read excellently, but cannot be reduced to practice'.¹³³ They were either too old to be 'adapted to existing circumstances',¹³⁴ or 'so numerous also and strict, that it is impossible to be a subject and not a transgressor'.¹³⁵ Due to their impracticable nature, it was found that very few Chinese laws were observed strictly by the people. Instead, 'all the restrictive laws of the Celestial Empire receive their validity from interpretation of the mandarins instructed with them, and ... this depends upon the force at their command to enforce them'.¹³⁶ In this respect, Gützlaff recalled that, during the voyage, although the edicts 'were generally in a very solemn manner proclaimed to us, and we were enjoined implicitly to obey them', the mandarins 'retained to themselves the full power either of overlooking some parts or neglecting the whole'.¹³⁷ For example,

In the imperial edict, ... all barbarian ships are forbidden to approach the coast of Fuh-keen [Fujian] and Che-keang [Zhejiang] provinces; they are not allowed to anchor for a moment, but ought to be driven away. We anchored for several days, and nobody even endeavoured to drive us away. The barbarians are not allowed to go on shore. We went into the city, and in every direction, and his Excellency never took effectual measures to prevent it. No boat was allowed to approach in order to trade, but no punishment mentioned; and people who dared to look at us were punished very severely. Nobody could therefore make us believe that his Excellency was strictly executing the imperial orders.¹³⁸

In view of this inconsistency between theory and practice in Chinese laws, the foreign travellers were led to believe that 'bribery with all its concomitant evils'¹³⁹ would definitely pervade the government of China. Moreover, in general, 'there is no officer ... whose hands

¹³³ Gützlaff, *Journal of Three Voyages*, p. 294.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 294-5.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

¹³⁶ Gützlaff's Report, in *Report of Proceedings*, pp. 273-4.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 274.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 273.

¹³⁹ Gützlaff, *Journal of Three Voyages*, p. 15.

are clean, or who is not at all times ready to infringe the law which it is his nominal duty to uphold.’¹⁴⁰ As a consequence of this perception, the poor image of Chinese laws was further confirmed.

After demonstrating that it was unnecessary to hold in esteem a government which did not represent its subjects, or the impracticable laws that were not observed even by its own officers, the conciliatory course of conduct towards China, which the EIC favoured, was opposed by these free trade advocates. They maintained that, on the one hand, ‘no government has a right to seclude its subjects from all foreign intercourse’¹⁴¹ and, on the other hand, ‘we have a right to require from China, at least just and equitable treatment and protection to the persons and property of British subjects’.¹⁴² For these reasons, it proved doubly legitimate to challenge the authority of the Chinese government for the ultimate benefit of both British and Chinese people. Moreover, unlike the EIC’s campaigners, who maintained that a moderate line of action was the most suitable to adopt in the case of China, the free trade advocates believed that ‘much more may be gained by an appeal to their fears than to their friendship’.¹⁴³ They claimed that, ‘The result of two British Embassies’ had indicated ‘how little is to be gained in China, by any of the refinements of diplomacy’.¹⁴⁴ Moreover, throughout history, ‘those objects which foreigners have sought by means of reason and persuasion, and especially by a show of respect, have scarcely ever been attained; whilst a tone of defiance, more particularly when backed by any display of physical force, has nearly always proved successful’.¹⁴⁵ In particular, the recent voyage had provided fresh evidence that ‘it is a Chinese maxim to trample on the voluntary submissive and abject, while

¹⁴⁰ Marjoribanks, *Letter to the Right Hon. Charles Grant*, p. 14.

¹⁴¹ Gützlaff, *Journal of Three Voyages*, p. 182.

¹⁴² Marjoribanks, *Letter to the Right Hon. Charles Grant*, p. 53.

¹⁴³ Lindsay’s Report, in *Report of Proceedings*, p. 57.

¹⁴⁴ Canton Petition, 24 Dec. 1830, in *China Trade and Empire*, p. 554.

¹⁴⁵ Anon., *The Foreign Trade of China*, pp. 14-15.

they respect firmness and decision'.¹⁴⁶ As Gützlaff discovered, 'even the least thing was refused when we humbly asked for it',¹⁴⁷ but, 'as soon as the mandarins perceived that we were firm and reasonable in our demands, they became polite, and yielded'.¹⁴⁸ On the basis of such findings and experiences, the free trade advocates were convinced that it was 'most erroneous to suppose that a submissive course of conduct'¹⁴⁹ would improve Sino-British relations, whereas more 'firmness and reason'¹⁵⁰ would definitely prove useful to Britain's future relations with China.

Last, but not least, although, in general, the free trade advocates desired a more firm and determined attitude towards China, two slightly different approaches were proposed. Some of these advocates maintained that 'to command the slightest attention or respect in China, you must appear with an appropriate force'.¹⁵¹ For example, based on the impression of the 'weakness and timidity of the Chinese government',¹⁵² Lindsay believed that:

if four or six Indiamen and one of His Majesty's frigates had entered the port of Fuh Chow-foo [Fuzhou], captured the war-junks, proceeded to Mingan, and thence sent the option to the government of friendship or hostility, trade or war, that the freedom of British intercourse would have been established in perpetuity, without any expenditure either of blood or money.¹⁵³

In comparison, other supporters of free trade, such as Gützlaff, agreed that a more steadfast stance was necessary, but they 'highly disapprove[d] of violent measures to obtain an object, which might be gained by firmness and resolution'.¹⁵⁴ The American merchant, C. W. King, who was closely associated with British merchants in Canton, also claimed that, 'We would

¹⁴⁶ Gützlaff, *Journal of Three Voyages*, p. 12.

¹⁴⁷ Gützlaff's Report, in *Report of Proceedings*, p. 289.

¹⁴⁸ Gützlaff, *Journal of Three Voyages*, pp. 284-5.

¹⁴⁹ Marjoribanks, *Letter to the Right Hon. Charles Grant*, p. 57.

¹⁵⁰ Gützlaff, *Journal of Three Voyages*, p. 305.

¹⁵¹ Marjoribanks, *Letter to the Right Hon. Charles Grant*, p. 53.

¹⁵² Anon., *The Foreign Trade of China*, p. 12.

¹⁵³ Lindsay's Report, in *Report of Proceedings*, p. 86.

¹⁵⁴ Gützlaff, *Journal of Three Voyages*, p. 310.

not trample down the custom of China with cavalry, nor cut up her prejudices with the sabre, nor carry *our* point and *her* cities by storm'.¹⁵⁵ Instead, he proposed that 'the mild interference of those commercial nations of Europe and America ... by the united expression of their desires'¹⁵⁶ might prove a better tactic. Nevertheless, no matter whether a violent measure was considered advisable at this point in Canton, the demand for a more determined attitude towards the Chinese government became more vociferous than before. The foundations for a change in British-Chinese relations, as a result, had been established to a considerable extent.

III

Epilogue

It can be observed from the evidence presented above that, in the debate of the early 1830s, the free trade advocates introduced various images of China and the China trade that contrasted with those created by the supporters of the East India Company. In an age increasingly dominated by the commercial doctrine of *laissez-faire*, it was not surprising that, as Crawford believed, 'All that the Company and its advocates have said about their monopoly being necessary, because of the peculiar nature of the Chinese character and institutions, falls to the ground'.¹⁵⁷ Winning this debate, however, did not necessarily mean that the views and images presented by the free trade advocates were completely unprejudiced. At least, from the following perspectives, some of their contentions deserve further consideration.

First and foremost, although it seems that some of the essential findings about China

¹⁵⁵ [C.W. King], 'Intercourse with China', *Chinese Repository*, 1:4 (Aug. 1832), 145. Italics in the original. C.W. King (1809-45) was an American merchant of Olyphant & Co., which 'had scrupulously avoided all dealing in opium'. See Arthur Waley, *The Opium War through Chinese Eyes* (London: Routledge, 2005), p. 50.

¹⁵⁶ [King], 'Intercourse with China', *Chinese Repository*, 1:4 (Aug. 1832), 145-6.

¹⁵⁷ [Crawford], 'East India Company – China Question', *The Edinburgh Review*, 104 (1831), 306.

derived from first-hand experiences of the voyage, similar opinions did exist prior to 1832. Since the late 1820s, the Chinese government had been widely criticised by the mercantile and missionary communities in Canton. In 1830, a group of British traders even petitioned Parliament for ‘the direct intervention of His Majesty’s Government’¹⁵⁸ on their behalf, but at that time they obtained no positive response. For this reason, more convincing arguments, or evidence, about the character of the Chinese government and people had been desired before the voyage, in order to persuade the British government to take action in China. Since the major persons on the voyage, i.e., Lindsay and Gützlaff, were personally inclined to agree with the country traders in many respects, it is very difficult to determine whether their ‘discoveries’ in China were entirely independent from any possible predispositions or prejudices.

Second, although, as a result of some evidence gained on the voyage, the free trade advocates asserted that the Chinese people were naturally friendly to foreigners and that they were keen to know about Christianity, it could well be a biased report based on the personal prejudices of these travellers. In Gützlaff’s accounts, he made every effort to note down how many of his religious tracts were wanted by the natives and how hospitable they were to foreigners whenever they were beyond the reach of the Chinese government.¹⁵⁹ Gützlaff took it for granted that all these signs were representative of the Chinese people’s genuine dispositions, but he never seriously questioned whether they were occasioned by other motives, such as their desire for commerce, or simply their ‘curiosity and the hope of gain’,¹⁶⁰ of which Gützlaff was in fact not unconscious. In this respect, Lindsay pointed out that it might be the free medical services that Gützlaff provided for the local inhabitants that gave rise to the ‘the extraordinary degree of respect and friendship shown to us by all classes of

¹⁵⁸ Canton Petition, 24 Dec. 1830, in *China Trade and Empire*, p. 558.

¹⁵⁹ See Gützlaff, *Journal of Three Voyages*, pp. 195, 276, 427, 431-3, 438. Similar arguments can also be found in Lindsay’s Report, in *Report of Proceedings*, pp. 194-5.

¹⁶⁰ Gützlaff, *Journal of Three Voyages*, p. 163.

Chinese’,¹⁶¹ but no such connection at all was made in Gützlaff’s report. Moreover, although some occurrences that might have challenged Gützlaff’s conclusions were recorded in his own accounts, no further analysis was made to explain these phenomena. For instance, Gützlaff once noted that:

We had had a long conversation with the owner of a house, who had posted himself right in the way to prevent our entering his dwelling. I now thought it high time to make them a present of some books. When they found that I really intended to *give* these to them, they changed their tone, became friendly and hospitable.¹⁶²

Examples such as this one may well indicate that the claimed friendliness or hospitality of the locals were not necessarily the result of the sincere feelings or innate character of the Chinese people. Nevertheless, when Gützlaff came to present the ‘genuine’ character of this nation, all of these occurrences were simply ignored.

Third, despite the fact that these travellers were aware that there was some duplicity in the Chinese character and that ‘they are not nice about a strict adherence to truth’,¹⁶³ they tended to blame this trait exclusively on the Chinese government rather than on the Chinese people. In order to suit their view that the Qing government did not represent its subjects, the free trade advocates alleged that, although there was a ‘friendly disposition on the part of the natives’,¹⁶⁴ the mandarins had a ‘lying spirit’¹⁶⁵ and that ‘habitual deception’¹⁶⁶ pervaded the whole system of the Chinese government. Even on the occasions when they were treated in the same favourable manner by the mandarins as by the local Chinese people, the travellers immediately pointed out ‘there was more of policy than sincerity’ in the mandarins’

¹⁶¹ Lindsay’s Report, in *Report of Proceedings*, p. 87.

¹⁶² Gützlaff, *Journal of Three Voyages*, p. 418. Italics in the original.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. ix.

¹⁶⁴ Lindsay’s Report, in *Report of Proceedings*, p. 11.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 78.

¹⁶⁶ Gützlaff, *Journal of Three Voyages*, p. 290.

‘*professions of friendship*’.¹⁶⁷ Nevertheless, it is interesting to note that not only was this duplicitous character charge never employed to account for the behaviour of ordinary Chinese people, but the mandarins’ ‘duplicity’ was selectively applied only to those cases that could be used to support the free traders’ arguments. On some other occasions, the travellers were rather satisfied with the comments or actions of the mandarins, insomuch that they never attempted to uncover their underlying motives. For example, following the orders of the Chinese emperor, the mandarins were everywhere anxious to drive the foreign visitors out of their own districts. Probably in order to avert an open conflict, some officials ‘agreed upon the reasonableness’ of foreign trade, ‘but as the laws of the Celestial Empire prohibited trade with foreigners’, they wished the visitors to retreat from their districts without delay, although ‘as for themselves, they would be highly desirous that the trade was opened’.¹⁶⁸ In this case, the mandarins’ favourable remarks on foreign trade, no matter whether they were sincere or not, were taken as evidence of the general eagerness in China for free trade and as proof that even government officials were no exception to this rule. No attention, however, was paid to why these mandarins acted in this way, nor was it related to their supposedly duplicitous character at all.

Fourth, when these travellers were endeavouring to convince the British public that the Chinese government was indeed extremely suspicious of foreigners, some important contextual evidence was concealed in their accounts. In particular, it should be noted that a few months before the voyage, a serious quarrel broke out between the men in the EIC’s factory at Canton and the local Chinese authorities. As a result, ‘it was publicly known that the former had actually demanded assistance from the Governor General of India’.¹⁶⁹ Instead of fully explaining this context, the travellers focused solely on the fact that the Chinese

¹⁶⁷ Lindsay’s Report, in *Report of Proceedings, Ibid.*, p. 111. Italics added.

¹⁶⁸ Gützlaff’s Report, in *Report of Proceedings*, pp. 282-3. This was sometimes accompanied with a promise that they would turn a blind eye to the happenings outwith their region, see Lindsay’s Report, in *Report of Proceedings*, p. 211; Marjoribanks, *Letter to the Right Hon. Charles Grant*, p. 23.

¹⁶⁹ [Crawford], ‘Voyage of Ship Amherst’, *The Westminster Review*, 20 (1834), 41.

mandarins whom they met were ‘always suspicious that we [the British] design to attack them’,¹⁷⁰ as if this fear were totally unfounded. In addition, since these travellers attempted to disguise their connection with the EIC throughout the voyage, but carried no opium for sale as had most ships belonging to foreign traders, it probably gave the government officials more reasons to suspect that these unusual visitors were ‘the precursors of an armed force, which were coming to take possession of some part of the country’.¹⁷¹ Although this context may not be sufficient to overthrow completely the argument that China possessed a suspicious government, it at least suggests that the anxiety and suspicions exhibited by the Chinese authorities were not entirely incomprehensible in this particular case.

Last, in the accounts of the free trade advocates, it was widely contended that the Chinese were ‘a very commercial nation’¹⁷² and that they were ‘in the Eastern what the Hollanders are, or rather were, in the Western world’.¹⁷³ These arguments, however, were no more than speculation based on limited evidence rather than being based on a wide-ranging survey. For one thing, foreigners in China had extremely restricted access to the Chinese people other than the coastal trading communities, which only made up a small proportion of the population in China. It was, therefore, obviously unfair to assess the ‘national’ character of such a vast population based on findings about one particular group. For another thing, even with respect to the characteristics of the Chinese mercantile class, some of the views were not drawn from those who lived within Chinese territory, but from Chinese emigrants and traders in southeast Asia. Discoveries about these people, whose lives were by and large disconnected from mainland China, were often taken to be representative of the character of all Chinese trading communities, or even of the general disposition of the entire Chinese nation. For instance, the following conjectures were quoted and widely publicised in the

¹⁷⁰ Gützlaff, *Journal of Three Voyages*, p. 268. Similar views can also be found in Lindsay’s Report, in *Report of Proceedings*, pp. 10, 93; Marjoribanks, *Letter to the Right Hon. Charles Grant*, pp. 23-4.

¹⁷¹ Lindsay’s Report, in *Report of Proceedings*, p. 147.

¹⁷² Marjoribanks, *Letter to the Right Hon. Charles Grant*, p. 27.

¹⁷³ [Crawfurd], *Observations on the Influence*, p. 14.

writings of the free trade campaigners:

Mr John Deans, ... who resided twenty years in the Eastern archipelago ... [claimed:] 'The Chinese of the Archipelago, who, I *believe*, do not differ from the Chinese in their native country, are very sensible of the importance of commerce, and are, as I have already observed, the keenest speculators perhaps in the country'.¹⁷⁴

Robert Rickards, Esq. [claimed:]

'I *believe* that the Chinese are a perfectly commercial people. Wherever the Chinese have been established in Singapore, in Java, in Borneo, and in the other eastern islands where they are settled in great numbers, they are found to be the principal traders, and the most industrious people in the country. I therefore take the Chinese, generally speaking, to be a perfectly commercial people, and exceedingly anxious to extend their commercial dealings, in spite of any restrictive regulations that may be imposed upon them by the Chinese government'.¹⁷⁵

From such comments, it can be clearly seen that these 'beliefs' were no more than purely personal speculations on the character of the mainland Chinese. Moreover, although some of these commentators had never visited China, their highly personal opinions were employed indiscriminately as proven facts in the campaign waged by the free traders, merely because these people had some experience of the East that supported the arguments being presented by the free trade advocates. This subtle but important difference between opinions and facts might have greatly misled the British public with regard to the real character of the Chinese people. It could therefore be another underlying reason for the victory of the free trade advocates in the debate waged in the early 1830s.

In conclusion, although the campaigners for free trade quite successfully challenged the images of China constructed by the EIC, their own interpretations should not be too readily accepted. According to the evidence produced above, the free traders' principal notions of the Chinese, such as their friendly and commercially-oriented disposition, as well as their natural

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 300-1. Italics added.

¹⁷⁵ Anon., *The Foreign Trade of China*, p. 36. Italics added. Similar examples can be found in the same book that the general commercial spirit of the Chinese was interpreted by different individuals from their experience in Batavia, Cochin China, Java, Penang and Singapore. See pp. 24-38.

suspicion of their own government, were by no means as indisputable as they asserted. Hence, their overall impressions of China, particularly that the Chinese government was the principal obstacle to free intercourse between two highly commercial and open-minded people, deserve some re-evaluation. Moreover, it can be seen that, in the controversy over the EIC's monopoly in China, both the Company and the free trade advocates had endeavoured to create an image of China that would suit their own commercial interests and would justify their own actions. Therefore, no matter whose opinions prevailed in the end, it needs to be borne in mind that neither side presented an entirely reliable and unprejudiced image. Since the types of encounter between Britain and China continued to change, especially after the abolition of the EIC's China monopoly in 1834, British perceptions of China as well as its diplomatic policies based on these perceptions, would change accordingly.

CHAPTER FOUR

‘The Napier Fizzle’ and beyond: British perceptions of China in the mid-1830s

In August 1833, Britain abolished the East India Company’s monopoly of China trade by Act of Parliament. It provided that, after 21 April 1834, trade with China would finally be open to all British subjects. This decision resulted in a series of changes to British-Chinese relations. Most important, instead of using the EIC’s Select Committee at Canton, the British government had to represent the British merchants in China and deal directly with the Chinese authorities. In this context, a new trade commission was quickly established. William John, 9th Lord Napier,¹ a Scottish peer with no prior experience of China, was appointed to be the ‘Chief Superintendent of Trade’. John Francis Davis and Sir George Robinson, both the EIC’s supercargoes, were named as the second and third superintendents, in order to assist Lord Napier’s mission to ‘protect the interests of British subjects in China in the peaceful prosecution of all lawful enterprises’.²

As to what transpired as the ‘Napier Fizzle’, a descriptive account can be found in quite a number of modern works.³ In brief, in July 1834, Napier arrived at the harbour of Whampoa in a British warship without receiving any prior permission to do so from the

¹ William John Napier, 9th Lord Napier (1786-1834) was lord-in-waiting to his former shipmate King William IV, who was a personal friend of Napier and helped him to get the post. See Harry G. Gelber, *The Dragon and the Foreign Devils: China and the World, 1100 BC to the Present* (London: Bloomsbury, 2007), p. 180; Susanna Hoe and Derek Roebuck, *The taking of Hong Kong: Charles and Clara Elliot in China waters* (Aberdeen; Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2009), p. 32.

² Extract from the Royal Sign Manual Instructions to the Superintendents of Trade in China, Dec. 31, 1833, in *Correspondence Relating to China, presented to both Houses of Parliament, by Command of Her Majesty* (London: T. R. Harrison, 1840), p. 3.

³ See Hosea Ballou Morse, *The International Relations of the Chinese Empire* (3 vols., London: Longmans, 1910-18; reprinted, Folkestone: Global Oriental, 2008), I: *The Period of Conflict 1834-1860*, 118-44; Maurice Collis, *Foreign Mud: being an account of the Opium Imbroglia at Canton in the 1830’s and the Anglo-Chinese War that followed* (London: Faber, 1964), pp. 108-65; Christopher Hibbert, *The Dragon Wakes: China and the West, 1793-1911* (New York: Penguin Books, 1984), pp. 90-102; Harry G. Gelber, *Opium, Soldiers and Evangelicals: Britain’s 1840-42 War with China, and its Aftermath* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), pp. 1-18.

Chinese government. This unauthorised entry into the Celestial Empire was followed by an approximately two-month stay at Canton, for which an additional permit was required. During this period, Lord Napier, assuming himself to be the representative of the British crown, refused to accept Hong merchants as the proper channel of communications. Instead, he insisted on writing directly to Chinese officials. In his correspondence, Napier resolved to abandon the normal heading of 'pin' (petition), which implies subservience, in order to suggest equality between himself and the Chinese viceroy, Lu Kun, the highest authority at Canton. After several attempts to deliver this letter at the city gate had been rejected, the situation escalated into a crisis. The Chinese stopped all trade with Britain and demanded Napier's immediate departure. Napier, in response, adopted some strong measures. He not only circulated in Canton a proclamation accusing the viceroy of 'ignorance and incompetence',⁴ but also ordered two British frigates to force a passage to Canton when he was put under house arrest by the Canton government. After a standoff of a few days, on 21 September, Napier's weakened health compelled him to withdraw. He died shortly afterwards in Macao, partly due to the very slow journey there in a Chinese boat, the only means by which he was allowed to leave Canton.

In some ways, the Napier mission can be viewed as the first effort by a British authority to employ a firm hand in its dealings with the Chinese government. For this reason, it has been widely maintained that Napier's conduct signalled the beginning of a 'forward policy', which was designed to compel the Chinese government to grant the British increased commercial facilities.⁵ Although, recently, by examining the private papers of British officials and unpublished Foreign Office records, Glenn Melancon has pointed out that 'the British

⁴ *Correspondence Relating to China*, p. 29.

⁵ Michael Greenberg, *British Trade and the Opening of China 1800-42* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1951), p. 191; Collis, *Foreign Mud*, pp. 108-25; Brain Inglis, *The Opium War* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1976), p. 89. Some historians even falsely make no distinction between a 'forward policy' and a war, see Murray A. Rubinstein, 'The Wars They Wanted: American Missionaries' Use of *The Chinese Repository* Before the Opium War', *American Neptune*, 48 (1988), 271-82.

government had no policy of aggression toward China'⁶ in 1834, his argument has not proved strong enough to remove entirely the commonly held perception, which sees the Napier affair as a prelude to the Opium War.⁷ The reasons for this are, first, historians who have written on this subject have focused either on the 'Napier Fizzle' itself or the immediate causes of the Opium War, while little attention has been paid to the period in between, i.e., the mid-1830s. Without a detailed knowledge of this interim period, however, any research that examines the Napier incident as a free-standing event is unable to overthrow the prevailing view of its direct connection with the outbreak of the Opium War. Second, although Melancon has shown that no member of the British government was interested in waging a war against China in 1834, he and some other modern historians, such as Harry G. Gelber,⁸ have examined only one side of the story, i.e., opinions of the decision makers in the British government. Public reactions to the Napier incident and the discussion within the British community in China concerning Britain's future course of action were generally overlooked in their works. Third, despite the fact that, in the mid-1830s, British residents in China, as well as the concerned merchant and legal communities in London, were not a politically significant group,⁹ their attitudes have, in the past, been seen too much as expressing a single

⁶ Glenn Melancon, 'Peaceful Intentions: the First British Trade Commission in China, 1833-5', *Historical Research*, 73 (2000), 47. Melancon elaborates on this point of view in his book *Britain's China Policy and the Opium Crisis: Balancing Drugs, Violence and National Honour, 1833-1840* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003).

⁷ Ulrike Hillemann, *Asian Empire and British Knowledge: China and the Networks of British Imperial Expansion* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p. 92; Julia Lovell, *The Opium War: Drugs, Dreams and the Making of China* (London: Picador, 2011), p. 8.

⁸ Chapter Two of Gelber's book *Opium, Soldiers and Evangelicals* deals specifically with the general outlook of the British government in London. See Harry G. Gelber, *Opium, Soldiers and Evangelicals: Britain's 1840-42 War with China, and its Aftermath* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), pp. 19-39.

⁹ Greenberg argues that, perhaps 'the most important consequence of 1834' was that the weight of the home manufacturing interests in Britain was thrown behind a 'forward policy' in China. See Greenberg, *British Trade and the Opening of China* p. 195. Nevertheless, no matter whether they are viewed individually or as a whole, in the mid-1830s, the British community in China and the concerned interest groups in Britain did not yet possess a strong voice in shaping government policies. The British government did not take the China question seriously until reports about the opium crisis reached London in August 1839.

view which ‘clearly had no respect for China’s rulers or their laws’¹⁰ and was solidly united in promoting a policy of coercion towards China.¹¹ Without investigating the complex views held by these seemingly unimportant opinion formers, a series of questions cannot be answered and misunderstandings will remain. For example, apart from those who had direct power to decide the nature of Britain’s policy towards China, was a strong-hand policy towards China generally justified and promoted immediately after ‘the Napier Fizzle’? Was it true that all the British residents in China considered a war desirable from the mid-1830s onwards? Were any other policies advocated and, if so, what was their impact? In order to answer these questions and to understand British perceptions of China in the mid-1830s better, a wide-ranging survey is conducted in this chapter not only of Lord Napier’s own views on China, but also on the reactions and attitudes of the British observers outside government circles, especially those residing in China. In particular, much attention is paid to some previously understudied English-language newspapers published in Canton. Only after this evidence has been explored, can we ascertain whether or not the British at large were in favour of war in the immediate aftermath of the Napier incident.

I

Napier on China

After the voice of the EIC had been significantly weakened by the abolition of its China monopoly, a consensus on a negative image of China was gradually reached among western communities in Canton. In the beginning of a new era of British-Chinese relations, British commentators’ interests in China were no longer restricted to observations on the Chinese government, society, people, and so forth, but extended to new subjects. Particularly during

¹⁰ Melancon, ‘Peaceful Intentions’, 47.

¹¹ Similar opinion can also be found in W. Travis Hanes III and Frank Sanello, *The Opium Wars: the addiction of one empire and the corruption of another* (Naperville, IL: Sourcebooks, 2002), p. 32.

and after the Napier incident, a variety of opinions were proposed with regard to Britain's future policy towards China. These varied perspectives and attitudes quickly attracted much attention in the mid-1830s and, as a result, a new British debate about China was generated.

The controversy over Britain's future course of conduct in China was initiated by no other than Napier himself. Although not sanctioned by the British government, Napier's firm line of action coincided with the free traders' call for a more determined stance. For this reason, it seems that Napier was fully convinced by these private merchants on the negative perceptions of China,¹² insomuch that he completely disregarded the instructions from Britain and wantonly transgressed the local laws while he was in Canton. Nevertheless, an examination of Napier's correspondence with the British government shows that it was in fact a more complex issue. To begin with, if we compare the king's and the British government's guidance on the conduct of Napier, it can be found that their expectations of the Napier mission were not exactly the same. His Majesty's instructions to the Superintendents of Trade were essentially based on the Canton trade. The commission's main obligations, according to the king's wish, were no other than to 'watch over and protect the interests' of British subjects in China, to afford them 'advice, information and assistance ... with a view to the safe and successful conduct of their commercial transactions', and to impress on them 'the duty of conforming to the laws and usages of the Chinese Empire' provided that such laws were implemented 'with justice and good faith'.¹³ In contrast, Foreign Secretary Viscount Palmerston seems to have been more ambitious. He stated, in a letter to Napier, that:

In addition to the duty of protecting and fostering the trade of His Majesty's subjects with the port of Canton, it will be one of your principal objects to ascertain, whether it may not be practicable to extend that trade to other parts of the Chinese dominions.

¹² Melancon, however, has demonstrated that Napier arrived at this view independently, well before he reached Canton. Therefore, the assumption taken by some historians that Napier formed his opinions after he talked to Jardine in China is unfounded. Melancon, 'Peaceful Intentions', 41.

¹³ Royal sign manual instructions, *Correspondence Relating to China*, p. 3.

...
for this end you will omit no favourable opportunity of encouraging any disposition which you may discover in the Chinese authorities, to enter into commercial relations with His Majesty's Government. It is obvious that, with a view to the attainment of this object, the establishment of direct communications with the Imperial Court at Peking would be desirable; and you will accordingly direct your attention to discover the best means of preparing the way for such communications.¹⁴

This ambiguity in the guidance being given, particularly the latter point,¹⁵ caused some confusion for Napier in his proceedings in China. This fact, although it partly accounts for Napier's actions afterwards, does not mean that Napier himself had no distinct intention concerning what means of communication he should employ. In fact, prior to his departure from Britain, as well as when in receipt of the aforesaid instructions, Napier had noted clearly in his diary that:

the empire of China is my own. What a glorious thing it would be to have a blockading squadron on the coast of the Celestial Empire, vessels of a light draft of water. Considering that that enormous empire of 400,000,000 hangs together by a spider's web, how easily a gun brig would raise a revolution and cause them to open their ports to the trading world. I should like to be the medium of such a change.¹⁶

Perhaps after sensing that Napier held such sentiments, not only the king and Palmerston, but also Prime Minister Grey, all stressed to Napier the importance of adopting a cautious and moderate policy. His Majesty desired Napier to 'observe all possible moderation' and to 'cautiously abstain from all unnecessary use of menacing language; or from making any

¹⁴ Viscount Palmerston to Lord Napier, 25 Jan. 1834, The National Archives of the U.K.: Foreign Office, Political and Other Departments: General Correspondence before 1906 [hereafter TNA, F.O.], F.O., 17/9/55-7. It is worth noting that the king's instructions would of course emerge from discussions with his ministers. It may be that Palmerston did not follow an agreed cabinet policy.

¹⁵ For more details about Lord Napier's complaints about Palmerston's instructions, see TNA: F.O., 17/6/8-24, Lord Napier to Viscount Palmertson, Canton, 9 Aug. 1834.

¹⁶ Napier, 26 Nov. 1833, Private Diary of William John 9th Lord Napier during the Years 1833-4, part ii, Papers of Lord Napier and Ettrick, in Melancon, *Britain's China Policy and the Opium Crisis*, p. 35.

appeal for protection to our military or naval forces' unless in an extreme case.¹⁷ Grey demanded that:

Nothing must be done to shock their prejudices and excite their fears. The utmost forbearance therefore will be required in any point of difference that may arise, and prove injurious to our commercial relations with that country. Persuasion and conciliation should be the means employed, rather than anything approaching to the tone of hostile and menacing language; and I should rather recommend where persuasion and conciliation failed, a submission for a time or till instructions could be received from home, than a vigorous enforcement of demands no matter how just.¹⁸

Palmerston, at the same time as setting up additional objectives for the mission, not only reminded Napier that 'peculiar caution and circumspection will be indispensable',¹⁹ but also forbade him from 'entering into any new relations or negotiations with the Chinese authorities, except under very urgent and unforeseen circumstances'.²⁰ The consensus on the expediency of prudence and conciliation, as shown here, was an obvious feature of Napier's pre-mission directions from the British authorities.

Notwithstanding the unanimous demand for a non-aggressive line of action, Lord Napier did not seem to alter his own conviction of the best way to deal with the Chinese government.²¹ On his voyage to China, Napier suggested that a coercive policy as well as a firm stand were crucial to the success of his mission, because

1st, that every act of violence on our part has been productive of instant redress

¹⁷ Royal sign manual instructions, *Correspondence Relating to China*, p. 3.

¹⁸ Durham University, GRE/B42/2/5. Political and Public Papers of Charles, 2nd Earl Grey, Grey to Napier, 10 Jan. 1834.

¹⁹ TNA: F.O., 17/5/57, Palmerston to Lord Napier, 25 Jan. 1834.

²⁰ TNA: F.O., 17/5/57-8. Same letter.

²¹ It cannot be ascertained, however, what the origins of Napier's views on the China issue were. Some historians presume that Napier adopted 'a discourse of opposition to tyranny' from his experiences during the Napoleonic wars (see Hillemann, *Asian Empire and British Knowledge*, p. 94), but this was rather a speculation than a finding based on historical evidence. Perhaps the only point that can be confirmed now is that even though Napier was influenced by the free traders' propaganda with regard to the negative images of China, he accepted them, or similar opinions, in Britain well before he reached China, rather than during his journey out or afterwards.

and other beneficial result; 2nd, that every concession made and every threat used, without having it in our power to carry the same into effect, has been followed by ensued oppression and spoliation.²²

Upon his arrival, however, it can be noticed that Napier softened his tone a little in his comment on the state of British-Chinese relations, while the most aggressive policy he advocated, such as a willingness to resort to violence, was not immediately advanced. In the meantime, during his initial intercourse with the Chinese, Napier tended to justify his stand against the Chinese from an 'honour' point of view. He maintained, on the one hand, that he came to China upon the invitation of the previous viceroy,²³ and, on the other hand, he stated that 'it was quite derogatory to the dignity of the Representative of the King to communicate through the merchants'.²⁴ The medium of communication through the Hong merchants was therefore no longer acceptable under the present circumstances. It was only by means of introducing such perspectives that Napier was able to write with confidence that 'I have, in fact, adhered most strictly to those instructions, without compromising the honour of His Majesty's Commission'.²⁵

As the conflict escalated, Napier's genuine attitudes towards Chinese affairs were disclosed more abundantly in his correspondence with the British authorities. When the dispute about honour was increasingly unable to explain the dispute he caused with the Canton government, Napier still endeavoured to legitimise his action from various perspectives. Among his arguments, we can detect that some of Napier's existing impressions

²² Napier, 10 Mar. 1834, 'From the MS. Memoir Vol. 2', Remarks and Extracts Relative to Diplomatic Relations with China, Napier and Ettrick Papers, in Melancon, *Britain's China Policy and the Opium Crisis*, p. 37.

²³ On 16 Jan. 1831, Viceroy Le, after being informed about the possible dissolution of the East India Company, issued an edict requiring the Chief of the Factory to pass on the message that 'it was incumbent on the British Government to appoint a Chief to come to Canton, for the general management of commercial dealings, and to prevent affairs from going to confusion'. This was frequently cited by the British at the time to indicate that it was the Chinese who broke their word. For Napier's arguments, see Napier, 'Present state of relations between China and Great Britain – Interesting to the Chinese merchants – A true and official Document', Canton, 26 Aug. 1834, *Correspondence Relating to China*, p. 33.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ TNA: F.O., 17/6/23-4, Napier to Palmerston, 9 Aug. 1834.

of China could account for his actions during the incident. First, Napier's assertion on the validity of a forceful approach derived from a number of impressions he had gained from previous writers. In order to justify his views and practices, Napier, on the one hand, avowed that the policies recommended by the British authorities were 'certainly most fitting when one has a reasonable people to deal with',²⁶ but, on the other hand, he maintained that, due to 'the utter imbecility of the Government, and the favourable disposition of the people, I cannot for one moment suppose, that, in treating with such a nation, His Majesty's Government will be ruled by the ordinary forms prescribed among civilized people'.²⁷ Specifically, in dealing with the Chinese government, 'which is too contemptible to be viewed in any other light than that of pity or derision',²⁸ Napier referred to earlier experiences and concluded that 'success has always attended determination'.²⁹ For one thing, 'that Government is not in a position to be dealt with or treated by civilized nations, according to the same rules as are acknowledged and practised among themselves'.³⁰ For another,

What advantage, or what point did we ever gain by negotiating or humbling ourselves before these people, or rather before their Government? The records show nothing but subsequent humiliation and disgrace. What advantage or what point, again, have we ever lost, that was just and reasonable, by acting with promptitude and vigour?³¹

In addition to these considerations, Napier's confidence in using compulsion was enhanced by his conviction that the Tartar rulers and their army had lost their warlike character so that concerns about a real military clash between the two nations were unfounded. He contended that, the Tartars 'continually reinforced or invigorated from the

²⁶ Napier to Grey, 21 Aug. 1834, *Correspondence Relating to China*, p. 28.

²⁷ Napier to Palmerston, 14 Aug. 1834, *Correspondence Relating to China*, pp. 12-13.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ Napier to Grey, 21 Aug. 1834, *Correspondence Relating to China*, p. 26.

³¹ Napier to Palmerston, 14 Aug. 1834, *Correspondence Relating to China*, p. 14.

Steppes, are a wretched people, inconceivably degraded, unfit for action or exertion'³² and therefore 'I am sure they would never for a moment dare to show a front'.³³ This speculation, consequently, enabled Napier to write to Palmerston with the assurance that, 'I am convinced that a commanding attitude alone, with the power of following the threat with execution, is all that is required to extort a Treaty which shall secure mutual advantages to China and to Europe'.³⁴ Even if the Chinese authorities would not comply immediately, Napier believed that 'Three or four frigates and brigs, with a few steady British troops, not sepoys, would settle the thing in a space of time inconceivably short. ... that the exploit is to be performed with a facility unknown even in the capture of a paltry West India Island'.³⁵ From these comments, it can be seen that, instead of acting unscrupulously against the instructions of home authorities, Napier selectively referred to local knowledge, particularly certain negative images of China that he had been persuaded to accept, in order to support his own contention that a firm stance was the best way to conduct relations with the Chinese government. In Napier's opinion, firm action would induce 'not the loss of a single man; and we have justice on our side',³⁶ an argument that doubly justified the expediency as well as the rightness of his actions and viewpoint.

Second, among Napier's proposals, one of the most notable was on the necessity to bypass the Canton government and to protest directly to the emperor in Beijing. This too has its roots in Napier's established views. In his opinion, the difficulties to which the British had been subjected over the past few decades at Canton were occasioned by the misconduct of the local authorities, rather than as a result of the intentions of the central government or the emperor himself. Napier believed, in general, that it was the 'unprecedented tyranny and injustice ... by the said viceroy and fooyuen' and the 'absurd and tyrannical assumption of

³² *Ibid.*

³³ Napier to Grey, 21 Aug. 1834, *Correspondence Relating to China*, p. 28.

³⁴ Napier to Palmerston, 14 Aug. 1834, *Correspondence Relating to China*, p. 14.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 13-14.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

power on the part of the governor and lieutenant-governor'³⁷ that handicapped his enterprise and prevented a stable trade from being established. In particular, Napier asserted that the viceroy 'is a presumptuous savage' and 'has committed an outrage on the British Crown, which should be equally chastised'.³⁸ For these reasons, he deemed it essential to protest 'with firmness and spirit'³⁹ to no other than the emperor himself. Supported by his local experience, Napier might be implying that, with respect to the instructions on unconditional submission to the local government, a little modification was indeed necessary. On the other hand, Napier definitely entertained some expectation that justice might be obtained from the emperor. It was no wonder that, in his warning to the Canton government, Napier openly stated that:

let the Governor or Lieutenant Governor know this, that I will lose no time in sending this true statement to His Imperial Majesty the Emperor at Peking; and that I will also report to his justice and indignation the false and treacherous conduct of Loo, Governor, and of the present Kwang Chow Foo ... His Imperial Majesty will not permit such folly, wickedness, and cruelty as they have been guilty of, since my arrival here, to go unpunished; therefore tremble Governor Loo, intensely tremble!⁴⁰

From this statement, it can be clearly seen that Napier indeed pinned much hope on the emperor, whose positive image overall and his impartiality in particular were taken for granted. It might be that Napier inherited the idea of a fair-minded Chinese emperor from the Macartney mission. It has to be remembered, however, that the Amherst embassy had produced an image of the emperor, which was almost the opposite to that provided by Macartney. Due to the fact that the British had never managed to hold another meeting with a Chinese monarch for four decades, it might be unwise to rely too much on the consistency of

³⁷ Napier to the Hong merchants and Chinese authorities, 8 Sep. 1834, *Correspondence Relating to China*, p. 36.

³⁸ Napier to Palmerston, 14 Aug. 1834, *Correspondence Relating to China*, p. 15.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ Napier to the Hong merchants and Chinese authorities, 8 Sep. 1834, *Correspondence Relating to China*, p. 36.

the British perceptions of the Chinese emperor. Moreover, it should not be ignored or denied that Napier's adoption of Macartney's interpretation rather than Amherst's was based on his own choice from a miscellaneous collection of information available to him on the character of the Chinese monarch, and it was taken in order to suit his own ideas. In this respect, therefore, Napier's view of Chinese affairs might be considered as part of the ongoing process to produce, rather than to inherit, a truthful image of China.

Third, Napier's decision to circulate among the public in Canton a statement, as another means of terrifying the viceroy, was based on his assumption that the Tartar rulers were disliked by the commercially-minded Chinese people, insomuch that this vast community could be encouraged to support his action against the Canton government. Napier was convinced that 'The house of every Chinaman in these extensive suburbs, is a shop of one sort or another. ... in fact, every man is a merchant'⁴¹ and 'the Chinese people are most anxious for our trade—from the Great Wall to the southern extremity of the empire,—the Tartar Government alone being anti-commercial'.⁴² As a result, he considered it advisable to promote the 'publishing in Chinese, and disseminating far and wide the base conduct of the Viceroy in oppressing the merchants, native as well as foreign'.⁴³ Clearly, Napier was disposed to interpret the Tartar rulers' management of Sino-British commerce, particularly the stoppage of trade, as 'a cruel and criminal measure on the part of a petty tyranny to annoy the merchants'.⁴⁴ He also believed that 'There is not the slightest fellowship between the Chinese and the Tartars'.⁴⁵ These existing perceptions, accordingly, induced him to suggest further that, 'If the Emperor refuses our demand, remind him he is only an intruder; and that it will be his good policy to secure himself upon his throne by gratifying the wishes of his people'.⁴⁶

⁴¹ Napier to Palmerston, 14 Aug. 1834, *Correspondence Relating to China*, p. 12.

⁴² Napier to Grey, 21 Aug. 1834, *Correspondence Relating to China*, p. 26.

⁴³ TNA: F.O., 17/6/48, postscript, Napier to Palmerston, 17 Aug. 1834.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ Napier to Grey, 21 Aug. 1834, *Correspondence Relating to China*, p. 28.

⁴⁶ Napier to Palmerston, 14 Aug. 1834, *Correspondence Relating to China*, p. 13.

Apparently, these impressions of Napier's were drawn from the interpretations advanced by British subjects who had previously travelled to or resided in China. The difference now, however, is that they finally began to be applied in a British high official's assessment of Chinese affairs and could potentially exert a major influence on Britain's national policy.

To sum up, it is undeniable that Napier's actions and standpoint were substantially influenced by previous British perceptions of China. It ought to be remembered, however, that some of these existing impressions were also selectively utilised by Napier in order to support his own stance during the incident. For this reason, it would be wrong to suppose that Napier had entirely disregarded the instructions he received from the king and the British government. On the contrary, Napier spared no effort, on different occasions, to prove that his conduct was contrary neither to the honour of the British nation nor to the policies of his government and that, in fact, his viewpoint with regard to Chinese affairs was the most reasonable and appropriate under the particular local circumstances he encountered. Meanwhile, although some of the earlier perceptions were indeed repeated by Napier, he also brought a new and important development to the British understanding of China. In particular, despite the fact that he declared that, 'I am the most peaceful of men; I have no delight in war',⁴⁷ Napier also asserted that the Canton authorities 'have opened the preliminaries of war'.⁴⁸ By expressions such as this, an aggressive line of action was seriously mentioned in the official documents of the British government for the first time. As a consequence, war with China became more imaginable than ever before.

II

Whose fault?

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

⁴⁸ Napier to the Hong merchants and Chinese authorities, 8 Sep. 1834, *Correspondence Relating to China*, p. 36.

Immediately after the ‘Napier Fizzle’, there followed a heated discussion among those who had any interest in or experience of Chinese affairs, particularly the British community in Canton. Within a short period of time, various pamphlets and articles on the present state of affairs and future prospects for British-Chinese relations were produced and widely circulated. This public debate, as well as the images of China that it presented, has previously been very little studied. In particular, the reason for the failure of Napier’s commission, one of the central topics discussed in this literature, where it was examined from a variety of perspectives by different commentators, has never been introduced, analysed and interpreted for modern readers.

A popular opinion at the time was that Napier’s failure was caused by the ‘treacherous and cowardly conduct of the Chinese authorities’.⁴⁹ With regard to what Napier had suffered during the incident, a number of British writers became convinced that it was in fact unavoidable given the character of the Chinese government, because ‘the Chinese were predetermined to insult him ... no moderation on his part would have procured for him a fitting reception’.⁵⁰ Moreover, many of them were disposed to consider the ‘Napier Fizzle’ as a serious insult to the British crown and nation by the Chinese authorities, rather than simply being the superintendent’s personal misfortune. For example, G. J. Gordon, in his *Address to the People of Great Britain*, claimed that ‘Our sovereign himself has, in the person of his representative at Canton, the late Lord Napier, been insulted by the Chinese authorities’.⁵¹ An anonymous writer, in *The Chinese Repository*, asserted that:

the course which the Chinese pursued with regard to Lord Napier, ... was most barbarous and unjust; ... Wrongs and insults have been heaped on the representative of a great and powerful nation, seeking an amicable, an honorable,

⁴⁹ Hugh Hamilton Lindsay, *Letter to the Right Honourable Viscount Palmerston on British relations with China* (London: Saunders and Otley, 1836), p. 6.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

⁵¹ G.J. Gordon, *Address to the People of Great Britain, Explanatory of Our Commercial Relations with the Empire of China* (London: Smith, Elder, 1836), p. 12.

and a profitable intercourse. ... their government has outraged the laws of common right and humanity.⁵²

The discussion on the cause of Napier's unsuccessful diplomacy, from the very beginning, was not limited to the incident itself, but was closely connected to the wider context in which the Chinese government was censured from a range of perspectives. Most remarkably, the Napier mission was described by many commentators as a gracious attempt by Britain to meet the commercial and social needs of both nations and, hence, the Chinese government was accused of having violated the law of nations as well as natural law, especially with regard to economic freedom and freedom of movement. On the principle that 'All men ought to find on earth the things they stand in need of. ... The introduction of dominion and property could not deprive men of so essential a right',⁵³ one of the authors lamented that:

Considering all the nations of the earth as one family, we see no reason why one of them, because it has remained for ages, occupying so large a portion of the common soil, in a state of moral and political idiocy, shall not only deny to the surrounding members all the advantages that may be derived from an interchange of its various productions, but also insult them when they come to them with the most friendly and the most beneficent intentions.⁵⁴

In addition, some of the personal inconveniences to which the British residents in Canton were subjected also produced strong complaints. In particular, the prohibition on foreign females entering Chinese territory, which compelled British merchants to leave their wives during the trading season, really annoyed the foreign community in Canton. It was denounced as 'an insult perfectly gratuitous' that made them believe 'the laws of nature are outraged'⁵⁵

⁵² Anon., 'British authorities in China', *The Chinese Repository*, 3:10 (Feb. 1835), 472.

⁵³ A quote of Vattel's, cited by Matheson, in James Matheson, *The Present Position and Prospects of the British Trade with China; Together with an Outline of Some Leading Occurrences in its Past History* (London: Smith, Elder, 1836), p. 34.

⁵⁴ *The Canton Register*, 8:39 (29 Sep. 1835), 156.

⁵⁵ Matheson, *The Present Position*, p. 49.

in China. The British also attempted to justify their cause from the perspective of the Chinese people. They maintained that, as with foreigners, the universal rights of Chinese subjects were greatly restricted by their arbitrary government. In an article entitled 'Universal Peace; obstacles to it in the character and government of nations', it was maintained that:

the government destroys the personal liberty of its subjects; none of whom may pass beyond the frontiers of the empire, or hold any intercourse with foreigners. Those who presume to disobey these restrictions are declared outlaws, worthy of death. In this way all the avenues to the introduction of every species of useful knowledge are sealed up; ... Moreover, the government affords but very imperfect security for the property of the people. In a word, it acknowledges no rights in its subjects. Such is the unnatural, the unreasonable, and the unrighteous condition in which the monarch of this empire holds his subjects; he robs them of liberty of conscience; annihilates their personal rights; and guaranties to them no security.⁵⁶

From such accusations, the view that 'the Chinese government is in the highest degree demoralized'⁵⁷ became increasingly prevalent. Consequently, these attacks created the impression that it was the Chinese government that had ruined Napier's friendly commission and they made this opinion more convincing to a wider readership.

Despite such strong criticism of the Chinese government, this view was not advanced by all British commentators. Some writers were inclined to suggest that Napier's misfortune resulted from his own faults and mistakes. In an article published by *The Canton Register*, the author not only asserted that Napier's conduct was 'offensive to the Chinese Government', but lamented that 'It is to be regretted that a person so inexperienced and ignorant of Chinese usage should have been sent to China at the critical moment of opening the British trade with that empire'.⁵⁸ Staunton, an old China hand who had been involved in Chinese affairs since the Macartney mission, advanced a similar point of view. In a more detailed observation, he maintained that 'the case of Lord Napier is not a tenable position in argument against the

⁵⁶ Anon., 'Universal Peace; obstacles to it in the character and government of nations', *The Chinese Repository*, 3:11 (Mar. 1835), 527.

⁵⁷ Anon., 'Brito-Chinese Politics', *The Canton Press*, 1:49 (13 Aug. 1836), 388.

⁵⁸ Anon., 'The Chinese Trade', *The Canton Register*, 8:28 (14 Jul. 1835), 113.

Chinese’,⁵⁹ because Napier had infringed Chinese laws in two ways. First, Napier was ‘an individual whose first act within the Chinese territories was a violation of its laws’,⁶⁰ because:

Lord Napier could not be ignorant of the fact, as he had persons of the greatest local experience and information joined with him in his commission, that no foreigners of any description have ever been permitted by the Chinese Government to establish themselves at Canton except in strictly a commercial character; and that, moreover, no person, even if habitually resident at Canton in such commercial character, was permitted to visit that city from Macao, without previously obtaining a certain license or passport. ...I fearlessly ask, then, what right or pretext had Lord Napier to signalize his first appearance in China by a violation of the known and acknowledged regulations of the country?⁶¹

Second, Napier’s decision to order two British frigates to proceed to Canton was ‘another illegal act’.⁶² In this respect, Staunton wrote:

All this was done without any actual need of either their assistance or their protection. Lord Napier was perfectly safe —his person was not threatened—he had only to go away, and return from whence he came. The object, therefore, neither was nor could have been any other than that of aiding him in his resistance to the orders of the Government.⁶³

As well as expressing these opinions, Staunton also refuted some of the viewpoints which were commonly advanced in support of Napier’s conduct. For instance, against the claim that Napier was the representative of the British sovereign in China, Staunton stressed:

He was in no sense whatever the King’s Representative. The fact is, however, that as far as the Chinese were concerned, he had no public character at all. No public functionary sent to another state can claim, as we have seen, the rights and privileges of his appointment till he is recognised. ... official station or public

⁵⁹ George Thomas Staunton, *Remarks on the British Relations with China, and the Proposed Plans for Improving them* (London: Edmund Lloyd, 1836), p. 26.

⁶⁰ Staunton, *Remarks on the British Relations*, pp. 18-19.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 17-18.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 23.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, pp. 23-4.

privilege he had literally none.⁶⁴

In opposition to Napier's assertion that he was 'invited' by the Chinese government, but then not treated accordingly,⁶⁵ Staunton pointed out that the Chinese authorities' original intention was actually misunderstood and even distorted by Napier and other observers. He maintained that:

the Chinese did *not* contemplate the coming out of an officer from the King, claiming new rights and privileges; but expected and required that, notwithstanding the abolition of the East India Company's trade and privileges, matters should be carried on at Canton, as far as they, the Chinese authorities, were concerned, precisely "*as heretofore*".⁶⁶

These opinions, furthermore, strengthened Staunton's claim that Napier was by no means innocent of what had occurred at Canton. It is worth noting, however, that a similar point of view to this one was rarely found in other works produced at this time. This was probably because, apart from Staunton, very few British observers were able to interpret China-related affairs from the Chinese perspective and with a knowledge of the Chinese language. His ability to adopt such an approach, therefore, was perhaps one of the reasons why Staunton's views on the Napier incident differed greatly from what became the dominant opinion.

Besides censuring Lord Napier, the British government was also blamed by some commentators for sending a figure of such a high rank when the Chinese expected only a commercial representative,⁶⁷ and for giving 'foolish'⁶⁸ instructions to the superintendents. For one thing, Staunton pointed out that, although he had made it clear to parliament in 1833 that

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 26-7.

⁶⁵ See Napier, 'Present state of relations between China and Great Britain—Interesting to the Chinese merchants—A true and official Document', Canton, 26 Aug. 1834, *Correspondence Relating to China*, p. 33. This view was also held by many Britons at the time to suggest that it was the Chinese who broke their word.

⁶⁶ Staunton, *Remarks on the British Relations*, p. 43.

⁶⁷ James Goddard, *Remarks on the Late Lord Napier's Mission to Canton; in reference to the present state of our relations with China* (London: printed for private circulation, 1836), p. 12.

⁶⁸ *The Canton Press*, 1:36 (14 May 1836), 283.

the previous sanction of the Chinese government was indispensable to the appointment of any British functionary at Canton, his advice had not been taken. Instead, Napier 'seems to have been simply instructed to proceed direct to Canton, and to assume at once his official character there, without the least anticipation of difficulty or discussion, just in the same way as a successor would have been appointed to any vacant Consulship in Europe'.⁶⁹ None the less, Staunton maintained that, 'a far greater share of the blame appears to lie with his Lordship's instructions, than with himself'.⁷⁰ On the government's decision to appoint the second and third superintendents from the EIC officials remaining at Canton, some observers maintained that this sent the wrong signal to the Chinese authorities. According to this viewpoint, the appearance of these EIC servants gave the Chinese the impression that 'the company is still paramount though in abeyance, and that the whole of the late proceedings here were a trick to terrify them into better terms'.⁷¹ In consequence, the Chinese authorities were induced to think that 'if they could only eject Lord Napier, they would then be able to preserve the *status quo* of things, and conduct matters as heretofore'.⁷² From this perspective, therefore, not only the British government, but the East India Company too, was held 'indebted for our late humiliation, and the death of the first representative of England to China'.⁷³

In brief, in the years immediately after Napier's death, the published interpretations of the 'Napier Fizzle' were quite different. The reasons given for his failure, despite the frequent claims that the Chinese government had been at fault, were in fact varied. Quite a few British observers, Staunton in particular, not only challenged this standpoint from a variety of perspectives, but also suggested that Napier himself, the British government, and even the East India Company were responsible for Napier's misfortunes. These arguments, however, did not necessarily indicate that these writers, who advanced such different interpretations,

⁶⁹ Staunton, *Remarks on the British Relations*, p. 19.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

⁷¹ Viator, 'To the Editor of the Canton Register', *The Canton Register*, 8:11 (17 Mar. 1835), 44.

⁷² Goddard, *Remarks on the Late Lord Napier's Mission*, p. 5.

⁷³ Viator, 'To the Editor of the Canton Register', *The Canton Register*, 8:11 (17 Mar. 1835), 44.

entertained more favourable views of China. On the contrary, the negative image, which had been held by British merchants at Canton for a long time, was further confirmed as a result of the Napier incident. In this regard, even Staunton clearly referred to:

... the vices of the Chinese national character, and also the vices of their political and commercial system. I shall certainly not undertake to defend either. It has been my lot, during a considerable portion of my life, to have had ample opportunities of witnessing these evils ... These evils ... I have always readily acknowledged and deplored.⁷⁴

Hence, there was no doubt that the enhancement of such an unfavourable image of China helped to lay the foundations for some of the opinions expressed in the discussion of what future measures should be adopted towards China.

III

The 'show of force' theory

Apart from the debate on the cause of the 'Napier Fizzle', Napier's failed effort to create fear in the Chinese government also excited other discussions among British subjects in Canton. Was it wrong to adopt this aggressive approach? Or did it fail because it was still not resolute enough? In order to answer these questions, a variety of opinions were raised about which approach ought to be adopted with regard to Britain's future relations with China. Among various proposals, the one most prevalent in Canton in the mid-1830s was the 'show of force' theory.

The 'show of force' theory was, in essence, a general idea advanced in miscellaneous pamphlets and articles that were widely distributed in Canton in the mid-1830s. Despite its prevalence, it was neither a policy devised by any British authority nor a rigidly defined strategy promoted by certain interest groups. Little is known of who first employed this term,

⁷⁴ Staunton, *Remarks on the British Relations*, p. 40.

but it is clear that, in the two years after the Napier incident, a number of British merchants, missionaries and anonymous writers began demanding the adoption of a more forceful attitude towards China in the local English-language press, such as *The Canton Register*⁷⁵ and *The Chinese Repository*.⁷⁶ Although there was a division of opinion among supporters of this theory on what a ‘show of force’ policy exactly involved, they agreed on the fact that ‘The time has arrived when a decisive step must be taken’.⁷⁷ In light of the recent experiences of Napier, they stressed that a harsher tone had to be adopted by the British government in its relations with China, otherwise the present difficulties would never be satisfactorily resolved. These advocates proposed that a determined plenipotentiary, granted full powers and ‘attended by a sufficient maritime force’,⁷⁸ should proceed to the immediate vicinity of the imperial residence at Beijing, ‘for the purpose of demanding redress for injuries sustained, and negotiating a commercial treaty on a liberal basis’.⁷⁹ Only by these means, they maintained, would the Chinese authorities be intimidated and the two nations’ commercial relations be ‘easily, speedily, and peaceably placed upon an honourable and secure footing’.⁸⁰ This ‘show of force’ approach had much in common with Napier’s coercive policy, particularly in terms of adopting a firm stand towards the Chinese government. It was, however, based on a profound debate conducted over about two years, and therefore the justifications for such a strategy were steadily developed and they had a growing influence on the images of China that were being constructed.

To begin with, in order to make the suggested line of action fully legitimate, supporters of the ‘show of force’ attitude tended to reinforce the argument that, inasmuch as China had

⁷⁵ *The Canton Register* was founded in November 1827 by Scottish merchants James Matheson and his nephew Alexander, together with Philadelphian, William Wightman Wood, who was the first editor.

⁷⁶ *The Chinese Repository* was founded in May 1832 by Elijah Coleman Bridgman, the first American Protestant missionary appointed to China.

⁷⁷ Matheson, *The Present Position*, p. 79.

⁷⁸ Anon., ‘British authorities in China’, *The Chinese Repository*, 3:8 (Dec. 1834), 363.

⁷⁹ Lindsay, *Letter to the Right Honourable Viscount Palmerston*, p. 12.

⁸⁰ Matheson, *The Present Position*, p. 70.

capriciously set itself against the universal laws of nations and the general interests of the human race, the British had just cause to protest. For example, in an article in *The Canton Register*, it was maintained that:

We must consider the Chinese either as a civilised nation, and one responsible for their own acts, or as barbarians; if as the former, we have an undoubted right to demand with the strong hand, ample satisfaction, not only for their present conduct, but for a long debt of past indignities; if as the latter, according to the usages of nations we see no valid objection to treating them just in the manner that our superior military and naval power can enable us to do, even to the occupation of a portion of their territory.⁸¹

With regard to the propriety of employing the discourse of universal laws in the case of China, these advocates pointed out that it was absolutely unreasonable to claim that China was ‘at liberty to disregard the law of nations, on the ground of her having never deigned to recognize it’.⁸² Since the law of nations is but ‘the just and rational application of the law of *nature* to the affairs and conduct of nations’, China, as a large branch of the great family of mankind, could not be ‘exempt from the obligations of that law which God himself has prescribed for the conduct of his creatures’.⁸³ Moreover, since ‘nations are under obligations to each other’, China, whose laws ‘are all more or less hostile to a free and amicable intercourse with foreigners’,⁸⁴ was certainly ‘in a position of open violation of the law’.⁸⁵ As a consequence of such reasoning, taking a strong line towards China was seen as legitimate, no matter from which perspective it was viewed. From the standpoint of the British, in particular, ‘it is the sacred duty of every government on earth to protect its subjects and maintain its own honor in foreign countries’.⁸⁶ From a wider point of view, it was in ‘the

⁸¹ *The Canton Register*, 8:39 (29 Sep. 1835), 156.

⁸² Matheson, *The Present Position*, pp. 42-3.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, pp. 49-50.

⁸⁴ Anon., ‘Negotiation with China’, *The Chinese Repository*, 3:9 (Jan. 1835), 422.

⁸⁵ Anon., ‘British authorities in China’, *The Chinese Repository*, 3:8 (Dec. 1834), 363.

⁸⁶ Anon., ‘War with China’, *The Canton Register*, 8:8 (25 Feb. 1835), 31.

interest of all civilized nations’⁸⁷ that China should be ‘compelled to abandon a position so hostile to the general interests of the human race’.⁸⁸ In other words, with respect to a ‘show of force’ policy, its supporters avowed solemnly that ‘Recent injuries demand this. Humanity demands it. And justice will approve of it’.⁸⁹

Along with the claim that it was legitimate to interfere in the internal affairs of China, advocates of the ‘show of force’ policy also attempted to demonstrate that such a coercive policy, supported by a British naval force, was the best course of action to take. This point of view was supported from several perspectives. In the first place, experience had shown that ‘the more forbearance and indulgence are shown to them [the Chinese government], the more proud and overbearing they become’,⁹⁰ and therefore the previous conciliatory policy had to be abandoned. As James Matheson⁹¹ maintained, ‘Experience ought by this time to have shewn us that it is a foolish and useless policy to attempt to gain the confidence of the Chinese by exhibiting, as was constantly enjoined by the East India Company, a servile deference to their innumerable and absurd peculiarities and customs’.⁹² Similarly, it was asserted in the Canton Petition (1834), a memorial signed by a number of British merchants to King William IV in order to call for the adoption of a more forceful policy, that:

we cannot but trace the disabilities and restrictions under which our commerce now labours, to a long acquiescence in the assumption of supremacy over the monarchs and people of other countries, claimed by the Emperor of China ... we are forced to conclude that no essentially beneficial result can be expected to arise out of negotiations, in which such pretensions are not decidedly repelled.⁹³

⁸⁷ An enemy to half-measures, ‘What steps should the expected strength from England take?’, *The Canton Register*, 8:14 (7 Apr. 1835), 54.

⁸⁸ Gordon, *Address to the People of Great Britain*, p. 16.

⁸⁹ Anon., ‘Negotiation with China’, *The Chinese Repository*, 3:9 (Jan. 1835), 421.

⁹⁰ Anon., ‘British authorities in China’, *The Chinese Repository*, 3:8 (Dec. 1834), 362.

⁹¹ James Matheson (1796–1878) was a leading opium trader of the time. He co-founded Jardine, Matheson and Company, the best-known China coast trading company at the time, with William Jardine in 1832. As it was stated above, Matheson also started *The Canton Register*, China’s first English-language newspaper in 1827. See Matheson, Sir (Nicholas) James Sutherland, in the *ODNB*, <http://www.oxforddnb.com>; accessed 22 May 2013.

⁹² Matheson, *The Present Position*, p. 63.

⁹³ ‘To the King’s most Excellent Majesty in Council: the Petition of the undermentioned British Subjects at

According to this viewpoint, if Britain was truly determined to realise its desired commercial goals, it was essential to abandon the submissive policy which had previously been adopted and to employ entirely different measures.

In the second place, advocates of this theory continued to strengthen the notion that in dealing with the 'haughty, semi-civilized, despotic' government of China, 'nothing will bring them to submission, until they have had demonstrative proofs of the force of British argument and reasoning, at the foot of the Imperial throne at Peking'.⁹⁴ This meant that, a show of Britain's strength was crucial to this new policy because only 'when force is opposed to force, their courage fails, and they prefer concession to a doubtful struggle, in which ... they can never be victorious'.⁹⁵ To support such a view, the Chinese government was compared to a village cur, which reduced the image of China to a new low level. It was maintained that:

Timidity and insolence are two prominent characteristics of the Chinese government, whose conduct (to compare great things with small) is like that of a village cur. The little animal barks furiously, pursues and tries to bite the stranger who is unprovided with a stick, particularly if he runs; but when he turns round, the cur draws back; if he lifts his stick, the cur flies; if he actually strikes, the cur becomes more cautious in future not to be the aggressor, and even endeavors to conciliate the offended party by fawning and wagging his tail and licking the hand that gave the blow. This is a true picture of the conduct of the Chinese government, as every one knows who is familiar with its history.⁹⁶

With the introduction of this particular image, an increasing number of British subjects, as well as other foreign residents in Canton, were led to believe that nothing indeed could be expected from sending humble petitions to such a government. On the contrary, 'if we wish to have a treaty with China, it must be dictated at the point of the bayonet, and enforced by

Canton' (also known as the 'Canton Petition'), 9 Dec. 1834, in *China Trade and Empire: Jardine, Matheson & Co. and the Origins of British Rule in Hong Kong 1827-1843*, ed. A. Le Pichon (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 563.

⁹⁴ *The Canton Press*, 1:18 (9 Jan. 1836), 138.

⁹⁵ A Wellwisher, 'Intercourse with China', *The Chinese Repository*, 3:9 (Jan. 1835), 401.

⁹⁶ Anon., 'Treaty with the Chinese, a great desideratum', *The Chinese Repository*, 4:10 (Feb. 1836), 448.

arguments from the cannon's mouth'.⁹⁷

Last, but not least, the 'show of force' advocates were confident that such new strong measures could be safely adopted. Because of the timidity of the Chinese, they believed that the imperial court would make every sacrifice in order to avoid any dangerous confrontation. To reinforce this viewpoint, it was maintained that the Chinese had an innate characteristic, which was 'more apt to waste the idle artillery of words in official interdiction, than to resort to serious and really threatening measures'.⁹⁸ In consequence, history had shown that 'There is not ... a single instance in which European troops have been attacked by Chinese' in the past two centuries.⁹⁹ Moreover, since the emperor was fully aware of the weakness of his empire, as well as 'the want of loyalty in the people',¹⁰⁰ he would certainly not venture to resort to any hostile measures, but would seek peace at almost any cost. As one of the articles in *The Chinese Repository* elaborated on this topic:

Taoukwang [Daoguang], the present emperor of China, is a man of the most pacific disposition, who instead of annihilating daring rebels, begs their leaders to submit, and wages bloodless war against them by means of gold and silver bullets. ... if the matter was once brought home to his own bosom, which has never yet been done, and if he began to see the affair in a serious light and has no alternative but acquiescence in our proposals, we are persuaded that he would quietly yield to seeming necessity.¹⁰¹

As a result of holding such a view, concerns that a serious clash would immediately ensue, if the British government adopted a forceful policy towards China, were largely discounted.

It can be observed from this kind of evidence that the advocates of the 'show of force' policy strongly justified the belief that a firm line of action, supported by British maritime forces, was certainly the most effective way to deal with the Chinese government. This was

⁹⁷ Anon., 'Treaty with the Chinese, a great desideratum', *The Chinese Repository*, 4:10 (Feb. 1836), 446.

⁹⁸ Matheson, *The Present Position*, p. 59.

⁹⁹ Gordon, *Address to the People of Great Britain*, p. 107.

¹⁰⁰ *The Canton Register*, 7:16 (22 Apr. 1834), 62.

¹⁰¹ Anon., 'Treaty with the Chinese, a great desideratum', *The Chinese Repository*, 4:10 (Feb. 1836), 446.

because it was founded not only on legitimate and rational grounds, but was also the most effective and safest course of actions to be taken in order to force the Chinese government to comply with Britain's just demands. Nevertheless, while agreeing on a general 'show of force' strategy, these writers did not agree with each other in all respects. In particular, although they shared a common view of the advantages of a more aggressive stance, they were divided in their attitudes to the actual use of arms and on whether to advocate open war.

Notwithstanding the strength of the 'show of force' policy, we find that, in the mid-1830s, there were very few commentators, who ventured to embrace openly the idea of a war with China. At least on paper, even *The Canton Register* and Matheson, who were usually considered as major advocates of adopting a forceful policy, were anxious to deny that they had 'any wish or suggestion which was likely to involve the two countries in a war'.¹⁰² Some modern historians, such as Wu Yixiong, have tended to stereotype *The Canton Register* as an organ for the most hardline policy.¹⁰³ Yet, as one of the most influential English-language newspapers at Canton, *The Canton Register* actually published numerous articles which contained a wide variety of opinions. It is not appropriate, therefore, to ignore the diversity of views expressed in the essays it published. In different issues, its editor explicitly disclaimed that the newspaper had ever had any editorial policy of advocating a war against China.¹⁰⁴ This fact indicates that, in the mid-1830s, the use of arms was still not a strategy supported by a majority of British residents in Canton.

Although straightforward appeals for open hostilities were only rarely expressed in publications, it should be noted that there was widespread criticism at this time *against* the

¹⁰² Matheson, *The Present Position*, p. 59.

¹⁰³ Wu Yixiong 吴义雄, 'Yapian zhanzheng qian zaihua xiren yu duihua zhanzheng yulun de xingcheng' 鸦片战争前在华西人与对华战争舆论的形成 ('The Formation of a General Sentiment among Westerners in China for Waging War against China before the Opium War'), *Jindai shi yanjiu* 近代史研究 (*Modern Chinese History Studies*), 2 (2009), 23-43.

¹⁰⁴ 'Supplement to the *Calcutta Courier*, Feby. 7', *The Canton Register*, 8:21 (26 May 1835), 83. *The Canton Register*, 9:33 (16 Aug. 1836), 134.

idea of war with China.¹⁰⁵ This suggests that calls for open violence may have been informally communicated on a greater scale than they appear in the published sources. The fact that there were many more public appeals against a war, however, indicates that no matter to what extent open hostilities against China were really wanted, the political climate at the time had somehow prevented them from being openly stated through the press. Again, it proves that, in the mid-1830s, there was a certain consensus among the British communities in Canton that it was not wise to raise this issue at this time.

Even though the extent of most radical calls for war was rather limited, it can be shown that, after all, there were some articles, in which a clear desire to resort to force was expressed. For instance, in September 1835, one commentator wrote, ‘no delicacy should be used towards the celestials; and if it be expedient to use power to compel them to our and their own goods, we ought not for a moment to hesitate to use it. ... But the Chinese are too wise ever to give us the pretense’.¹⁰⁶ Among the available sources, this passage is probably the best evidence that indicates at this time that there were indeed some militant British commentators who were seeking an excuse to use force against China and who wished to push this hardline policy to extremes. As for such a ‘pretense’, some other commentators suggested that a stoppage of trade – the usual check applied by the Chinese government on foreign merchants – could be regarded as a virtual declaration of war by the Chinese. According to this view, if the Chinese ever ventured to repeat that policy, it could provide a great opportunity for Britain to avoid the moral responsibility of declaring a war on an innocent country. It was claimed that ‘any threat on the part of the Chinese officers to resort to their favourite and hitherto too successful policy – a stoppage of trade ... should be instantly retaliated: for it is a declaration of war, a cartel of defiance, a manifestation of

¹⁰⁵ For example, see Anon., ‘Free Trade to China’, *The Canton Register*, 7:26 (1 Jul. 1834), 101-3. Anon., ‘Treaty with the Chinese, a great desideratum’, *The Chinese Repository*, 4:10 (Feb. 1836), 441-9. Anon., ‘Brito-Chinese Politics’, *The Canton Press*, 1:49 (13 Aug. 1836), 387-9.

¹⁰⁶ *The Canton Register*, 8:39 (29 Sep. 1835), 156.

passive hostility'.¹⁰⁷ In such an eventuality, instead of Britain, it would look as if it was China who 'is determined to precipitate an open rupture', insomuch that it would 'surely deserve little sympathy'.¹⁰⁸ For this reason, one commentator was confident enough to write that

If her forts have been dismantled, her troops killed and, her laws and territory violated, what induced these acts? her own ignorance, falsehood, treachery and cowardice. Let China avenge her own wrongs; let her redress the grievances of foreigners and she will remove the cause of too probable future wrongs.¹⁰⁹

In contrast to such militant views, the vast majority of the 'show of force' advocates, although in support of a more determined stance by the British government, were clearly not in favour of open hostilities against China. According to the most common viewpoint, any step which might lead to bloodshed in China was to be avoided on the grounds of justice and expediency. For one thing, some authors maintained, to wage a war for the sake of commercial advantage was not only repugnant to people's feelings, but inconsistent with the maxims of international law. In this respect, an article in *The Canton Register* claimed that 'the act of pillaging and destroying the towns and villages of the Chinese people, merely because they refuse to enter into any treaty of commerce, alliance, or friendship with us' would be extremely 'atrocious' conduct.¹¹⁰ In *The Chinese Repository*, another author who agreed with this opinion went on to state that, 'We abhor bloodshed and that policy which would build up its own prosperity on the ruins of others. We advocate no course which is repugnant to justice or the laws of nations'.¹¹¹ Moreover, the resort to force was also rejected for practical reasons. Some observers were worried that if military action was really taken, unexpected consequences might arise and turn out to be ruinous to Britain's commercial

¹⁰⁷ An enemy to half-measures, 'What steps should the expected strength from England take?', *The Canton Register*, 8:14 (7 Apr. 1835), 54.

¹⁰⁸ Anon., 'War with China', *The Canton Register*, 8:8 (25 Feb. 1835), 31.

¹⁰⁹ *The Canton Register*, 9:33 (16 Aug. 1836), 134.

¹¹⁰ Anon., 'Free Trade to China', *The Canton Register*, 7:26 (1 Jul. 1834), 102.

¹¹¹ Anon., 'Treaty with the Chinese, a great desideratum', *The Chinese Repository*, 4:10 (Feb. 1836), 447.

activities. For instance, one commentator pointed out that ‘the Chinese may imitate the example of the Japanese, and exclude all foreigners forever, or cut down the tea shrub and put an effectual stop to foreign commerce’.¹¹² In that case, all British-Chinese trade would be endangered. Others, such as the following commentator in *The Canton Press*, reminded the public of the fact that:

this Government ... had, still the extraordinary power and influence to order its subject to retire ... from the coast into the interior of the country to avoid intercourse ... and to enforce obedience to that order. Suppose that a British force were to land at Tiensing and similar orders were given and obeyed, might not the Expedition be thereby considerably embarrassed? Or if this is not the case, supposing the Emperor sufficiently uncompromising, to render hostilities indispensable, is a force of 600 soldiers sufficient to march up to Peking ... can it for one moment be reasonably supposed that if the Emperor be really willing ... to oppose his forces to this aggression, that he would not succeed in overcoming so very trifling an armament? ... The mildest treatment of the Chinese would be to confiscate our property as a setoff for damage sustained in the north, and expel us for ever from the country. We could in justice not find fault with this.¹¹³

These considerations in the mid-1830s, by and large, maintained that it would be improper to wage war against China. As a result, the vast majority of the ‘show of force’ advocates, as well as other British subjects at Canton, were further persuaded that open hostilities against China were certainly inappropriate under the present circumstances.

For most of the ‘show of force’ supporters, their concerns over the danger of resorting to military action did not prevent them from insisting on the necessity of impressing the Chinese government with a due sense of the power of Great Britain. Although they tended to identify their views as a ‘middle course’ or a ‘half-way measure’,¹¹⁴ a fact which has confused some modern readers, these observers agreed that neither open violence nor unconditional submission should be adopted in Britain’s relations with China. Instead, they were convinced

¹¹² Anon., ‘Treaty with the Chinese, a great desideratum’, *The Chinese Repository*, 4:10 (Feb. 1836), 446.

¹¹³ Anon., ‘Brito-Chinese Politics’, *The Canton Press*, 1:49 (13 Aug. 1836), 388.

¹¹⁴ See A Wellwisher, ‘Intercourse with China’, *The Chinese Repository*, 3:9 (Jan. 1835), 393-405; Anon., ‘Treaty with the Chinese, a great desideratum’, *The Chinese Repository*, 4:10 (Feb. 1836), 441-9. The former contains four letters by different writers.

that a firm resolve, attended by a clear demonstration of Britain's ability to resort to extreme measures, was the most effective strategy to adopt. It was widely believed at Canton that, 'we can demand everything from the fears of the Chinese Government, but nothing from their good will'.¹¹⁵ For this reason, it was vital to dispatch a plenipotentiary, who was 'firm of purpose and strong of nerve, armed with discretionary powers'¹¹⁶ to remonstrate with the emperor, in order to command respect from the Chinese as well as to ensure that 'no encroachment on our rights or insult to our national honor to pass with impunity'.¹¹⁷ This course of action was considered by most of these commentators as the surest way to achieve success. For one thing, 'Such firmness carries greater force of conviction to the Chinese than the best diplomatic arguments; ... the less that proof by words is resorted to, and the more it is shown by incontestable facts, that the plenipotentiary is an immovable man, the greater will be his success'.¹¹⁸ For another, given the present state of China and the character of that nation, a 'show' of Britain's naval power would not only require no open violence, but would render much assistance to hasten the conclusion of an amicable arrangement with China:

A glimpse of one or two of our men-of-war stationed off the north-eastern coast of China, would send a thrill of consternation through the whole empire, and do more to incline the Chinese to listen to the dictates of reason and justice than centuries of "temporizing" and submission to insult and oppression.¹¹⁹

It was concluded by Matheson that 'the surest preventive of war is an unequivocal manifestation of our being neither unable nor unprepared, on its becoming necessary, to resort to it'.¹²⁰

In sum, although a 'show of force' strategy was generally the most prominent policy

¹¹⁵ TNA, F.O., 17/9/148. Gützlaff, 'Present state of our relations with China', separate inclosure, Robinson to Palmerston, 26 Mar. 1835.

¹¹⁶ A Wellwisher, 'Intercourse with China', *The Chinese Repository*, 3:9 (Jan. 1835), 403.

¹¹⁷ Anon., 'Treaty with the Chinese, a great desideratum', *The Chinese Repository*, 4:10 (Feb. 1836), 447.

¹¹⁸ A Wellwisher, 'Intercourse with China', *The Chinese Repository*, 3:9 (Jan. 1835), 404.

¹¹⁹ Matheson, *The Present Position*, pp. 62-3.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 78.

advocated in Canton in the mid-1830s, there was no agreement on how this strategy should be implemented. Among the advocates of this course of action, were those who simply wanted the Chinese to recognise the strength of those forces at Britain's disposal, whereas others were much more willing to support the actual use of force. After a detailed examination of the sources available, it can be shown that the vast majority of observers in Canton were in favour of the former point of view. These commentators, on the one hand, insisted that it was absolutely crucial to adopt a resolute and forceful line of action, supported by a display of Britain's maritime power, but, on the other hand, it was unjust and impractical to try to resort to a significant use of force or to wage an open war. It can be inferred, therefore, that to most of the 'show of force' advocates, the significance of this new strategy did not rest on any physical harm being inflicted on the Chinese people, but on the psychological impact it would produce on the Chinese authorities. What these commentators were most concerned about was that, by advocating this new course of action, it would signal a change in Britain's official attitude towards China, indicating a change from unresisting submission to firm determination to stand up to the Chinese authorities. It was for this change, rather than for direct armed intervention, that the majority of British residents in Canton had been waiting and lobbying.

IV

Alternatives to a 'show of force'

In addition to the widespread discussion of a 'show of force' strategy, there also existed in the mid-1830s some other views on Britain's future relations with China. As with the 'show of force' advocates, those who held these views can be found across different social groups, such as the British merchants and missionaries in Canton, as well as some old China experts. These observers, on the one hand, concurred with the majority of the 'show of force'

supporters in opposing open hostilities, while, on the other hand, they also attempted to find better approaches than a directly aggressive military response. Amongst these ‘minor’ voices, the following are worthy of particular notice.

First, instead of advocating a show of strength in the vicinity of Peking, an economic blockade was proposed as the most effective way to combat the oppression of British merchants by the Chinese government. Some commentators suggested that, if the Chinese authorities in Canton ventured to stop the trade again, the British government should respond strongly in order to ensure ‘their [the Chinese] own trade will be stopped as long as ours continued to be so’.¹²¹ Gützlaff, the Protestant missionary and foremost China expert in Canton, agreed that this was ‘the least bloody and the most efficacious’¹²² way to exert pressure on the Chinese government. Because ‘The trade along the coast is enormous and feeds myriads; as soon as it ceases ... the effects would be dreadful, so much so, that the local government, as well as the Court, would pray for the resuming of the trade, with more humanity than we ever intend to do’.¹²³ In an article in *The Canton Register*, it was also argued that this line of action was indeed a feasible policy to adopt. Because there were numerous navigable rivers which led to the most prosperous cities, and the forts along China’s coast were ‘in the most defenceless state’, ‘the most important parts of the empire’ were actually ‘open to the grasp of a superior maritime power’.¹²⁴ Along with these words, a detailed plan was devised by the author to cut off communications between important ports along the coast and the rest of China by using only thirteen warships.¹²⁵ All in all, according to the supporters of this policy, it was hoped and believed that, through a non-violent but resolute economic blockade, the imperial court could be made to realise that the economic

¹²¹ A correspondent, ‘Character of the Chinese’, *The Canton Register*, 7:50 (16 Dec. 1834), 200.

¹²² TNA: F.O., 17/9/152. Charles Gützlaff, ‘Present state of our relations with China’.

¹²³ TNA: F.O., 17/9/150. Gützlaff, ‘Present state of our relations with China’.

¹²⁴ A correspondent, ‘Character of the Chinese’, *The Canton Register*, 7:50 (16 Dec. 1834), 200.

¹²⁵ For the details, see A correspondent, ‘Character of the Chinese’, *The Canton Register*, 7:50 (16 Dec. 1834), 201.

vitality of its maritime provinces could easily be threatened by British naval power, indeed, to such an extent, that its control and influence over the whole country might be endangered. As a consequence, it was believed that China's general attitude as well as its particular policies towards Britain would soon be profoundly changed.

Second, in Lindsay's public letter to Palmerston, alongside his references to a coercive line of action, he also advanced another proposal. It was to withdraw all political establishments from China, only appointing 'a person of no pretensions' as agent for the customs, whose duty was simply that of 'registering ships' papers, and countersigning manifests'.¹²⁶ Lindsay maintained:

This mode of procedure will be highly embarrassing to the Chinese authorities, who are most anxious to see some recognised chief at Canton for the purpose, as they term it, of "managing and controlling all affairs of the English nation;" and on the very first difficulty or dispute which occurs, they will most anxiously inquire, why no such authority exists. Our reply then is obvious: "It is your own fault; for, when we sent one to you, you treated him with insult; and it is incompatible with the dignity of England that a representative of her sovereign should be subject to such indignity; no chief will, therefore, be sent until you promise him 'proper reception and treatment.'"¹²⁷

This alternative course of action was applauded by quite a few notable observers. Goddard, from an economic perspective, agreed that it was more reasonable to develop a purely commercial intercourse than to preserve the expensive, but unproductive, political establishments. In his opinion, to leave the trade to the 'patient, thrifty, dexterous assiduity of private and untrammelled enterprise' would be really helpful to British merchants in Canton. As 'guardians of their own anomalous privileges', they should be allowed to 'protect themselves in the best way they could against the encroachments of the Chinese'.¹²⁸ Staunton, in his *Remarks on the British Relations with China*, also expressed his support for Lindsay's

¹²⁶ Lindsay, *Letter to the Right Honourable Viscount Palmerston*, p. 5.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

¹²⁸ Goddard, *Remarks on the Late Lord Napier's Mission*, pp. 16-17.

second proposal. He acclaimed it was ‘a plan, easy and simple, perfectly peaceable as well as legitimate’.¹²⁹ Instead of seeking to put fear into the Chinese, this plan, ‘by a merely negative course of proceeding’, placed them ‘in such a highly embarrassing predicament ... that they must very shortly become most anxious to do that of their own accord, which it is not quite certain that all our embargoes and blockades would extort from them’.¹³⁰ In addition, Staunton also suggested that, in concert with the policy of political withdrawal, Britain should try to set up a trading post beyond the limits of Chinese jurisdiction: ‘there is an infinite number of intermediate islands ... which might be taken possession of, not only without a contest, but without the violation of any right in practical exercise’.¹³¹ Given the commercial-oriented character of the Chinese, ‘the Chinese would not hesitate to trade with foreigners there, if they could be assured of receiving protection’.¹³² By establishing such an intermediate trading station, Staunton was convinced that British-Chinese relations would be put onto a thoroughly satisfactory commercial basis. As a result, the molestation and oppression of British merchants by the Chinese government would be prevented, while the profitable trade with China would be maintained in the most pacific and lawful manner.

Third, a number of observers, who believed in the peaceful benefits of commerce, contended that nothing was more trustworthy than the ‘irresistible and expansive energy of the free trade’.¹³³ They maintained that, since China had ‘sufficient resources’ to ‘isolate itself from the rest of the inhabitants of this globe’,¹³⁴ a too precipitate attempt to coerce its government would serve only to retard the progress of this mutually beneficial trade.¹³⁵ Since

¹²⁹ Staunton, *Remarks on the British Relations*, p. 31.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 42. This opinion coincides with Lord Napier’s view in August 1834. In his correspondence with Earl Grey, to ‘take possession of the island of Hong Kong’ was mentioned for the very first time to the British government. See Lord Napier to Earl Grey, Canton, 21 Aug. 1834, *Correspondence Relating to China*, p. 27.

¹³² Staunton, *Remarks on the British Relations*, p. 42.

¹³³ A correspondent, ‘Commercial Treaty with China’, *The Canton Register*, 8:4 (27 Jan. 1835), 14.

¹³⁴ *The Canton Press*, 1:22 (6 Feb. 1836), 170.

¹³⁵ R. I., ‘Notices of Modern China’, *The Chinese Repository*, 5:5 (Sep. 1836), 211-2.

‘the Chinese government and people are not yet sufficiently advanced in civilisation to be capable of forming a reasonable commercial treaty’,¹³⁶ an immediate demand for a treaty might place unnecessary burdens on the British government, while not producing any positive results. The best course of action at this stage, therefore, was simply to trust ‘the gradual operation of time’,¹³⁷ so that, with the progress of the trade, the obstacles and prejudices in China would ultimately be overcome. To this end, an article in *The Canton Press* elaborated on what would transpire as a result of such a policy. Its author predicted that:

whilst on continuing a course of quiet and unassuming trade, which brings us in continual and ... extensive intercourse with the mass of the people, these will soon become aware of many of the disabilities under which we labour, and from which they equally suffer. Such a state of things must lead to evasion of the imposed regulations. The people find it their interest to treat us well to secure their own welfare, and public opinion among Chinese even is strong enough to make itself heard by its rulers. ... The rapacity of the Local Government is too great to allow so rich a prize to escape without attempting to draw large profits from it individually. The consequence will be, that the too heavily taxed commodity will not only continue to be smuggled into the ports of the eastern coast, but will be sent there in greater quantities than ever ... and the Government at Peking failed in obtaining the object it had in view, viz, that of preventing foreign ships from visiting other ports than Canton will have at no very remote date to concede to us the freedom of these ports, in order to enjoy the revenue of which under the present system it is deprived.¹³⁸

According to this view, although ‘The process will be slow, the result doubtful’,¹³⁹ the advantages that might arise from it would be enormous once the Chinese authorities realised the reciprocal benefits of international commerce. It was for this reason, as well as for its perfectly peaceful nature, that this course of action was considered by some as ‘the true policy of foreign states in their communications with China, and the only policy which the Chinese government in its present state of knowledge is likely, or possibly, able to pursue

¹³⁶ A correspondent, ‘Commercial Treaty with China’, *The Canton Register*, 8:4 (27 Jan. 1835), 14.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*

¹³⁸ Anon., ‘Brito-Chinese Politics’, *The Canton Press*, 1:49 (13 Aug. 1836), 388.

¹³⁹ Goddard, *Remarks on the Late Lord Napier’s Mission*, p. 18.

towards foreigners'.¹⁴⁰

Last but not least, some commentators, mostly Protestant missionaries, did not wholly agree with those who believed in the progressive influence of commerce. Instead, they believed that the spread of Christianity and of useful knowledge were the most just and powerful means to adopt in Britain's future relations with China. These observers contended that a purely commercial course of action was more applicable to the uncivilised races of the islands than to the comparatively refined continental nations.¹⁴¹ In the case of China, therefore, the most just and effective line of action should not be to wait passively for the long-term results of economic improvement. On the contrary, it might be a much better idea actively to 'attempt the amelioration of the condition of China',¹⁴² through 'the diffusion of knowledge and the dissemination of religious truth'.¹⁴³ In their opinion, an intellectual and moral darkness was hanging over the empire of China, and all its inhabitants, irrespective of their nationality, were the sufferers. For quite a long time, these existing evils, mainly occasioned by the Chinese government, not only suppressed or misdirected the genius of the Chinese people, but prevented 'almost entirely that interchange of thought and those kind offices of humanity, which the Almighty has vouchsafed to his creatures as their birth right'.¹⁴⁴ For this reason, the Chinese 'cannot make known their wishes or sufferings to each other, or join in any determination to acquire new privileges or redress old wrongs'.¹⁴⁵ Furthermore, the previously advanced Chinese civilisation had more recently fallen far behind the free and cultivated nations of the West. In spite of these unfavourable circumstances, these commentators continued to maintain that: 'The Chinese are by no means such a forlorn race,

¹⁴⁰ R. I., 'Notices of Modern China', *The Chinese Repository*, 5:5 (Sep. 1836), 207.

¹⁴¹ Anon., 'Free Intercourse between China and Christendom', *The Chinese Repository*, 5:6 (Oct. 1836), 255.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, 242.

¹⁴³ An American Merchant, 'Remarks on British relations and intercourse with China', *The Chinese Repository*, 3:9 (Jan. 1835), 412.

¹⁴⁴ Anon., 'British authorities in China', *The Chinese Repository*, 3:8 (Dec. 1834), 361.

¹⁴⁵ Anon., 'Free Intercourse between China and Christendom', *The Chinese Repository*, 5:6 (Oct. 1836), 257.

so incapable of improvement'.¹⁴⁶ What was needed in China was nothing but the moral power of Christianity, as well as the knowledge of western sciences and arts. They maintained that it was the divine duty of the spiritually advanced nations, particularly powerful Britain, to enlighten the minds and secure the salvation of the Chinese nation. Once darkness was dispelled and prejudices overcome, the foundations of friendly relations between China and western countries would be laid and, as a result, the evils which restricted foreign trade would be permanently removed. As one such commentator stated: 'Truth is our object ... we do wish and hope and desire to bear a humble part in labours to concentrate the *energies* of *all* in just and generous efforts to improve the condition of China. This is DUTY'.¹⁴⁷ In addition, 'Knowledge is strength: if we can show our mental superiority, and excite congenial feelings in the breast of those to whom we communicate our sciences, we shall marshal the minds of the people, and have public opinion in our favour'.¹⁴⁸

In conclusion, apart from support for a 'show of force' strategy, a variety of viewpoints were raised in the press at Canton regarding the best line of conduct to be employed with regard to China. Although individually, none of these 'minor' voices was able to contend against the former in terms of scale and influence, their impact seems much more significant when they are viewed as a whole. Furthermore, as they concurred with the majority of the 'show of force' advocates in opposing open hostilities, it can be inferred that the voices against violence were, in fact, in a clear majority, even though a war with China did become more imaginable after the 'Napier Fizzle'. For this reason, the prevailing historical interpretation that 1834 marked the beginning of Britain's pro-war attitude towards China deserves serious reconsideration. Since no one at the time could have known that a war would break out in just a few years time, we cannot view it retrospectively and maintain that the

¹⁴⁶ *The Canton Register*, 7:16 (22 Apr. 1834), 62.

¹⁴⁷ Anon., 'Free Intercourse between China and Christendom', *The Chinese Repository*, 5:6 (Oct. 1836), 242.

¹⁴⁸ *The Canton Register*, 7:16 (22 Apr. 1834), 62.

Opium War had become inevitable from this year onwards. The mid-1830s, therefore, should be considered more as a period of confused thinking with regard to Britain's China policy, rather than a clear stage in the preparation for a military conflict.

CHAPTER FIVE

An ‘Opium’ war? British perceptions of China in the late-1830s

Compared with the previous Sino-British encounters, the First Anglo-Chinese War, the so-called ‘Opium War’, has attracted much more attention from modern historians. Various reasons have been advanced to explain its origins, but little has been done from the perspective of perceptions and images obtained and established in the immediate run-up to this fateful conflict. In particular, there is a commonly held perception that concerns over the immorality of the opium trade were the main reason why so many Members of Parliament voted against the idea of war. Because the Whig government won the motion for war by only a narrow majority (271 votes to 262), Britain’s vigorous intervention in Chinese affairs has been assumed to have been a highly contentious policy at the time. In opposition to this view, however, we can find in the record of this parliamentary debate that one commentator clearly stated in the House of Commons that ‘no member was willing to declare himself directly opposed to a war with China’.¹ This evidence suggests that there is certainly something missing in our previous understanding of the pre-Opium War period. In order to obtain a clearer view of the history of British justification for the First Anglo-Chinese War, it is essential to conduct a wide-ranging survey of British perceptions of China in the late 1830s.

Unlike previous studies on the origins of the Opium War, this chapter focuses on how the images of the opium trade and related Chinese affairs were presented and disputed prior to the outbreak of the war, particularly in 1839 and 1840. During this period, the illicit opium traffic sparked extensive discussion among not only the British community in China, but also among other interested parties and the wider public at home, as well as in the British parliament. Notwithstanding the enormous distance that separated the two countries, a

¹ *Hansard’s Parliamentary Debates*, House of Commons, 8 Apr. 1840, Third series, vol. 53, 836.

number of significant publications, such as translations of Chinese official documents and influential pamphlets on this topic, found their way to readers on the other side of the globe. This remarkable change, to some extent, resulted in the expansion of the number of those who participated in the ideological encounter with the Chinese and, as a result, British opinion formers in Canton and at home were able to cooperate with or debate against each other about the same questions. In the crisis that led up to the Opium War, they not only jointly produced broadly defined ‘first-hand’ knowledge about China, but also served as the driving force which persuaded Britain to levy war upon the Chinese empire. Nevertheless, these pre-war perceptions and justifications, especially the consolidation of unfavourable impressions of China, have not been deeply studied by previous researchers as an important cause of the conflict. Based on a variety of pamphlets, local English-language newspapers in Canton, official correspondence, as well as the parliamentary debates that eventually approved the motion for war, this chapter reveals that, although this conflict was generally known as the ‘Opium War’, the controversy over the opium issue was not in essence the immediate trigger for hostilities. Moreover, despite the fact that the opium question was closely interwoven with the ensuing disputes and confrontations, the debates on the opium trade, the proceedings of the opium crisis and the means of the British government’s intervention can each be examined in its own right. In this manner, it can be seen more clearly that this war was not caused by Britain’s willingness to protect the opium traffic, a trade of doubtful morality, but by its determination to defend the safety and property of British subjects against the arbitrary government of China, and because of various concerns over Britain’s honour and its long-term interests in the Far East.

The opium controversy

Prior to 1796, opium, recognised as a form of medicine, was admitted into China on the payment of an import duty. The practice of opium smoking and its injurious consequences, however, attracted the attention of the Chinese government.² As a result, shortly after the Jiaqing emperor ascended the throne in 1796, he issued a decree which totally banned the importation of this drug. This prohibition turned out to be utterly ineffectual however. Because of the perseverance of the opium traders, most of whom were British, as well as the corruption of the provincial officers at Canton, the supply of opium constantly increased at a dramatic rate. By the late 1830s, the quantity imported annually reached 40,200 chests,³ approximately forty times more than the figure when it was declared contraband. The mania of opium-smoking that spread rapidly throughout China caused a series of problems for the Qing government. Not only were the moral and physical welfares of the people seriously threatened by this harmful habit, but the currency of the country was also affected by the exportation of a vast amount of native or sycee silver. This increasingly alarming situation at length aroused anxiety in the imperial court. After a discussion on whether or not such imports should be legalised in order to remedy the financial difficulties, the Daoguang emperor opted for adopting stringent measures to eliminate the opium trade entirely. To achieve this, extraordinary powers were granted to the Imperial Commissioner, Lin Zexu, an energetic and determined man who came to Canton with the sole objective of eliminating the evils caused by the importation of this dangerous drug.

Quite independent of the drama occasioned by Lin's hardline approach to stamping out

² Details about the opium culture in Qing China can be found in Zheng Yangwen, *The Social Life of Opium in China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005). For the suppression of opium, see David Anthony Bello, *Opium and the limits of empire: drug prohibition in the Chinese interior, 1729-1850* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2005).

³ Michael Greenberg, *British Trade and the Opening of China 1800-42* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1951), appendix I, 'opium shipments to China 1800-1839', p. 221.

this unlawful traffic, a controversy over the nature of opium and its trade, as well as the character of British opium dealers, occurred among the concerned parties both in Canton and in Britain. As early as 1835, the first anti-opium pamphlet, *No Opium! Or, Commerce and Christianity, Working Together for Good in China*,⁴ was published anonymously for Robert Philip in London. About a year later, *The Chinese Repository* in Canton began to present diverse views on the opium question, together with translations of some Chinese sources on this issue. It was not until 1839, however, that this drug was brought to the forefront of public consciousness by A. S. Thelwall's *The Iniquities of the Opium Trade*, which drew the nation's attention to the deplorable effects of opium-smoking and the problem this trade posed to the extension of Christianity in China. As a consequence of this publication, an Anti-Opium Society was formed. A number of pamphlets and articles poured forth⁵ and a debate on opium started almost concurrently in both Canton and Britain.

The nature of opium was the first subject of dispute. The prominent impression introduced by the anti-opium campaigners was that opium was 'a certain poison',⁶ whose injurious effects threatened the health, morals and lives of millions of people in China. Thelwall noted that the immediate consequence of its use was a highly excited imagination, which was soon followed by 'a correspondent lassitude and intolerable depression, which scarcely anything but a repetition of the dose can relieve. Thus the habit grows upon the wretched victim, till he becomes entirely enslaved to it'.⁷ The more this drug was consumed, the greater became the need for it, with the result that opium-smoking diminished the

⁴ [Robert Philip], *No Opium! Or, Commerce and Christianity, Working Together for Good in China: A Letter to James Cropper, Esq., of Liverpool* (London: Thomas Ward, 1835).

⁵ A comprehensive list of the pamphlets produced by the Anti-Opium Society, as well as those who participated in the debate but held opposing views, is included in Ting Man Tsao, 'Representing China to the British Public In the Age of Free Trade, c. 1833-1844', unpublished PhD dissertation (State University of New York at Stony Brook, 2000), pp. 188-90. All these works have been consulted.

⁶ Horatio Montagu, *A Voice for China: which must be heard* (London: Nisbet, 1840), p. 9.

⁷ A.S. Thelwall, *The Iniquities of the Opium Trade with China; Being a Development of the Main Causes Which Exclude the Merchants of Great Britain from the Advantages of an Unrestricted Commercial Intercourse with that Vast Empire* (London: Wm. H. Allen, 1839), p. 5.

consumer's savings and reduced his energy very quickly. Consequently, not only were various crimes committed to meet the growing cost of consuming opium, but the lives of millions of individuals were destroyed by either the need for or the further use of this drug. Although with regard to the nature of opium, there was a claim that it was 'a medicine of incalculable value when properly used',⁸ anti-opium activists pointed out that the drug sold by the British traders was actually 'deficient in the sedative principle for which opium is chiefly valued'.⁹ Compared with Turkish opium, the produce of British India was simply 'unfit for medicine, applicable only to purposes of vicious indulgence'.¹⁰ Moreover, as Sir Stephen Lushington stated in the House of Commons, in fact, 'not a thousandth part of the quantity of opium exported from India, and introduced into China, was used for medical purposes'.¹¹ Hence, in the view of the anti-opium campaigners, the destructive effects of this pernicious drug were beyond all doubt. In addition to this, they also asserted, quite unlike the use of alcohol, moderation in opium-smoking was almost impossible, because once a person was induced to smoke it, 'the habit fasten[s] itself on him so rapidly, and so forcibly, that he ... becomes in a short time inveterately addicted to it'.¹² According to an article from *The Chinese Repository* cited by Thelwall, 'There is no slavery on earth to name with the bondage into which opium casts its victim. There is scarcely one known instance of escape from its toils'.¹³ Similarly, in order to stress that opium was highly unwelcome to the Chinese, local knowledge was referred to by those who resided in China and made regular contact with the natives. For instance, an author in *The Canton Press* maintained that, 'I have conversed with some thousands of the people on this subject, and I never met with one who would advance

⁸ *Compendium of Facts Relating to the Opium Trade* [London, 1840?], in *The Dublin Literary Journal*, (Dublin: Joshua Abell, 1843), I, 221.

⁹ Anon., *British Opium Trade with China* ([Birmingham?]: B Hudson [1840?]), p. 14.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Hansard's Parliamentary Debates*, House of Commons, 9 Apr. 1840, Third series, vol. 53, 855-6.

¹² Anon., 'Abuse of opium: opinions on the subject given by one long resident in China', *The Chinese Repository*, 8:10 (Feb. 1840), 517.

¹³ Anon., 'Remarks on the Opium Trade with China', *The Chinese Repository*, 5:7 (Nov. 1836), 300. See also Thelwall, *The Iniquities of the Opium Trade with China*, p. 22.

one plea for the drug. ... not a syllable do I even hear in favour of the pipe.’¹⁴ Another concurred with this opinion in *The Chinese Repository*, where he wrote, ‘So far as we know – and we have read and heard the sentiments of thousands of the Chinese – no one ever regards the use of the drug in any other light than as a physical and moral evil. ... “It is a noxious thing,” they say, ... This is truth’.¹⁵ By such means, the image of opium was quite successfully constructed as ‘a deleterious drug which ruins those who indulge in it, in mind, body, and estate – which depraves and enervates them, physically, intellectually, and morally, and finally brings them to an untimely grave’.¹⁶

Based on such assertions of opium’s harmful nature, the illicit trade conducted by British merchants in China was condemned from different perspectives. First of all, it was contended that, since the introduction of opium was contrary to the laws of China and in open defiance of the Chinese authorities, it was ‘highly injurious to the legitimate commerce’ and endangered ‘a most important branch of our revenue’.¹⁷ According to some of the anti-opium campaigners, the contraband character of the opium trade justified the Chinese government in its policy of exclusion, as well as in treating the British merchants with constant suspicion. As a result, not only had Britain’s export of woollens and cottons declined, while that of opium had increased,¹⁸ but the extension of Britain’s legal trade to other ports of China was justly prohibited. In the second place, the opium traffic was accused of being ‘dishonourable to the British name’¹⁹ in the highest degree, because so long as a trade with such a notorious reputation was carried out in contravention of China’s law, ‘it renders us [the British] contemptible in the eyes of the Chinese, or rather it seals and confirms them in that disdain

¹⁴ S.S.S., ‘To the Editor of the Canton Press’, *The Canton Press*, 3:51 (25 Aug. 1838), no pagination.

¹⁵ Anon., ‘Remarks on the present crisis in the opium traffic, with inquiries respecting its causes, and the best course to be pursued by those now connected with it’, *The Chinese Repository*, 8:1 (May 1839), 4.

¹⁶ Thelwall, *The Iniquities of the Opium Trade with China*, pp. 129-30.

¹⁷ William Storrs Fry, *Facts and Evidence Relating to the Opium Trade with China* (London: Pelham Richardson, 1840), p. 6.

¹⁸ *Compendium of Facts Relating to the Opium Trade*, p. 221.

¹⁹ William Groser, *What Can Be Done to Suppress the Opium Trade* (London: J. Haddon, 1840), p. 4.

with which their pride has always prompted them to regard us'.²⁰ Since the British flag had been constantly implicated in this export trade which killed tens of thousands of individuals every year, the reputation of Great Britain was seriously damaged, and further commercial communications between the two nations became even more unattainable. Last, but not least, it was widely held that the opium trade was a major obstacle to the introduction of Christianity into China. Philip, the author who first raised the opium issue in Britain, attributed the failure of the Chinese mission to the fact that 'our Chinese missionaries have all along been counteracted by the influence of the Opium Trade'.²¹ To account for this, other anti-opium advocates alleged that, for one thing, 'every individual who is once enslaved by the use of Opium, is *morally and physically* incapacitated from giving any attention to the voice of Christian instruction';²² while, for another, 'the most lamentable part of the present state of things'²³ was that the Chinese at large were not be able to distinguish the hands which were stretched out to rescue, or to give them the Bible, from those who offered the opium pipe. Instead, the Chinese had to form their own judgment of Christians from the conduct of opium merchants. As Thelwall lamented, as a result of this nefarious traffic, 'how should they be able to imagine that any real good or true kindness can come from a nation and people whom they look upon as smugglers and dealers in poison, for their ruin and destruction?'²⁴ To demonstrate his point more fully, Thelwall raised a multitude of questions before he concluded his book. From these lines, a comprehensive picture of the opium trade was most vividly projected. With indignation, he wrote:

I ask of every considerate and reflecting man, Can it be doubted but that the name

²⁰ Anon., 'Means of doing good in China, or remark upon a few of those expedients of a benevolent kind that are still within our reach', *The Chinese Repository*, 7:4 (Aug. 1838), 196.

²¹ Robert Philip, *Peace with China! Or The Crisis of Christianity in Central Asia: A Letter to the Right Honourable T.B. Macaulay, Secretary at War* (London: John Snow, 1840), p. 4.

²² Fry, *Facts and Evidence*, p. 6. Italics in the original.

²³ S.S.S., 'To the Editor of the Canton Press', *The Canton Press*, 3:51 (25 Aug. 1838), no pagination.

²⁴ Thelwall, *The Iniquities of the Opium Trade with China*, p. 131.

and profession of Christianity is grossly dishonoured by the fact (well known throughout Eastern Asia), that those who profess and call themselves Christians are systematically and perseveringly engaged in this iniquitous and poisonous traffic? that our national character is degraded, and covered with infamy too well deserved, among the nations of the East? ... that the greatest market in the world is comparatively closed – and that justly – against the productions of our national industry? that we are deservedly excluded from all honourable and comfortable intercourse – commercial or diplomatic – with the most populous Empire upon earth? that the cause of the glorious Gospel of Christ itself is compromised, and the progress of Christian missions among half the population of the globe is effectually impeded? and that among three hundred, or rather five hundred, millions of our fellow-men, we are justly branded as wholesale corrupters and murderers of an unoffending people?²⁵

Since the conduct of British opium traders was widely regarded as ‘utterly derogatory to the British name and nation and injurious to British interests’,²⁶ it can therefore be seen that the image created of these merchants was very unfavourable because of the anti-opium campaign. They were denounced, for example, as ‘lawless smugglers’,²⁷ ‘greedy and pestilent corrupters and poisoners of the Chinese nation’,²⁸ and ‘the most deceitful, dishonest, grasping, criminal party’.²⁹ Since none of the opium-sellers smoked this drug himself, it was further shown that nothing but the lust for financial gain induced these merchants to violate every obligation of justice, truth and humanity. In this regard, comparisons were drawn between the iniquities of the opium traders and those who had conducted the slave trade, which was believed to be ‘equally hateful, and equally productive of human misery’.³⁰ On the foundation of these facts and accusations, the vilest and most sordid characteristics were attributed to the opium merchants. A hostile impression of these traders was hence very well constructed in pre-Opium War Britain and China. According to T. H. Bullock, these men:

for their own sordid purposes, have not only inundated with a poisonous and

²⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 173-4.

²⁶ *The Canton Register*, 12:44 (29 Oct. 1839), 177.

²⁷ H. Hamilton Lindsay, *Is the War with China a Just One?* (London: James Ridgway, 1840), p. 7.

²⁸ Anon., *British Opium Trade with China*, p. 24.

²⁹ Montagu, *A Voice for China*, p. 9.

³⁰ Anon., *British Opium Trade with China*, p. 22.

destructive drug, a country, from which for two hundred years we had drawn enormous commercial advantages, and introduced the new vice of intoxication in its most revolting form, amongst a sober and industrious people; but have carried on this intrinsically nefarious traffic, by a system of evasion of the known laws of the realm, maintained by gross bribery and fraud.³¹

Despite the strength of this anti-opium campaign, the accused traders, as well as those who did not share the same opinion as the anti-opium campaigners, were not silent on the issue. In direct opposition to the perceptions discussed above, contrasting notions of opium, its trade and its participants were also put forward. First and foremost, the opium-trade defenders declared that the destructive effects of opium on the human frame were ‘based upon gross exaggeration’.³² Some argued that instead of being a pernicious poison, opium was undeniably ‘one of the most beneficial medicines at present in use’.³³ As ‘a perfect substitute for quinine’,³⁴ it was not only ‘one of the most powerful remedies for numerous diseases which science had discovered and art applied’,³⁵ but a ‘balm’ that heaven ‘bestowed upon us ... to our suffering bodies and our troubled minds’.³⁶ In this way, quite contrary to the life-destroying image of opium that its critics had established, the discovery of this substance was described as ‘the greatest good to the cause of humanity’.³⁷ Some less radical supporters of opium, however, did not go so far, but still pointed out that, although the excessive smoking of this article might be deleterious, ‘if used in moderation, opium was not injurious to morals or health’.³⁸ It was not the use, therefore, but the abuse of opium that caused the misfortunes its critics had noted. The advocates of opium claimed that the effect

³¹ T. H. Bullock, *The Chinese Vindicated, or Another View of the Opium Question: Being in Reply to a Pamphlet, by Samuel Warren, Esq., F.R.S., Barrister at Law in the Middle Temple* (London: Wm. H. Allen, 1840), p. 105.

³² Samuel Warren, *The Opium Question* (London: James Ridgway, 1840), p. 83.

³³ Anon., ‘Mr. King’s Letter to the British Chief Superintendent, dated Macao, 19th May, 1839’, *The Canton Register*, 13:7 (18 Feb. 1840), no pagination.

³⁴ Anon., ‘Substitutes for Sulphate or Quinine’, *The Canton Register*, 11:39 (25 Sep. 1838), no pagination.

³⁵ *Hansard’s Parliamentary Debates*, House of Lords, 12 May 1840, Third series, vol. 54, 32.

³⁶ A resident in China, *The Rupture with China and Its Causes; including the Opium Question, and other important details: in a letter to Lord Viscount Palmerston* (London: Sherwood, Gilbert, and Piper, 1840), p. 8.

³⁷ D. Stewart, ‘Dr. Stewart’s report’, *The Canton Register*, 13:21 (26 May 1840), no pagination.

³⁸ *Hansard’s Parliamentary Debates*, House of Commons, 8 Apr. 1840, Third series, vol. 53, 824.

on health and morals of a temperate use, or the actual proportion of good and evil resulting from the smoking of opium in China, were questions that could not be determined.³⁹ They attempted to construct a different image that was based on certain knowledge available to the public. As ‘a resident in China’ maintained, ‘the smoking of opium, if not less, was not more deleterious than the use of ardent spirits at home; both depending upon the quantity taken’.⁴⁰ In other words, even if terrible calamities occurred because of the use of opium, these were imputed to the over-indulgence of the Chinese themselves, rather than to the nature of the products introduced by the British merchants. Moreover, in contrast to the fearful picture of opium causing general depravity throughout China, it was maintained that, in fact, ‘the mass of the people seem healthy, industrious, and cheerful, where the greatest quantity of the drug is consumed’.⁴¹ On the basis of this impression, opium was further interpreted to be ‘as great a national luxury as tea with us’.⁴² Substantial local knowledge, in this respect, was also utilised to support this opinion. The natives along the coast were described as ‘flocking on board the opium ships, bringing bags of dollars to purchase it’.⁴³ It was claimed that,

Their great solace ... is the opium-pipe. There is nothing they would substitute for it. ... They have told me, “Opium is to us what tea is to you. You cannot do without tea, and we must have opium. Deprive us of opium, and you drive us to despair.”⁴⁴

In this manner, an unwanted poisonous drug according to some was represented by others as a largely innocuous article which was greatly desired by the Chinese.

Furthermore, the character of the opium trade was also explained in ways that conflicted

³⁹ Anon., *Some Pros and Cons of the Opium Question; With a Few Suggestions Regarding British Claims on China* (London: Smith, Elder, 1840), pp. 14-17.

⁴⁰ A resident in China, *The Rupture with China and Its Causes*, p. 4.

⁴¹ Anon., *Some Pros and Cons of the Opium Question*, pp. 12-13.

⁴² One long resident in China, ‘The Opium Trade, to John Harsley Palmer, ESQ’, *The Canton Press*, 5:16 (18 Jan. 1840), no pagination.

⁴³ Lindsay, *Is the War with China a Just One?* p. 30.

⁴⁴ A resident in China, *The Rupture with China and Its Causes*, p. 33.

with the assertions of the anti-opium activists. First, supporters of the opium trade alleged that the foreign merchants who conducted this traffic had ‘never themselves introduced the Opium into the country’;⁴⁵ instead, opium was delivered to the natives from beyond the jurisdiction of the Chinese empire. This was because, in 1820, when Chinese local authorities complained that opium was brought into the port of Canton by British ships, all vessels with opium retreated to Lintin or Macao, both ports reckoned to be outside the borders of Chinese jurisdiction. Since then, although opium was still sold by British merchants in Canton, the Chinese purchasers could only receive an order for delivery, but then they had to take their own risk in collecting their cargoes from the importing ships anchored in the so-called outer waters.⁴⁶ By using these means, it was believed that the opium merchants were completely vindicated from accusations that their acts were in contravention of Chinese laws, because, clearly, it was the Chinese who bribed the customs officers and introduced the article into China, whereas, the British did nothing beyond the ‘undoubted right of every British subject to trade in opium on the high seas’.⁴⁷ Second, contrary to the lawless and nefarious image constructed by the anti-opium campaigners, attempts were made to represent this traffic as a *de facto* regular trade. For instance, it was claimed that ‘such a trade cannot fairly be considered smuggling in the ordinary acceptance of the term’,⁴⁸ because it was a fact that ‘this falsely called smuggling trade had for a series of many years been conducted with greater regularity, facility, and mutual confidence, than any trade of similar magnitude in any part of the world’.⁴⁹ When comparing it with other legitimate trade, another commentator insisted that ‘both were equally regular trades, although differently conducted, each paying

⁴⁵ Anon., ‘Foreign Relations with China, IV’, *The Canton Press*, 4:47 (24 Aug. 1839), no pagination.

⁴⁶ A Barrister at Law, *The Opium Question, as between Nation and Nation* (London: James Bain, 1840), pp. 13-15.

⁴⁷ Anon., ‘Mr. King’s Letter to the British Chief Superintendent, dated Macao, 19th May, 1839’, *The Canton Register*, 13:7 (18 Feb. 1840), no pagination.

⁴⁸ Lindsay, *Is the War with China a Just One?* p. 9.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

the duties, and fees instead of duties, to the government officers, with the same punctuality'.⁵⁰ In line with this view, 'the open and undisguised connivance of the local authorities'⁵¹ was highlighted as the very reason why such a mode of trade had subsisted so well over the past decades. Although it was debatable whether the imperial Chinese government was indirectly involved,⁵² defenders of the opium trade repeatedly reinforced the general opinion that, because of the venality of the Chinese officers and the widespread corruption within the Chinese system, 'opium enjoyed the clandestine patronage of the court'.⁵³ According to this interpretation, the local government officials in China, rather than anybody else, became 'the most blame-worthy parties'.⁵⁴ The supposed responsibility for the evil perpetrated by this trade was once again shifted from the British to the Chinese.

Last, the legitimacy of Chinese law was highly doubted, insomuch that the boundary between justice and unlawfulness was greatly blurred in the case of the opium trade. Its advocates contended that, for one thing, due to the vanity of the Chinese government, normal diplomatic relations as well as proper commercial treaties could not be obtained by the British. As a result, the opium merchants had to subject themselves entirely to the local authorities, without any possibility of discovering whether the edicts presented to them as Imperial actions, were in fact the laws or the imperial will emanating from Beijing. In addition, they maintained that the theoretical and the written laws of China were implemented

⁵⁰ *Review of the Management of Our Affairs in China, since the Opening of the Trade in 1834* (London: Smith, Elder, 1840), p. 54.

⁵¹ Dent & Co., *et al.*, 'To the Right Honorable Lord Viscount Palmerston, Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs', *The Canton Press*, 4:38 (25 May 1839), no pagination.

⁵² Some observers maintained that the Beijing government, even the emperor himself, was not only perfectly sensible of the situation in relation to the opium traffic, but partly benefited from it. See Anon., *Some Pros and Cons of the Opium Question*, p. 24. Lindsay, *Is the War with China a Just One?* pp. 9-11. Anon., 'The Future', *The Canton Register*, 11:6 (6 Feb. 1838), 24, etc.; while others argued that on account of the limited means of information transmitted throughout China at the time, the corruption of local authorities could be concealed from the imperial government. See Bullock, *The Chinese Vindicated*, pp. 75-77. Captain Elliot to Viscount Palmerston, Canton, Nov. 19, 1837, in *Correspondence Relating to China, presented to both Houses of Parliament, by Command of Her Majesty* (London: T. R. Harrison, 1840), p. 241.

⁵³ Anon., 'Foreign Relations with China, III', *The Canton Press*, 4:43 (27 Jul. 1839), no pagination.

⁵⁴ *The Canton Register*, 13:11 (17 Mar. 1840), 58.

very differently in practice, to such an extent that

the Chinese say of their own law, it was made for the officers, not for the people; it is a net no one can escape if the mandarin throws it; for a fee, anything is declared legal, and every thing is illegal to extract a fine, especially as regards trade Duties are said among themselves to be almost always matter of bargain, not regular established charges.⁵⁵

Under these circumstances, now that the authority was doubtful, and the laws far from being practicable, ‘submission to the Chinese law’ became a different and difficult issue. To account for this point of view, local knowledge was again applied to demonstrate that in the past, local officers did issue ‘so many absurd, frivolous, vexatious, inconsistent, and contradictory regulations’,⁵⁶ that the British merchants had no other option but to disregard them. Hence, they became more convinced that ‘there are no laws in China demanding conscientious obedience – beyond the universal law of truth, justice, and mercy – and that all questions there regarding legality or illegality, are questions of prudence, not of principle’.⁵⁷

In the light of the arguments above, the commonly perceived iniquitous image of the opium trade was interpreted by some commentators in a very different fashion. According to the discourse established by the opium traffic defenders, this trade was neither inconsistent with the general desires of the Chinese population nor conducted in violation of morality or justice. For these reasons, the term ‘smuggler’ was regarded as ‘a stigma on our characters’,⁵⁸ which should by no means be applied to the British opium merchants. Since opium was introduced into China because of the demands of the natives and the business was transacted with the tacit and almost open consent of the local authorities, the opium trade’s supporters declared that an opium dealer could at most be described as ‘the *importer* of opium into

⁵⁵ Anon., *Some Pros and Cons of the Opium Question*, p. 19.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 23.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

⁵⁸ Lindsay, *Is the War with China a Just One?* p. 8.

Whampoa' or 'the disposer of his *own property*'.⁵⁹ As for the character of these merchants, it was asserted that they actually commanded much respect, because they 'thought it their duty ... to submit to inconvenience and seeming degradation'⁶⁰ in China, in order to enrich 'their country far more than themselves'.⁶¹ In addition, they were the 'most intelligent, and useful, and charitable persons',⁶² who not only acquired extensive knowledge of China's coast and its inhabitants, but also 'dispensed the most munificent charities among the poor Chinese'.⁶³ Given these justifications, it was maintained that no resemblance at all could be drawn between the opium merchants and those engaged in the slave trade.⁶⁴ All accusations of the immoral character of these people, therefore, were utterly unfounded.

In sum, it can be observed that two sets of conflicting images were presented by the anti-opium campaigners and their opponents with regard to the nature of opium, the opium traffic, and its British participants. Supporters of the opium trade, at this stage, were largely forced onto the defensive. While the views of the anti-opium activists did not entirely prevail in the controversy, their views were not in the slightest degree inferior to those of the other side in terms of their strength and influence. Accordingly, it seems certain that, on opium-related issues, the general atmosphere neither leaned towards the opium trade advocates nor were any of their arguments able to justify open hostilities against China. This state of things, however, was greatly altered when the ensuing crisis is taken into consideration.

II

The crisis debate

Imperial Commissioner Lin Zexu reached Canton on 10 March 1839. A week later, he issued

⁵⁹ *The Canton Register*, 12:11 (12 Mar. 1839), 57.

⁶⁰ Anon., *Some Pros and Cons of the Opium Question*, pp. 21-2.

⁶¹ Warren, *The Opium Question*, p. 78.

⁶² Anon., *Some Pros and Cons of the Opium Question*, p. 21.

⁶³ Warren, *The Opium Question*, p. 78.

⁶⁴ *Review of the Management of Our Affairs in China*, pp. 56-7.

an edict requiring all opium, including that lying in the outer waters, to be surrendered to the Chinese government immediately. In order to enforce obedience to this demand, Lin suspended all trade, detained the entire foreign community within their factories, and deprived them of all servants and provisions. He also demanded that all foreign merchants sign a bond, the breaking of which was punishable by death. Learning of these actions, the British superintendent of trade, Charles Elliot,⁶⁵ who was then at Macao, lost no time in going to Canton. No sooner had he arrived at the British factory, than he found himself under restraint as well. On 27 March, in this ‘imprisoned and harassed condition’,⁶⁶ Elliot yielded to circumstances. On the assumption that ‘the safety of a great mass of human life hung upon’⁶⁷ his decision, Elliot ordered all British subjects to give up their opium stock to Commissioner Lin, with a promise of compensation from the British government for their losses.⁶⁸ As a consequence, after seven weeks or so, a total of 20,283 chests⁶⁹ of opium were handed over. The confinement in Canton then came to an end. Although Elliot and his fellow Britons retreated to Macao soon afterwards, the diplomatic crisis between China and Britain was not resolved. On 7 July, a riot took place in a village near Hong Kong. Several British seamen and a few Americans were involved in the death of a Chinese native named Lin Weixi. Commissioner Lin, on this occasion, demanded the surrender of the murderer to Chinese justice, but Elliot’s investigation failed to identify this individual and so no one could be

⁶⁵ Sir Charles Elliot (1801-75) arrived in China in 1834 as master attendant to Napier commission. Elliot was plenipotentiary and chief superintendent between 1836 and 1841. See Elliot, Sir Charles, in the *ODNB*, <http://www.oxforddnb.com>; accessed 22 May 2013.

⁶⁶ Captain Elliot to Viscount Palmerston, Canton, 30 Mar. 1839, in *Correspondence Relating to China*, p. 355.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 357.

⁶⁸ As a matter of fact, according to the instructions given by the British government, Elliot had neither real authority over these British subjects, nor any legal standing to make this pledge on behalf of the government. This man’s authority had been in dispute since he was appointed to his superintendancy. As Julia Lovell wrote, Elliot was in a very awkward position in 1839, because he was ‘socially isolated by the foreign merchant population in Macao ... politically and linguistically challenged in Canton, and infuriated by contradictory instructions from London’. See Julia Lovell, *The Opium War: Drugs, Dreams and the Making of China* (London: Picador, 2011), p. 64.

⁶⁹ 1540 chests belonged to American merchants.

delivered up to Commissioner Lin. In response,⁷⁰ Lin cut off supplies for Macao and moved 2000 troops to an adjacent town. All British subjects, including women and children, were compelled to abandon their dwellings in Macao without being given any time to make preparations for their departure. They had to seek refuge on board the merchant fleet off Hong Kong, where the denial of provisions was repeated in addition to other local irritations. On 4 September, an armed conflict took place at Kowloon when the first shots between British and Chinese warships were exchanged. Serious intervention from the British government now seemed inevitable. In April 1840, the Whig government narrowly won a parliamentary motion in support of war. After just three months, a British naval force arrived off Macao and the First Anglo-Chinese War began.⁷¹

As with the opium controversy, the crisis in 1839 touched off a heated debate both within the British community in China and between concerned parties back home. Various viewpoints were raised as to the fairness or injustice of Commissioner Lin's conduct. In this debate, contrasting images of China were produced or reaffirmed in support of the various arguments advanced. Eventually, at variance with the contention that China was completely in the wrong, a less biased point of view, which saw the insults delivered during the crisis as separate from the immorality of the opium trade, met with the most favourable response. Serious intervention on the part of the British government, as a result, was legitimised on the grounds of the injustice and unreliability of the Chinese authorities.

According to the most radical wing of these commentators, who were mainly solid supporters of the opium trade, China was entirely in the wrong because 'a gross infraction of

⁷⁰ Another factor that might have irritated Commissioner Lin was that as soon as the British had left Canton, they renewed the sale of opium along the Chinese coast.

⁷¹ It should be noted that the British Parliament did not declare war on China. It merely authorised the dispatch of a fleet and the mobilisation of further troops in India in order to obtain 'satisfaction and reparation' and, if necessary, to 'hold in custody the ships of the Chinese and their cargoes'. See J.D. Spence, *The Search for Modern China* (New York; London: Norton, 1999), p. 156.

the law of nations'⁷² had been committed. They insisted, first of all, that the principle of free trade had been severely violated. On the one hand, since every article was 'in itself good, and ... may be cultivated, manufactured, bought, sold, and distributed all over the world',⁷³ opium was 'no exception as an article, nor China as a country'.⁷⁴ In particular, given the vast population of China, a 'moderate' trade in opium at present should by all means be deemed as quite proper. On the other hand, no political system had the right to keep out 'those luxuries which the people enjoyed, or were able to purchase, or to prevent the efflux of precious metals, when it was demanded by the course of trade'.⁷⁵ Therefore, even though the Chinese government had declared opium to be an illicit article and had erected various legal barriers to its commerce with the West, foreign merchants were still justified in carrying on the trade in any product that was desired by Chinese subjects, 'with or without her consent, contraband or otherwise'.⁷⁶ It was also alleged that a serious insult had been committed 'not only against British subjects and property, but also against the dignity of the British crown'.⁷⁷ For one thing, Commissioner Lin's decision to incarcerate Elliot was a direct affront to the British sovereign, because, according to international law, Elliot's public character as the Queen's representative at Canton was not merely 'sacred and inviolable, but independent of the jurisdiction of the Chinese government'.⁷⁸ For another thing, the forcible detainment and expulsion of the British community, as well as the confiscation of their property, without a judicial hearing, were unlawful proceedings. Some commentators maintained that these merchants came to China 'under the full protection of the British flag, and under the sanction

⁷² Warren, *The Opium Question*, p. 101.

⁷³ Anon., *Some Pros and Cons of the Opium Question*, p. 34.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

⁷⁵ *Hansard's Parliamentary Debates*, House of Commons, 7 Apr. 1840, Third series, vol. 53, 717.

⁷⁶ A resident in China, *The Rupture with China and Its Causes*, p. 44.

⁷⁷ Alexander Graham, *The Right, Obligation, and Interest of the Government of Great Britain to require redress from the Government of China for the late forced surrender of British-owned Opium at Canton* (Glasgow: Robert Stuart, 1840), p. 17.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

of British authority ... in pursuit of the objects of national commerce',⁷⁹ but, in the recent crisis, they were treated 'like a parcel of wild animals, and, without ... an opportunity of pleading the cause'.⁸⁰ Clearly, by seeking to propagate such perceptions, commentators could claim that Britain could be justifiably outraged by such attacks on the persons and property of its countrymen. The Chinese authorities were blamed as the sole responsible party for this crisis in Sino-British relations. Last, but not least, in order to justify the necessity of taking retaliatory measures, China was characterised as a capricious 'other' that had long held other countries in contempt and had often set at defiance the laws of civilised nations. It was asserted that, 'the single fundamental cause' of the present crisis and also of past disputes was the 'the arrogant assumption of supremacy on the part of China over foreigners'.⁸¹ Although China had no real sense of its relative place in the scale of nations, its rulers believed themselves first among nations in knowledge and power, insomuch that they were accustomed to acting as the supreme authority, wholly regardless of the laws of international society. For centuries, China had displayed to foreigners 'the petty tyranny of the self-sufficient pedagogue, and have frequently laid on them the strong hand of the unrestrained despot'.⁸² Nevertheless, it was contended that, even though the Chinese empire sought to exist in isolation from other nations, in accordance with the maxim that the majority should give law to the minority, the Chinese were not entitled to ignore any international law with complete impunity. On the contrary, since numerically they were only one third of the human race, 'China, as one, cannot be allowed to oppose the rest of the world, who are two, and more particularly when she is asked to do any thing that cannot injure herself, or place her in a worse state than she is at present'.⁸³ By such means as this, China's image was confirmed as

⁷⁹ Warren, *The Opium Question*, p. 114.

⁸⁰ A Barrister at Law, *The Opium Question, as between Nation and Nation*, p. 44.

⁸¹ Anon., 'On the causes of rupture between England and China', *The Chinese Repository*, 8:12 (Apr. 1840), 622.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 621.

⁸³ *Review of the Management of Our Affairs in China*, p. 90.

a presumptuous and arbitrary power which set itself against the rest of the world and acted in opposition to the common interests of other civilised societies. Based on this assumption, any challenge to China's authority was justified in the name of protecting international law. Especially, in view of the present crisis, in which Britain's economic interests and national honour were both damaged, Foreign Secretary Palmerston accepted such interpretations of the crisis. He condemned Lin Zexu's conduct as 'totally at variance with international law, a course of the most arbitrary kind, and liable to every possible objection'.⁸⁴ In consequence, many observers at the time, including Palmerston himself, were convinced that Britain was legitimately 'entitled to demand satisfaction, reparation, and redress'⁸⁵ from the Chinese authorities.

In opposition to the views outlined above, a number of contrary arguments were raised, mostly by the anti-opium advocates. They averred that many of the aforesaid remarks were contrary to the truth, while 'right and justice are entirely on the side of China'.⁸⁶ First of all, they pointed out that it was incorrect to regard Elliot as the representative of the Queen. Since the Chinese authorities had never acknowledged any official personage at Canton, this British agent was, in fact, 'nothing more than chief commercial agent'.⁸⁷ Moreover, the fact that Elliot had to communicate with the local government in China through Hong merchants clearly indicated that he had no political authority to represent British interests whatsoever. Therefore, as William Gladstone claimed in Parliament, since 'by the Chinese he had only been received as a commercial officer ... it was unjust to contend that the Chinese were responsible as if they had known him in the character of a regularly-accredited diplomatic agent'.⁸⁸ In addition, it was maintained that, although Lin Zexu's decisions to suspend all trade and to act against the whole foreign community sounded cruel and unjustifiable, it was

⁸⁴ *Hansard's Parliamentary Debates*, House of Commons, 9 Apr. 1840, Third series, vol. 53, 939.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 27 Jul. 1840, vol. 55, 1047.

⁸⁶ Sydney S. Bell, *Answer to 'The Opium Question' by Samuel Warren* (London: Smith, Elder, 1840), p. 7.

⁸⁷ Montagu, *A Voice for China*, p. 24.

⁸⁸ *Hansard's Parliamentary Debates*, House of Commons, 27 Jul. 1840, Third series, vol. 55, 1036.

in fact not entirely unreasonable in the circumstances, because, in Canton, there was neither the necessity nor the possibility of fixing the guilt on individuals, since ‘the entire British community, at Canton, was directly or indirectly implicated in this odious traffic’.⁸⁹ In this regard, even Elliot himself admitted that ‘the Chinese Government had a just ground for hard measures towards the lawful trade, upon the plea that there was no distinguishing between the right and the wrong’.⁹⁰ As to the Lin Weixi incident, since the murderer could not be delivered up to the Chinese authorities, China certainly had a right to refuse all those who might be concerned in this incident the right to remain on Chinese territory. In particular, in light of Britain’s well-known conduct in India, it was perfectly understandable that the Chinese government remained suspicious of all westerners, especially the British, and excluded the suspicious ones whenever it deemed it to be necessary to do so in order to protect its own interests. Moreover, against the general charge of China’s unwillingness to abide by the common law of nations, many observers suggested that every nation was entitled to choose for itself what contributed most to its own wellbeing. Any interference with this right should be considered as an infringement of its liberty. Since the Chinese government never formally recognised what the West called international law, the principles of this law were by no means applicable to China. Accordingly, with regard to the present crisis, it was affirmed that ‘the Chinese Government had the “unquestionable right” ... to prohibit the importation of Opium ... to enforce it by penalties; ... The extent of the penalty is left to the discretion of the power making the law, and necessarily so’.⁹¹ Meanwhile, ‘every foreigner was bound to pay absolute, implicit, unconditional, obedience’⁹² to these laws, irrespective of the grounds upon which they were founded.

In line with the direct refutation of the key arguments of the pro-war agitators, these

⁸⁹ Anon., *British Opium Trade with China*, p. 19.

⁹⁰ Captain Elliot to Viscount Palmerston, Canton, 30 Jan. 1839, in *Correspondence Relating to China*, p. 343.

⁹¹ Bullock, *The Chinese Vindicated*, p. 101.

⁹² *Hansard’s Parliamentary Debates*, House of Lords, 12 May 1840, Third series, vol. 54, 2.

anti-war commentators also pointed out that the public was being misled into believing that brutal oppression had long been deployed indiscriminately by the despotic Chinese authorities against the British community in Canton. They alleged that this was a false way of perceiving and understanding the nature of China and its government. A whole range of established impressions needed to be revised. To start with, it was stressed that, as a matter of fact, the living and trading conditions of foreigners in Canton were not as harsh as was generally supposed. To prove this, there were frequent references to comments made by some influential British personages in China. For example, William Jardine,⁹³ the famous opium merchant, had clearly stated that life and property in China were

more effectually protected by laws than in many other parts of the East, or of the world ... business is conducted with unexampled facility, and in general with singular good faith ... for these reasons it was that so many of our country men visited this country, and remained there so long.⁹⁴

Elliot himself declared that the Chinese people 'have great confidence in the good faith of the Europeans ... they are ... the most moderate and reasonable people on the face of the earth'.⁹⁵ The local government in China, Bullock suggested, was 'more lenient to strangers than to themselves, constantly making allowances for any infraction of the law, by the assumption that the offence had been ignorantly committed, and never overstepping the law to punish or injure'.⁹⁶ On the basis of these very different perceptions, it was contended that the Chinese, in fact, expressed no enmity and displayed no ill feeling towards the British. As far as the recent crisis was concerned, the Chinese government's intention was simply to put

⁹³ William Jardine (1784-1843) was a Scottish merchant who came to China in 1820 and co-founded Jardine, Matheson and Company with Matheson in 1832. By the mid-1830s, Jardine was regarded as 'the most influential British figure at Canton' and was 'already a celebrated name in the commercial world of London'. After the opium crisis in 1839, Jardine returned to London and pressed Foreign Secretary Palmerston for a forceful response. See Jardine, William, in the *ODNB*, <http://www.oxforddnb.com>; accessed 22 May 2013.

⁹⁴ This was taken from a talk Jardine gave on 19 Jan. 1839, see Bullock, *The Chinese Vindicated*, pp. 19-20.

⁹⁵ Captain Elliot to Viscount Palmerston, Macao, 8 Jan. 1839, in *Correspondence Relating to China*, p. 341.

⁹⁶ Bullock, *The Chinese Vindicated*, p. 27.

down the opium trade, the majority of whose participants happened to be British subjects. This action therefore could by no means be taken as support for the widely propagated notion that in China there was considerable and widespread antipathy towards Britain. Furthermore, even though forcible measures were in the last resort adopted against the opium dealers, they were adopted by the Chinese government with the utmost reluctance. In this regard, many observers spared no effort in order to show that, despite the fact that the Chinese government had a clear right to suppress the illicit trade by any methods it chose, it was only after reiterated exhortations and warnings had failed to produce any effective results that the penalties of the law were enforced. As George Palmer mentioned in the House of Commons, since the Chinese ‘had given ample warning of their intentions preceding the carrying them into execution ... it was too bad to turn round on them now and attack them for its exercise’.⁹⁷ Last, against the charge that Commissioner Lin had exceeded the limits of international obligations, it was stated that, on the contrary, the Chinese authorities had implemented their anti-opium campaign with much forbearance and leniency. For one thing, to place Elliot, who had illegally forced his way to Canton without permission ‘under gentlemanly restraint in his house’ was ‘the mildest possible’ means by which Lin Zexu could possibly achieve his objectives.⁹⁸ This fairly moderate detention could in no sense be interpreted as a harsh or unjust imprisonment. Moreover, over the years, the opium merchants had been treated by the Chinese government ‘with more kindness than if they had been proceeded against either according to the spirit of the English or of Chinese law’.⁹⁹ On the present occasion, it was indisputable that the Chinese, at any rate, had a right to drive these individuals from their territory because of their obstinate persistence in this illegal trade. For this reason, William Gladstone maintained in the parliamentary debate, ‘I do not know how it

⁹⁷ *Hansard's Parliamentary Debates*, House of Commons, 8 Apr. 1840, Third series, vol. 53, 834-5.

⁹⁸ Anon., *British Opium Trade with China*, p. 19.

⁹⁹ *Hansard's Parliamentary Debates*, House of Lords, 12 May 1840, Third series, vol. 54, 9.

can be urged as a crime against the Chinese that they refused provisions to those who refused obedience to their laws whilst residing within their territories’.¹⁰⁰

These very different interpretations presented a fairly positive image of the Chinese. Bullock wrote in *The Chinese Vindicated*:

the security of the merchants in China has never been violated, nor placed in jeopardy, by any capricious or oppressive measure of the Chinese. ... There has been no wrong, no oppression, no cruelty – no life has been taken, no property seized, no person injured – but life and property have been inviolate, and under gross provocation, the greatest forbearance exercised towards those whom they affectingly call the “far travelled foreigner.”¹⁰¹

In such a light, China could no longer be portrayed as a tyrannical and arbitrary power that mistreated innocent foreign merchants. On the contrary, the Chinese government had been careful in its efforts not to offend the British. When China exercised its laws against persistent opium traders, its sole aim was to protect Chinese subjects from a highly dangerous product. The enforcement of Chinese laws, in this manner, was justifiable and was exercised in a very lenient fashion. None of China’s international obligations had been violated to any great extent. In fact, blame deserved to be placed entirely on the British opium merchants. They were characterised as the real aggressors and as men who had applied double standards in their dealings with the Chinese. It was maintained that these opium traders continued to defy and systematically violate the laws of China, in selfish pursuit of their own financial interests. When China was compelled to take legal measures against their unlawful conduct, they unjustly sought to impose upon her ‘the international laws of Europe’,¹⁰² which China had never recognised, in order to justify their actions as well as seeking to provoke the British government’s intervention on their behalf. In view of these facts, Montagu announced in *A*

¹⁰⁰ *Hansard’s Parliamentary Debates*, House of Commons, 8 Apr. 1840, Third series, vol. 53, 818.

¹⁰¹ Bullock, *The Chinese Vindicated*, pp. 16-21.

¹⁰² *Hansard’s Parliamentary Debates*, House of Commons, 7 Apr. 1840, Third series, vol. 53, 737.

Voice for China:

China ... is not the aggressor, nor the first to violate the laws of God or man. It is our own country which *is the first to commit this crime*, ... China is “innocent and unoffending” to us; until we first seduced, bribed, provoked, and poisoned them into resistance and aggression, by our guilty, lawless, violent, unchristian, Opium smuggling... No nation in defending itself is an aggressor. Doubtless this fearful carnage must be traced, not to China as the first to act on the offensive, but to England as the violator of her laws, and thereby compelling China to act both on the defensive and offensive.¹⁰³

In this spirit, a lot of observers at this time were persuaded that there had been no violation of international law on the part of the Chinese and, hence, any act of hostility or aggression against China on these grounds was entirely unjustified.

In spite of these different views for or against the Chinese government, the most popular approach taken in Britain in order to evaluate the opium crisis was to concentrate on the insults offered to Britain by the Chinese authorities rather than on the injustice or immorality of the opium trade. Supporters of this attitude were not necessarily advocates of the opium traffic, nor opponents of the opium traders, but, from a less biased standpoint, they generated a more influential case, which to a great extent produced Britain’s decision to intervene in the dispute with China. Against the assertion that justice was entirely on China’s side, it was maintained that those who upheld that point of view ‘very foolishly, mix up the insult and violence with the illicit trade’.¹⁰⁴ It was stressed that the essence of the present crisis was that ‘*a legitimate end is no justification of illegitimate means*’.¹⁰⁵ Although it was undeniable that China had the right to stamp out a contraband trade for its own safety and well-being, ‘the circumstances of severity under which it took place’,¹⁰⁶ were a great wrong and a serious

¹⁰³ Montagu, *A Voice for China*, pp. 25-30.

¹⁰⁴ William Jardine in London to James Matheson in China, 25-7 Sep. 1839, in *China Trade and Empire: Jardine, Matheson & Co. and the Origins of British Rule in Hong Kong 1827-1843*, ed. Alain Le Pichon (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 387.

¹⁰⁵ Graham, *The Right, Obligation, and Interest*, p. 16. Italics in the original.

¹⁰⁶ *Hansard’s Parliamentary Debates*, House of Commons, 27 Jul. 1840, Third series, vol. 55, 1039.

insult to British subjects and their property, as well as to the honour of the British crown. Despite the fact that the seizure of contraband goods found within the jurisdiction of the Chinese government was a lawful act, the coerced surrender of opium without its jurisdictional limits, especially before these goods had actually been smuggled into China, could not be understood in the same light. Staunton, the China expert who translated *Ta Tsing Leu Lee* (大清律例; *The Penal code of China*), proclaimed in his parliamentary speech:

there was absolutely no law authorizing the confiscation of goods, under any circumstances, outside the port. The opium lying in the receiving ships at Lintin, was no more liable to confiscation by any existing fiscal law of the Chinese, than if had been lying in the river Thames.¹⁰⁷

As Staunton was never a friend of the opium trade and ‘yielded to no Member of the House in his anxiety to put it down altogether’,¹⁰⁸ his view in this respect was very well received. Moreover, it was widely held that, in Canton, Lin Zexu never attempted to distinguish the participants in the opium trade from those involved in the legal trade, but placed both traffics under one common suspension and the whole foreign community in arbitrary confinement. In consequence, and not only from a commercial point of view, ‘the innocent and the guilty have both had to suffer – and in some cases it may be the former have sustained greater losses than the latter’,¹⁰⁹ but, most important, all British men in Canton,¹¹⁰ whether they were implicated in the opium trade or not, were indiscriminately taken hostage. In a period of seven weeks, they were threatened with capital punishment, as well as being deprived of food and servants. Even Britain’s chief officer in China, no matter if he was regarded as the sovereign’s representative or not, was not excepted from such harsh treatment. A few months

¹⁰⁷ *Corrected Report of the Speech of Sir George Staunton, on Sir James Graham’s Motion on the China Trade, in the House of Commons, April 7, 1840* (London: Simpkin, Marshall, 1840), p. 13.

¹⁰⁸ *Hansard’s Parliamentary Debates*, House of Commons, 7 Apr. 1840, Third series, vol. 53, 740.

¹⁰⁹ Anon., ‘The new year; posture of public affairs; prospects and probable consequences of war between the governments of China and Great Britain’, *The Chinese Repository*, 8:9 (Jan. 1839), 443.

¹¹⁰ Women from foreign countries were not allowed to enter Canton. They normally resided in Macao and hence were separated from their husbands during the trading season.

later, when Elliot was unable to identify the murderer of Lin Weixi, not only British men, but British women and children, who certainly had no involvement in any illegal activities, were treated with equal severity. They were expelled from their residences at only three hours' notice, with all means of subsistence cut off. Commands were even given to natives along the coast to fire upon and seize the British whenever they went on shore to purchase provisions. Under these circumstances, there was no doubt that the lives and property of quite a number of law-abiding British subjects were put in jeopardy at the hands of the tyrannical Chinese authorities. With the introduction of these specific examples, a rather deplorable spectacle concerning the occurrences in China was presented to the public. For example, as an article of *The Canton Press* illustrated:

our sovereign has been styled the “respectful and submissive tributary of China”. Her representative has been seized, imprisoned and his life threatened, our merchants innocent and guilty have been confounded together, and the lives of the whole put in imminent peril, our women and children, who never committed any crime, have been expelled from these shores almost at the sword's point, edicts have been published by which the peaceable people of this country are incited to take up arms and shoot any Englishman who might go ashore in quest of food as if he were a wild beast, and hostilities have actually been waged against our fleet of merchantmen, by far the greater number of which were lying pacifically at anchor and contravening no law either of this empire or any other.¹¹¹

In light of these opinions of Chinese conduct, some commentators firmly believed that, although China had a right to seize any contraband goods smuggled into its dominions, or even inflict death on the detected smugglers in compliance with its own laws, Lin Zexu's forcible measures to punish the innocent with the guilty had already crossed the line of acceptable conduct. Even although China was not bound by international law, its recent proceedings were contrary to the most ordinary sense of justice, as well as ‘every principle of justice and eternal truth ... which must exist so long as man and man had the power of

¹¹¹ Ramrod, ‘To the Editor of the Canton Press’, *The Canton Press*, 5:11 (14 Dec. 1839), no pagination.

conversation and intercourse with one another'.¹¹² On such grounds, in opposition to the claim that China was not the aggressor, it was maintained that, 'from the moment British subjects at Canton were placed in prison to the danger of their lives, the Chinese became the aggressors'.¹¹³ Since the British government had a natural and legal obligation to protect 'the sacredness of British life, liberty, and property, from sudden and most unjustifiable aggression',¹¹⁴ it was absolutely right and necessary to take immediate and vigorous counter-measures against the crimes committed by the Chinese. To legitimise further the actions of the British government, supporters of this view made considerable efforts to distinguish the evil of the opium trade and the injustice of Lin Zexu's actions as two quite separate issues. They maintained that, 'the question between us and the Chinese, in a national point of view, has nothing to do with the immorality or the impolicy of the trade'.¹¹⁵ The British government had never had any intention of protecting those who violated Chinese law by engaging in that illicit trade, but, at the same time, it also could not disregard the insult and injuries that the Chinese had unjustly inflicted upon the honour of the British nation and the interests of British merchants. As to the present crisis, despite the fact that China had formerly been on the right side when it commenced its campaign to drive out opium, 'the Chinese had now put themselves in the wrong'.¹¹⁶ It was these latter outrages, rather than the earlier trade whose justice was very doubtful, to which Britain was responding. T. B. Macaulay, in his celebrated speech, which to some extent set the tone for the parliamentary debate on this issue, made it very clear:

that government had a right to keep out opium, to keep in silver, and to enforce their prohibitory laws, by whatever means which they might possess, consistently

¹¹² *Hansard's Parliamentary Debates*, House of Commons, 9 Apr. 1840, Third series, vol. 53, 864.

¹¹³ *Hansard's Parliamentary Debates*, House of Commons, 27 Jul. 1840, Third series, vol. 55, 1051-2.

¹¹⁴ Captain Elliot to Viscount Palmerston, Canton, 13 Apr. 1839, in *Correspondence Relating to China*, p. 388.

¹¹⁵ *Corrected Report of the Speech of Sir George Staunton*, p. 11.

¹¹⁶ *Hansard's Parliamentary Debates*, House of Lords, 12 May 1840, Third series, vol. 54, 43.

with the principles of public morality, and of international law; and if, after having given fair notice of their intention, to seize all contraband goods introduced into their dominions; they seized our opium, we had no right to complain; but when the government, finding, that by just and lawful means, they could not carry out their prohibition, resorted to measures unjust and unlawful, confined our innocent countrymen, and insulted the Sovereign in the person of her representative, then ... the time had arrived when it was fit that we should interfere.¹¹⁷

Based on these impressions, the image of the Chinese government was once again characterised as that of an arbitrary and unreliable power upon which no real trust could be placed. Accordingly, serious intervention by Britain became even more crucial, not merely in response to the sufferings of the past, but ‘for the effectual prevention of the like dark proceedings’¹¹⁸ in future. Because of the importance of the China trade, as well as the perception that ‘British commerce can never safely be carried on, and certainly can never flourish in a country where our persons and property are alike at the mercy of a capricious and corrupt Government’,¹¹⁹ many opinion formers at this time clearly concurred on the justice and necessity of making alterations to Britain’s relation with the Chinese empire. They either strongly urged ‘very prompt and powerful interference of Her Majesty’s Government for the just vindication of all wrongs, and the effectual prevention of crime and wretchedness by permanent settlement’,¹²⁰ or, at the least, accepted ‘with great reluctance’¹²¹ that Britain was certainly entitled to demand redress for the injuries suffered in the recent crisis, and to ‘ensure for the future that justice and protection to commerce, which has hitherto been withheld by extortionate restrictions and disabilities’.¹²²

It can be seen from the above that, after the opium crisis of 1839, a remarkable change

¹¹⁷ *Hansard’s Parliamentary Debates*, House of Commons, 7 Apr. 1840, Third series, vol. 53, 717.

¹¹⁸ Captain Elliot to Viscount Palmerston, Canton, 13 Apr. 1839, in *Correspondence Relating to China*, p. 389.

¹¹⁹ Dent & Co., *et al.*, ‘To the Right Honorable Lord Viscount Palmerston, Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs’, *The Canton Press*, 4:38 (25 May 1839), no pagination.

¹²⁰ Captain Elliot to Viscount Palmerston, Canton, 6 Apr. 1839, in *Correspondence Relating to China*, p. 387.

¹²¹ *Hansard’s Parliamentary Debates*, House of Lords, 12 May 1840, Third series, vol. 54, 43.

¹²² *Chinese Commerce and Disputes, from 1640 to 1840* (London: W. Morrison, 1840), p. 5.

occurred in the British debates on Chinese affairs. Contrary to the previous controversy, which was based solely on the opium question, the focus of the debate was now diverted from the character of the opium trade to the nature of the Chinese government's actions. To assess what the Chinese authorities did to British subjects, rather than what the British merchants did to Chinese subjects, became the main concern of all parties. As a result, those who formerly had to defend the legitimacy of the opium trade gained much ground, because their demand for a forcible response by the British government happened to coincide with the views of a more disinterested group, who had less connection with or sympathy for the opium merchants, but saw this crisis as quite distinct from the immorality of the opium trade. They jointly produced an impression that the lives and property of British subjects had been subjected to gross insults offered by an arbitrary and presumptuous Chinese government. This view eventually overwhelmed the voices that had been raised on the other side, which now adopted a defensive position and was in any case unable to convince the public that all of Lin Zexu's proceedings had been based on just grounds. Accordingly, after this debate, a prompt British response was not only regarded as legitimate, but crucial to the future of the British-Chinese relations. A significant change in perceptions had occurred and a vigorous response was finally going to be made.

III

War

According to the traditional arguments on the causes of the Opium War, Britain's economic interests were seen as the fundamental driving force.¹²³ This conflict was considered as

¹²³ David Owen, *British Opium Policy in China and in India* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1934; reprinted, Archon Books, 1968), p. 168; W.C. Costin, *Great Britain and China: 1833-1860* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1937), p. 20; Greenberg, *British Trade and the Opening of China*, p. 215; Hsin-pao Chang, *Commissioner Lin and the Opium War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1964), p. 2; Gerald S. Graham, *The China Station: War and Diplomacy, 1830-1860* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), x.

inevitable, because Britain's industrial expansion and need for new markets were in essence irreconcilable with China's untimely policy of restricting foreign imports. In 1971, Peter Fay claimed that some neglected short-term causes, such as Elliot's unauthorised promise to compensate the opium traders' loss on behalf of British government, and the Protestant missionaries' resolution to 'open' China, were crucial to the outbreak of the war.¹²⁴ Melancon, more recently, has maintained that national honour, as well as the domestic political crisis facing the Whig government,¹²⁵ were the prime reasons for the British-Chinese confrontation.¹²⁶ Although these historians have suggested the general importance of economic interest and national honour, neither of them has sufficiently investigated what specific perceptions of the nation's interests and honour led Britain to interfere so violently in China's internal affairs, nor did they discuss the various means advanced as the best way to carry out this interventionist policy. Discussions on these subjects, however, were such an essential part of the pre-Opium War debates that they deserve greater attention than they have received.

One of the most important but neglected factors that accounts for Britain's determination to intervene in Chinese affairs was the anxiety felt about the need to preserve the Indian empire. In this respect, some commentators have argued that the present crisis in China was chiefly a financial problem, because, approximately 'one-sixth of the whole united revenue of Great Britain and India depended on our commercial relations with that country'.¹²⁷ The greater part of the East India Company's revenue was derived from the opium trade. To the

¹²⁴ Peter W. Fay, 'The Protestant Mission and the Opium War', *Pacific Historical Review*, 40 (1971), 145-61.

¹²⁵ Melancon maintains that in 1839 there was a crisis of confidence in the Melbourne ministry. Because of the government's weakness, a small group of Radicals held the balance of power in the Commons. This minority took advantage of the government's desire to maintain its position and pressed for war. See Glenn Melancon, *Britain's China Policy and the Opium Crisis: Balancing Drugs, Violence and National Honour, 1833-1840* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003), pp. 138-9.

¹²⁶ Glenn Melancon, 'Honour in Opium? The British Declaration of War on China, 1839-1840', *International History Review*, 21 (1999), 855-74; Melancon, *Britain's China Policy and the Opium Crisis*, pp. 5-6, 133-9.

¹²⁷ *Hansard's Parliamentary Debates*, House of Commons, 7 Apr. 1840, Third series, vol. 53, 670.

merchants of India, this traffic also employed a large amount of capital as well as a good many ships. If the trade with China was destroyed, it would be 'one of the greatest calamities which could befall the East India Company and the nation'.¹²⁸ In addition to this financial concern, other commentators believed that the China question had become a serious security matter for the maintenance of the British empire in the east. They alleged that, if Britain submitted to the recent outrages and commercial degradation without any attempt at defending its interests and its honour, it would not only be 'degrading in the eyes of the world generally, but especially destructive of that respect and confidence among our Indian fellow-subjects, which maintains our empire of opinion in the East'.¹²⁹ In particular, given the vicinity of China to the Burmese empire, 'the peace of India greatly depended on our vindicating British supremacy before China'.¹³⁰ Otherwise, as Staunton firmly believed, 'the day is not far distant when the consequences will be visited on our great empire in India, and our political ascendancy there will be fatally undermined'.¹³¹ Clearly, from this perspective, the China question was no longer an isolated issue, but was undoubtedly associated with important matters about the safety and preservation of the British empire. Since Britain's interests and honour in the east were so much interwoven with each other, an alteration in its relations with China became vitally necessary.

Meanwhile, in this debate leading up to the First Anglo-Chinese War, some favourable perceptions of the Chinese emperor and his people were seriously challenged, so that nothing else seemed reliable to the British, but their own actions. The British government, for this reason, had to take positive steps in order to protect the interests and honour that were so much at risk. Previously, no matter how hard the British had censured the local authorities of Canton, they had more or less entertained a relatively positive image of the Chinese monarch.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, vol. 53, 674.

¹²⁹ Anon., *Some Pros and Cons of the Opium Question*, pp. 39-40.

¹³⁰ *Hansard's Parliamentary Debates*, House of Commons, 27 Jul. 1840, Third series, vol. 55, 1052.

¹³¹ *Corrected Report of the Speech of Sir George Staunton*, pp. 14-15.

The emperor had long been assumed or imagined to be a merciful and impartial sovereign who was kept in ignorance of the evils committed in Canton. Even shortly before the entire British community was driven out of Macao, Elliot still pinned his hope of establishing ‘peace and honourable trade on a permanent footing’ on making ‘known to the Emperor the falsehood, violence, and venality of the Mandarins’.¹³² This impression of the situation in China, however, changed dramatically during the opium crisis. For one thing, it had become well-known that the Daoguang emperor attached much importance to the opium question. In order to eradicate the opium trade, he had selected Lin Zexu and had appointed him to an imperial commissionership, an office of very high honour and extreme significance that had only been conferred four times before in the history of the Qing dynasty. Unlike the local public officers of Canton, therefore, Lin was clearly seen as ‘the interpreter of the Imperial wishes and of the principles that actuate the administration’.¹³³ Moreover, intelligence also confirmed the view that His Imperial Majesty had indeed quite unkind intentions against the British. For instance, during the crisis, the emperor had forwarded to Lin Zexu a memorial, presented by another mandarin, that proposed to ‘call out the best swimmers and divers ... cause them at night to divide into groups, to go diving straight on board the foreign ships, and taking the said foreigners unawares, *massacre every individual among them*’.¹³⁴ When such information, as well as the actions that did occur during the crisis, reached the wider British public, it was no wonder that ‘a resident in China’ deplored the fact that:

Opinion had commonly gone with Captain Elliot’s views as to the disposition of the Emperor, or Supreme Government, to do justice to foreigners ... But how could he be warranted in the expression of such a reliance, after what he himself and our countrymen had so lately suffered from the local officers, acting under the authority of the Imperial orders, and how can any of us continue of our former

¹³² Captain Elliot to Viscount Palmerston, Canton, 18 May 1839, in *Correspondence Relating to China*, p. 410.

¹³³ *The Canton Press*, 5:8 (23 Nov. 1839), no pagination.

¹³⁴ A resident in China, *Remarks on Occurrences in China, since the opium seizure in March 1839 to the latest date* (London: Sherwood, Gilbert, and Piper, 1840), p. 28. Italics in the original.

opinions?

...

how greatly should we appreciate the Emperor's tender mercies towards us, past, present, and future, when he has lent his sign manual and signet to give authority to such a document!¹³⁵

In consequence, the previously favourable image of the Chinese emperor was now challenged. Many British commentators began seriously to doubt if the Chinese emperor could be, or indeed had ever been, a reliable protector of Britain's interests and honour in China.

Likewise, in the immediate run up to the war, the general character of the ordinary Chinese people was also reexamined. In the past, many British visitors to China had tended to regard the Chinese middle and lower classes as being friendly and commercially-minded people, possessed of a good temper and a cheerful disposition. As more intercourse with them took place, however, some British observers began to claim that they had been deluded by the Chinese people's outward forms, because, on a closer inspection, 'nothing is visible but fraud, hypocrisy, and falsehood'.¹³⁶ According to these new attitudes, 'a disregard for veracity is so common among the lower orders of Chinese, and those a little above them',¹³⁷ while 'personal profit and convenience is all they look to; and so long as we contribute anything to pamper that selfish feeling, they will profess themselves to be our friends. But hollow are their promises, and fragile the ties that bind them to us'.¹³⁸ For these reasons, even though it was still believed that the Chinese people were passionately interested in commerce, it had to be remembered that, their professed friendship and pretended hospitality were by no means genuine or trustworthy. For these seemingly straightforward people, in order to gain an end, 'no pretense is too barefaced, no lie too monstrous, to be resorted to'.¹³⁹ Moreover, the British

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 27, 29.

¹³⁶ Warren, *The Opium Question*, p. 76.

¹³⁷ *Review of the Management of Our Affairs in China*, p. 39.

¹³⁸ A resident in China, *Remarks on Occurrences in China*, p. 32.

¹³⁹ Warren, *The Opium Question*, p. 76.

commentators also affirmed that the morality of which the Chinese boasted was essentially a pretence, while cruelty was another major characteristic of these people. In China, it was noted, infanticide was widely practised and daughters of lower class families were often sold as prostitutes or slaves.¹⁴⁰ On quite a few occasions, so it was claimed, when a Chinese man fell into water, no rescue effort was made at all by his fellow countrymen. Instead, they simply looked on with indifference. In consequence of such inhumane acts performed by ordinary Chinese people, who were observed to show no mercy to their own children or compatriots, the previously held image of China's populace as being essentially kindhearted was further eroded. Since neither the Chinese monarch nor his subjects were now considered as dependable at all in terms of establishing or sustaining honourable and profitable relations, the British both in Canton and at home became increasingly convinced that 'there is no security for us in future but the strong hand of power, such as we can wield for our own protection'.¹⁴¹ As a result, the need for the British government to become directly involved in Chinese internal affairs was further confirmed.

It can be seen from the above that the pressing necessity of the British government's intervention in China was significantly justified from a variety of perspectives. A general inclination to interfere had been reached to a considerable extent. Although, in April 1840, the idea of war was supported in the British Parliament by only a narrow majority, the disparity of views over the propriety of 'intervention' was actually not as great as has been commonly presumed. In other words, the actual inclination to interfere in the affairs of China was in fact much greater than what the voting results in Parliament appear to indicate. For those who approved of a war plan, the narrow majority in Parliament did not really arise from their position in the controversy over the nature of the opium trade. For those in the minority, the decision to vote against the war at this time did not necessarily indicate their acceptance

¹⁴⁰ These 'slaves', in the Chinese context, were normally female servants of an affluent family.

¹⁴¹ A resident in China, *Remarks on Occurrences in China*, p. 32.

of Lin Zexu's conduct. What divided opinions, on this crisis, was not whether it was legitimate for Britain to involve itself in Chinese affairs for the sake of the opium trade, but the disagreement inside and outside Parliament on whether an immediate large-scale war against China was the best option for the British government to take. In this respect, various viewpoints were put forward on what specific means should be adopted in future British operations.

First and foremost, in the late-1830s, it was notable that the actual use of force was much more favoured in comparison to the attitude taken a few years earlier. Probably in consequence of the opium crisis, quite a number of commentators now insisted that the response to the injuries delivered to Britain's honour and interests, as well as the desire to extend peaceful commerce, 'must be enforced at the cannon's mouth'.¹⁴² They suggested that since China had inflicted upon Britain intolerable insults and injuries, it deserved 'the most signal chastisement in our power'.¹⁴³ To achieve this end, 'a powerful armament'¹⁴⁴ should be sent to China, first of all, to blow up 'every fort at the mouth of the Canton river',¹⁴⁵ and then, to 'demand, in the highest tone, defined treaties, both political and commercial, or the alternative to China of an aggression on her territory, or the occupation of an island, to secure the due protection of our subjects and their property'.¹⁴⁶ Accordingly, to those who concurred with this point of view, the proposed response was fully justified because previous relations between the two countries had proved that it was utterly useless to attempt to conciliate the Chinese authorities. Only a firm military response would check their insolence and compel their submission. Under the present circumstances, these commentators believed that open violence would help to create such a great sensation that the Chinese government would

¹⁴² *Chinese Commerce and Disputes*, p. 31.

¹⁴³ Warren, *The Opium Question*, p. 108.

¹⁴⁴ James Matheson in Canton to William Jardine in London, 1 May 1839, in *China Trade and Empire*, p. 359.

¹⁴⁵ Lindsay, *Is the War with China a Just One?* p. 37.

¹⁴⁶ One long resident in China, 'The Opium Trade, to John Harsley Palmer, ESQ', *The Canton Press*, 5:16 (18 Jan. 1840), no pagination.

certainly be forced to make concessions. Otherwise, 'as long as the forts are allowed to remain in the hands of the Chinese, all negotiation will be useless'.¹⁴⁷ In other words, in order to obtain justice from the Chinese, the use of military force was an absolute prerequisite. Aligned with this opinion, these commentators also argued that the present crisis had provided 'a golden opportunity'¹⁴⁸ to give the Chinese a lesson. For one thing, unlike the case of Lord Napier, the conduct of Commissioner Lin Zexu had provided ample grounds for legitimising the British government's forcible intervention in Chinese affairs. Moreover, since the imperial government of China had adopted force to compel compliance with its demands, the British, with equal justice, were undeniably entitled to adopt a similarly vigorous policy. Probably in consideration of these same points, Elliot declared that 'a more just, necessary, or favourable conjunction for action never presented itself'.¹⁴⁹ Soon after the crisis escalated in Macao, he wrote to Palmerston again as follows:

I am more and more convinced, my Lord, that the late crisis, and the just ground of interference afforded to Her Majesty's Government, will enable it to interpose, under the most favourable circumstances, for the establishment of regular and honourable trade on a firm basis, ... for the effectual check or regulation of a traffic, which by the present manner of its pursuit must every day become ... more discreditable to the character of the Christian nations, under whose flags it is carried on.¹⁵⁰

Given an awareness of these arguments and perceptions, the prevalence of pro-war sentiments becomes increasingly comprehensible: since justice was clearly on the British side, and force was the most effective means of responding to Chinese actions, the present opportunity should not be lost if Britain's relations with China were to be placed on a satisfactory footing.

¹⁴⁷ *The Canton Press*, 6:10 (5 Dec. 1840), no pagination.

¹⁴⁸ Anon., 'China', *The Canton Press*, 4:45 (10 Aug. 1839), no pagination.

¹⁴⁹ Captain Elliot to Viscount Palmerston, Canton, 22 Apr. 1839, in *Correspondence Relating to China*, p. 391.

¹⁵⁰ Captain Elliot to Viscount Palmerston, Canton, 18 Jul. 1839, in *Correspondence Relating to China*, p. 431.

In comparison with the mid-1830s and even before then, another notable difference in the position adopted in the late-1830s was that, at least a significant number of those in favour of open hostilities against China were no longer disposed to underestimate the difficulty of overawing the Chinese. Ever since Lord Macartney's time, British commentators on Chinese affairs had entertained a rather sanguine outlook on the weakness of the Chinese defences. Up until the mid-1830s, many observers who supported the 'show of force' option still believed that a small-scale demonstration of Britain's naval force would be sufficient to frighten the timid Chinese court, which would then unreservedly yield to the demands of the British. By the time the country was almost on the brink of war, however, this view had been significantly altered. Quite a few observers accepted that 'the conviction [that] the Chinese are a nation of cowards, is a very unwarranted and a very unsafe one',¹⁵¹ and admitted that 'we are equally erroneous in our estimate of their resources and their power'.¹⁵² On the basis of these revised perceptions, it was proposed for the first time that, in the anticipated expedition to China, not only as many warships and armed vessels as possible should be deployed, but a sufficient *military* force was also desirable.¹⁵³ To justify this proposal, some observers contended that, after all, China possessed 'a people unbounded in population, animated by the purest patriotism, and by the most enthusiastic attachment to the laws and institutions under which they had enjoyed prosperity and peace'.¹⁵⁴ It was therefore difficult to imagine that such a people would succumb to an invasion by a foreign country without offering stiff resistance. Moreover, in order to produce a favourable effect upon these people and their government, it was vitally important to make sure that the British expeditionary force sent out to China succeeded in all its undertakings, so that the Chinese would be

¹⁵¹ Ramrod, 'To the Editor of the Canton Press', *The Canton Press*, 5:11 (14 Dec. 1839), no pagination.

¹⁵² Anon., *British Opium Trade with China*, p. 18.

¹⁵³ Captain Elliot to Lord Auckland, Governor-General of India, Canton, 16 Apr. 1839 in *Correspondence Relating to China*, p. 431; Graham, *The Right, Obligation, and Interest*, p. 16; A resident in China, *The Rupture with China and Its Causes*, p. 56.

¹⁵⁴ *Hansard's Parliamentary Debates*, House of Lords, 12 May 1840, Third series, vol. 54, 25.

sufficiently impressed with and overawed by Britain's formidable military and naval strength.

In this regard, an author in *The Canton Press*, expounding on this argument, advised that:

In putting any of our military or naval plans in execution, we employ such numbers and such *moyens militaires* as always to make victory *certain*, so that on no occasion may we allow the Chinese the slightest pretext for claiming the smallest advantage over us ... if we permit the Chinese to beat us even if the odds be twenty to one, still if they *beat us*, our *prestige* of superiority is gone, and our cause lost even before we have well begun it.¹⁵⁵

According to these views, a war against the Chinese empire not only became more conceivable than ever before, but it became more widely accepted that if an expedition were to be launched, it should definitely be composed of sufficient forces to ensure ultimate success.

Contrary to those who were vehemently calling for a large-scale war, however, some other observers pointed out that, although there were just grounds to intervene in Chinese affairs, and the success of open violence was almost certain, a war against China might not be the most appropriate way of establishing proper relations with the Chinese government. These observers reckoned that a war was a threat to the safety of the Chinese people, as well as to Britain's long-term interests in the Far East. Hence, these observers proposed that '*every peaceful resort must be exhausted, before force is employed against China*'.¹⁵⁶ Even if the most extreme measures had to be adopted eventually, the scale of Britain's initial operations should be limited. It should be remembered that the purpose of Britain's response was to demand reparations from the Chinese for the insults and injuries inflicted on British interests, rather than to seek aggrandisement or promote aggression of any kind. Otherwise, British power might become over-extended: 'if we once planted our flag and built a fort within the

¹⁵⁵ Ramrod, 'To the Editor of the Canton Press', *The Canton Press*, 5:2 (12 Oct. 1839), no pagination. Italics in the original.

¹⁵⁶ C. R., 'Progress of the difficulties between the English and Chinese', *The Chinese Repository*, 8:9 (Jan. 1839), 476. Italics in the original.

Chinese dominions, circumstances would compel us to extend our limits, and our career of British India would be repeated in China'.¹⁵⁷ Since China was not only much bigger than India, but also very different, any attempt to obtain territorial acquisitions in that country might create an incredible burden for Great Britain as well as for its existing empire in the east. Moreover, it was pointed out that, as the ultimate object of this action was to improve commercial intercourse between the two nations, every care should be taken to preserve amicable relations with the Chinese people. For the sake of Britain's trade in future, any hostile measures taken against China should be designed to involve ordinary citizens as little as possible. In order to avoid rousing vindictive feelings among the Chinese populace, in particular, it was vital to restrict bloodshed to 'the mandarins and military who would come to interfere with our works',¹⁵⁸ while, at the same time, endeavouring to 'protect, cherish, and refrain from injuring, the Chinese *people*'.¹⁵⁹ Even though a war against China might be inevitable, it should not therefore be 'a war of blood and of reprisals',¹⁶⁰ nor should the means applied to obtain justice exceed what was necessary to achieve Britain's limited objectives. Politicians such as Sir Robert Peel strongly urged Parliament:

do not enter into this war without a becoming spirit – a spirit becoming the name and character of England. Do not forget the peculiar character of the people with whom you have to deal, and so temper your measures that as little evil as possible may remain. ... It is your duty to vindicate the honour of England where vindication is necessary, and to demand reparation wherever reparation is due. But God grant that all this may lead to the restoration of amicable relations with China.¹⁶¹

Those adhering to this opinion believed that the long-term effects of open hostilities had to be taken into consideration. Although the prospect of war was not absolutely unacceptable, any

¹⁵⁷ Lindsay, *Is the War with China a Just One?* pp. 36-7.

¹⁵⁸ Ramrod, 'To the Editor of the Canton Press', *The Canton Press*, 5:11 (14 Dec. 1839), no pagination.

¹⁵⁹ Ramrod, 'To the Editor of the Canton Press', *The Canton Press*, 5:2 (12 Oct. 1839), no pagination. Italics in the original.

¹⁶⁰ *Hansard's Parliamentary Debates*, House of Commons, 9 Apr. 1840, Third series, vol. 53, 866.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 924.

military action against China should proceed with the utmost caution and prudence.

Compared to the number of observers holding the views just described, those who completely disagreed with the idea of going to war were in a small minority. As in the crisis debate, the main grounds of the arguments advanced by these commentators were still the sheer iniquity of the opium trade. They contended that, in order to diminish the evil inflicted upon the Chinese, the only just method of intervention was to 'prohibit the growth of the poppy and manufacture of opium in British India',¹⁶² and, meanwhile, to cooperate with the Chinese government in efforts to 'seize all smugglers from henceforth, and deal with them as with pirates'.¹⁶³ With regard to a potential war against China, it was considered not only indefensible 'upon the principles of justice and humanity',¹⁶⁴ but injurious to Britain's interests and honour in the east. These commentators maintained that, although violence had been employed by the Chinese, the Chinese authorities should not be regarded as being the unjust party just because of these actions. It was stressed that what the Chinese had done 'was only a reciprocation of outrage and violence. ... the crime does not originate in secondary, but in primary causes ... these reciprocal injuries are but symptoms of that evil disease our people have carried into the land of others'.¹⁶⁵ It was therefore indisputable that the opium traffic was 'the sole cause of the war'.¹⁶⁶ For this reason, if open hostilities were to be adopted against China, it would not only be 'a most unjust and unfair attack upon the Chinese, who had done nothing more than we had compelled them to do',¹⁶⁷ but it would 'add another gross insult to humanity, and to the laws of nations'¹⁶⁸ by the British government. Moreover, some of these commentators claimed that, quite separate from any

¹⁶² Fry, *Facts and Evidence*, p. 61.

¹⁶³ Montagu, *A Voice for China*, p. 55.

¹⁶⁴ Bullock, *The Chinese Vindicated*, p. 110.

¹⁶⁵ John Fisher Murray, *The Chinese and the Ministry. An Inquiry into the Origin and Progress of Our Present Difficulties with China, and into the Expediency, Justice, and Necessity of the War* (London: T. Cadell, 1840), p. 51.

¹⁶⁶ *Hansard's Parliamentary Debates*, House of Lords, 12 May 1840, Third series, vol. 54, 26.

¹⁶⁷ *Hansard's Parliamentary Debates*, House of Commons, 8 Apr. 1840, Third series, vol. 53, 836.

¹⁶⁸ Montagu, *A Voice for China*, p. 55.

concern over the immorality of the war, it was impractical to believe that the war could be terminated in a single campaign. Once operations commenced, it 'would be no little war'.¹⁶⁹ Since 'an independent nation will always resent any condition imposed upon it at the point of the Bayonet',¹⁷⁰ a war of conquest would turn out to be necessary in order to achieve Britain's ultimate commercial goals. Since it was obvious that Britain was simply not strong enough to complete the conquest of China, the consequences of starting such a war would be disgrace to the honour of Britain and danger to Britain's commercial interests in China. Furthermore, in the long term, if China was awakened from its present dormant state, 'the combined nations of Europe, would hardly compete with her single and united power'.¹⁷¹ As a consequence, not only Britain's rule in India, but its influence across the whole British empire might be placed in jeopardy.

In spite of the existence of these arguments, it is clear that they were expressed by only a small minority in the pre-war discussions on how to respond to China's actions. It can be observed that the main ground on which these arguments were based, i.e., the immorality of the opium trade, did not vary greatly from that employed in the earlier debates on British-Chinese relations. This fact, to a great extent, determined that those whose arguments against going to war were so much in the minority that some commentators even openly stated that, in Parliament, 'no member was willing to declare himself *directly* opposed to a war with China'.¹⁷² All in all, it can be concluded that, in the late-1830s, the discussions on the best course of conduct that Britain should adopt towards China differed markedly from those advanced in the past. In contrast to the 'show of force' theory, by this time, a war against China was substantially justified by various commentators anxious to defend Britain's economic interests and national honour in the Far East. Although there was not yet entire

¹⁶⁹ *Hansard's Parliamentary Debates*, House of Commons, 7 Apr. 1840, Third series, vol. 53, 702.

¹⁷⁰ Bullock, *The Chinese Vindicated*, p. 113.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 111.

¹⁷² *Hansard's Parliamentary Debates*, House of Commons, 8 Apr. 1840, Third series, vol. 53, 836. Italics added.

agreement on the scale and specific means of military intervention in China, a general agreement was reached on the justice and viability of adopting a reasonably strong stance with regard to China. This significant change of attitude, by and large, arose from the altered circumstances and from the changed British perceptions of China occasioned by Lin Zexu's strong-arm policy during the opium crisis. After this incident, many British commentators believed that no Chinese person, from the emperor down to the lowest official, was any longer capable of protecting Britain's interests and honour. As a result, a vigorous intervention became almost inevitable because to so many Britons it seemed the only effective way for the British government to respond to Chinese actions against British subjects.

IV

Conclusion

It can be seen from this chapter that, in the complexity of pre-Opium War controversies over China and over opium-related issues, although the debates on the subjects of opium, crisis and war were considerably interwoven with each other, they can also be viewed separately and in their own right. In each of these discussions, the impact and relative strength of different viewpoints varied greatly. Initially, the British arguments against the opium trade were not at all weak, but, after the opium crisis had arisen, the case for British intervention gradually gained the upper hand. Although, in April 1840, the Whig government won the vote on its motion for war by only a small majority, there was in fact greater common ground among concerned observers in support of Britain adopting a policy of vigorous intervention in Chinese affairs. War against China, at any rate, became an acceptable prospect, even though, in the opinions of many commentators, it was still not the country's best option. In contrast, those, who insisted that justice was entirely on the Chinese side, and hence a war

was by no means advisable, were reduced to a small minority. On this basis, it has been shown in this chapter that general support for government intervention in Chinese affairs was not justified in order to protect the opium trade. There were in fact very few commentators who attempted to demonstrate the legitimacy of war solely on the basis of the economic importance of this traffic. Instead, the immorality of the opium trade was often viewed apart from the injustice of the recent actions taken by the Chinese. It was on the latter ground, rather than the former, that different interpretations of justice and legality were disputed. Eventually, notwithstanding the notoriety of the illicit opium trade, the necessity and timeliness of dispatching a military expedition to China was justified, on the grounds of various concerns over the long-term and short-term interests and honour of Britain and her empire, as well as on the determination to protect the lives and property of British subjects from a capricious Chinese government and its unreliable people. In the short term, since before the late-1830s, there had been no general disposition to expect or advocate a war and, hence, the commencement of hostilities between Britain and China can be viewed as the result of specific and unexpected developments. Although this conflict was originally derived from the opium question, it was Lin Zexu's decision to suppress this illegal trade by coercive means, rather than anything else, that can be viewed as the immediate trigger for hostilities. In the long run, however, the outbreak of this war can be attributed to the consolidation of an unfavourable image of the Chinese empire developed because of changing circumstances. Although we should not maintain that the negative and untrustworthy impressions of the Chinese emperor, government and people had rendered the Opium War inevitable, a British-Chinese war would probably not have been conceivable, justifiable and acceptable without these developing perceptions and prejudices in Britain that were gradually constructed over the course of the previous five decades.

PART III

CHAPTER SIX

Britain through Chinese eyes: Chinese perceptions of Britain during the early Sino-British encounters

The previous five chapters have shown that the outbreak of the Opium War could not have been possible without the developing perceptions acquired and produced by British observers and commentators who were directly involved with Chinese affairs. Along with the discoveries and image-building from the British perspective, some general knowledge about China's internal history of this period, as well as an introduction to the Chinese people's early notions of Britain, can help us appreciate how accurate and realistic were British perceptions of China. Although a balanced comparative study is not the aim of this thesis, nor is it really practicable given the relatively limited Chinese sources available, it is certainly helpful to set this half-century of encounters between Britain and China in the context of Chinese history. This chapter, mainly based on materials in the Chinese language, explains the major developments occurring in China over these decades and investigates how Great Britain was known to and perceived by the Chinese government and people before the country was forcibly thrown open by war. It also explains the problems facing the Qing government in this increasingly troublesome period and it then shows that, although the imperial government was not entirely unaware of the potential threat from Britain, serious attention had not been paid to studying this approaching outsider. Instead of undertaking an intensive state-sponsored investigation, it was through trade and some individual efforts that some initial understandings of Britain and the British people were obtained by the Chinese

government and people. This superficial and scattered knowledge provides a sharp contrast to Britain's growing comprehension of China and interest in Chinese affairs during this period.

I

The Chinese context: dynastic decline

Lord Macartney came to the Qing court at the very end of the Qianlong reign. It was around the same time that a range of social and economic problems became increasingly clear in China as early signs of the Qing dynasty's decline. Overpopulation, land shortage, the fiscal weakness of the government, and unceasing rebellions became the major themes of China's internal history in the half century before the Opium War. For these reasons, when the British people attempted to discover or began to dispute what the 'real' China was in this period, it should be noted that China itself was changing fast and experiencing a variety of crises. Alongside the challenges brought by westerners based on the country's southeast coast, these internal changes not only increased the difficulty the British had in understanding China, but also accounts for some of the different observations they made at different times.

In the history of the Qing dynasty, the Kangxi, Yongzheng and Qianlong reigns, which covered the period from 1662 to 1795, are known as '*Kang-Qian shengshi* (康乾盛世; the prosperous age of the Kangxi until the Qianlong reigns)'. During this period, with the consolidation of Manchu rule, the conquest and subsequent integration of vast western territories into the Chinese state, as well as the expansion of the country's external and internal trade, the Qing dynasty reached the apogee of its power. Nevertheless, as Philip A. Kuhn has stated, when the Qianlong emperor (1711-99, r. 1735-95) 'proudly bequeathed Jiaqing a "prosperous age" in which Chinese people had doubled in number, and Beijing's control had penetrated deep into Central Asia', 'his son inherited not prosperity, but a cascade

of troubles'.¹ The enormous cost of Qianlong's military campaigns, as well as the increasing luxury of official lives, on which the Qianlong emperor himself set the tone, seriously depleted the Chinese treasury's once healthy finances.² Moreover, the abundance of silver drawn in by foreign trade over the past two centuries fuelled a steady inflation of prices in the Chinese economy. After the 1780s, in particular, with local government becoming increasingly costly, but the means of meeting these costs remaining unchanged, the rising expenses of government became a pressing problem for the Qing rulers. Under such circumstances, in order to slow the drain of revenues from the treasury, a remarkable feature of the Jiaqing (1760-1820, r. 1796-1820) and the subsequent Daoguang (1782-1850, r. 1820-50) reigns was 'a highly publicized effort to reduce spending by curbing waste and conspicuous consumption at court'.³ The Jiaqing emperor, in particular, not only halted the annual tributes presented by provincial officials in border provinces, but, through his own example, ended the imperial tradition of southern tours to the lower Yangzi delta, China's most advanced economic region.⁴ These extravagant 'tours of inspection to the south (南巡; *nanxun*)', especially those conducted by the Qianlong emperor, were known to have resulted in lavish expenditure and a drain on resources.⁵ Along the route of these tours,⁶ local officials

¹ Philip A. Kuhn, *Origins of the Modern Chinese State* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002), p. 3. Unlike most of the emperors in Chinese history, the Qianlong emperor abdicated the throne in 1795 when his reign reached sixty years, in order to pay respect to his grandfather, the Kangxi emperor, who had ruled for sixty-one years. Qianlong, however, continued to rule behind the scenes until 1799, in which year he died at the age of eighty-eight.

² Wei Kewei 魏克威, 'Lun Jiaqing zhongshuai de yuanyin' 论嘉庆中衰的原因 ('On the reasons for the Qing dynasty's decline during the Jiaqing reign'), *Qingshi yanjiu*, 2 (1992), 39-40.

³ Susan M. Jones and Philip A. Kuhn, 'Dynastic decline and the roots of rebellion', in *The Cambridge History of China*, ed. John K. Fairbank, *et al.* (15 vols., Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), X, 118.

⁴ Chen Xulu 陈旭麓, *Jindai Zhongguo shehui de xinchendaixie* 近代中国社会的新陈代谢 (*The metabolism of modern Chinese society*) (Shanghai: Shanghai renmin chubanshe, 1992), p. 41.

⁵ The Kangxi and Qianlong emperors each undertook six such tours in their respective reigns. The motives behind the Qianlong emperor's southern tours are much debated. Xiao Yishan maintained that these tours were in essence self-aggrandizing pomp, simply to please the Qianlong emperor. See Xiao Yishan 萧一山, *Qingdai tongshi* 清代通史 (*A general history of the Qing period*) (5 vols., Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1986), II, 73. Others contended that these tours of inspection were instruments of Qianlong's administration and policy-making, especially in terms of water control. See Xu Kai 徐凯 and Shang Quan 商全, 'Qianlong nanxun yu zhihe' 乾隆南巡与治河 ('Qianlong's southern tours and (the Yellow) River conservancy'),

and wealthy merchants competed to curry favour with the emperor by presenting gifts and building luxury accommodation. For example, it was recorded that, in order to receive the Qianlong emperor during a visit to Yangzhou, 5,154 palatial rooms and 196 pavilions were erected or refurbished and, in general, this pattern was repeated in almost every urban centres in which the Qianlong emperor was accommodated.⁷ As most of these lavishly decorated buildings remained largely unattended after Qianlong's last southern tour in 1784, when they were visited by the two British embassies, whose return journey from Beijing to Canton covered much of this route, very different views were presented. In 1793, some initial signs of disrepair shown on these buildings did not rouse much attention from Macartney's embassy. As has been discussed in chapter two, however, when largely the same route was taken by the Amherst mission in 1816, thirty-two years after the Qianlong emperor last sailed down the Grand Canal, the dilapidation of Chinese buildings, including these ones, became a noticeable feature of the Jiaqing reign. It was also as a result of this discovery that the British travellers first detected the decline of Qing power.

Another striking phenomenon of mid-Qing China was the immense growth of population, which has been regarded as 'the root cause of nearly every ill that affected the Qing dynasty'.⁸ Since the beginning of the Qianlong reign, the relative peace and stability of that period saw China's population triple from around 140 million to over 420 million within

Beijing daxue xuebao (zhexue shehui kexue ban) 北京大学学报 (哲学社会科学版) (*Journal of Peking University (Humanities and Social Sciences)*), 6 (1990), 99-109; Michael G. Chang, 'Fathoming Qianlong: Imperial activism, the southern tours, and the politics of water control, 1736-1765', *Late Imperial China*, 24 (2003), 51-108. Nevertheless, it has been widely accepted that these tours to the lower Yangzi delta caused so much waste of resources that the expenditure exceeded what this region could produce.

⁶ For each of Qianlong's southern tours, the emperor and his royal party travelled overland from Beijing to Qingkou in Jiangsu, where they crossed the Yellow River and then sailed along the Grand Canal, passing through Yangzhou, Suzhou, Hangzhou, etc. The return route passed through Jiangning (Nanjing), where the Qianlong emperor paid tribute to the mausoleum of emperor Taizu of the Ming dynasty. The entire journey covered nearly 2,800 kilometres.

⁷ 'The Southern Expedition of Emperors Kangxi and Qianlong', *China Heritage Quarterly*, 9 (Mar 2007). See <http://www.chinaheritagequarterly.org/features.php?issue=009>; accessed 28 May 2013.

⁸ Susan Naquin and Evelyn S. Rawski, *Chinese Society in the Eighteenth Century* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1987), p. 223.

approximately 120 years.⁹ Despite the remarkable economic growth in the ‘prosperous age’, by the end of the eighteenth century, ‘there was every indication that the Chinese economy, at its prevailing technological level, could no longer gainfully sustain an ever-increasing population without overstraining itself’.¹⁰ Prices rose, food shortages threatened, and villages became so crowded that there was not enough land for everyone. With the importation of new crops from the Americas, such as sweet potatoes, maize and peanuts, which could be grown in relatively poor soil,¹¹ the eighteenth century turned out to be ‘China’s greatest age of internal migration’.¹² Landless farmers from densely settled southern areas not only moved into the hilly uplands, but to the frontiers of central and western China in search of agricultural land. This massive migration, in consequence, gave rise to various interethnic conflicts between Han settlers and the aboriginal societies of these regions. As the following table shows, between 1795 and 1840, most of China’s major uprisings took place in the recently-settled areas where the Chinese state was weak and ethnic and religious minorities were strong. The Qing government’s unrelenting suppression of these rebellions, hence, became a major theme of this period.

⁹ Huang Aiping 黄爱平, ‘Qianjia shiqi de shehui bianhua yu jingshi zhuzhang’ 乾嘉时期的社会变化与经世主张 (‘Social changes and the statecraft school of thought during the Qianlong and Jiaqing reigns’), *Qingshi yanjiu*, 2 (1997), 101-2. Official data of Qing population between 1741 and 1850 can be found in Ho Ping-ti, *Studies on the Population of China 1368-1953* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1959), appendix I, pp. 281-2.

¹⁰ Ho, *Studies on the Population of China*, p. 206.

¹¹ Some historians have attributed the demographic expansion to increased food production, which in part resulted from the appearance of these crops that helped feed more people. See Dwight H. Perkins, *Agricultural Development in China, 1368-1968* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1969), pp. 13-26; Ho, *Studies on the Population of China*, pp. 137-68. Song Xuwu and Zhao Shanxuan, however, do not agree with this view. They maintain that the long period of internal peace was the main reason for the demographic boom. See Song Xuwu 宋叙五, Zhao Shanxuan 赵善轩, *Qingchao qianjia zhihou guoshi shuaitui de jingji yuanyin* 清朝乾嘉之后国势衰退的经济原因 (*The economic causes of Qing dynasty’s decline during and after the Qianlong and Jiaqing reigns*) (Hong Kong: Shue Yan College, 2004), pp. 28-32.

¹² Kuhn, *Origins of the Modern Chinese State*, p. 6.

Major Domestic Uprisings, 1795-1840

Case	Period	Affected region
Miao aboriginal uprising	1795-1806	Southwest China
White Lotus sect uprising	1796-1803	Sichuan, Hubei, Shannxi
The rampage of Pirate Cai Qian	1800-9	Southeast coast
Eight Trigrams uprising	1813	North China
Sancai timber workers uprising	1813-15	Northwest China
Yi aboriginal uprising	1817-21	Southwest China
Muslim uprising	1820-8	Xinjiang
Tibetan and Mongol uprising	1822	Qinghai
Blue Lotus sect uprising	1826	Southeast coast (Taiwan)
Li aboriginal uprising	1831	Lingnan
Yao aboriginal uprising	1832	Lingnan
Heaven-Earth society uprising	1832-3	Southeast coast (Taiwan)
Prebirth sect uprising	1835	Northwest China
Yao aboriginal uprising	1836	Middle Yangzi
Yi aboriginal uprising	1837	Upper Yangzi

Source: Adapted and modified from Table 4, in Naquin and. Rawski, *Chinese Society in the Eighteenth Century*, p. 228, and 'Appendix Table' in C.K. Yang, 'Some Preliminary Statistical Patterns of Mass Actions in Nineteenth-Century China', in *Conflict and Control in Late Imperial China*, ed. Frederic Wakeman, Jr. and Carolyn Grant (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1975), p. 209.

Moreover, in the traditional core areas such as the urbanised lower Yangzi delta and the Pearl River delta, the effects of demographic pressure were also considerable. Most notably, while the population more than doubled, the number of official posts in the Chinese government did not increase accordingly. This situation caused 'an overproduction of literate men in relation to the capacity of the economic and political systems to absorb and reward

them'.¹³ Since the Ming dynasty, a Chinese man's primary path to upward mobility had been through education and the imperial examination system. As the population continued to grow, however, this formerly effective mechanism for mobility was seriously undermined. A large number of educated men were rendered jobless in their search for official employment, for which they were technically qualified. As with the land-poor farmers, frustration, insecurity, and dissatisfaction with the government by these educated men were constantly on the rise. In part, as a result of these common sentiments, the early decades of the nineteenth century saw a surge of secret societies across many parts of the Chinese empire. As with the White Lotus Society and its numerous sub-sects,¹⁴ these organisations not only offered spiritual support to those whose traditional social ties had been weakened, but provided mutual aid and a safety net under a pseudo-kinship structure. As many of these secret societies were associated with the persistent Ming loyalism whose political orientation was to 'overthrow the Qing and restore the Ming (反清复明; *fanqing fuming*)', the Qing government in the early nineteenth century was extremely cautious to guard against threats from these difficult to control societies. Especially after the Eight Trigrams uprising of 1813, when a contingent of the Heavenly Principle Society (天理教; *Tianli jiao*) even penetrated into the Forbidden City,¹⁵ the Qing rulers became particularly alarmed at any potential disturbance that might be excited in Beijing. This context, in addition to the fact that self-preservation had always been the Qing court's primary concern, may account in part for the Jiaqing emperor's indifferent attitude towards the Amherst mission in 1816. Since any contact between the militarily

¹³ Jones and Kuhn, 'Dynastic decline and the roots of rebellion', in *The Cambridge History of China*, X, 110.

¹⁴ The White Lotus Society was a popular religious sect whose origin dated back to the eleventh century. The rebellion it led against the Qing regime between 1796 and 1804 was frequently cited as the turning point of the Qing history. In the following decades, numerous sub-sects of the White Lotus continued to harass the Qing government. See Johns and Kuhn, 'Dynastic decline and the roots of rebellion', in *The Cambridge History of China*, X, 136-44; Naquin and Rawski, *Chinese Society in the Eighteenth Century*, p. 227.

¹⁵ Details about this incident can be found in *Qing shi* 清史 (*History of the Qing dynasty*), ed. Li Zhiting 李治亭 (2 vols., Shanghai: Shanghai renmin chubanshe, 2002), II, 1404-8.

powerful foreigners and China's local society had been considered by the Chinese authorities as a dangerous signal, the Qing government's general suspicion of foreigners, especially of those who came into the interior of China, became one of the most notable impressions that British observers obtained from their visits to China.

In brief, during the half century before the Opium War, there had been clear signs of Qing dynastic decline. The task of maintaining order over an expanding and increasingly belligerent population became more and more difficult for the financially troubled imperial government. It was around the same period, as the previous chapters have shown, that China's contacts with western nations, especially Britain, greatly increased. The three major Sino-British encounters between 1793 and 1840, i.e., the Macartney and the Amherst embassies and the lead-up to the Opium War, occurred in the three different reigns over this timespan. In the rest of this chapter, details about the Chinese people's and government's perceptions of Britain in each of these reigns will be introduced and analysed.

II

Chinese perceptions of Britain in the Qianlong period

Although the periodisation of modern Chinese history as beginning with the Opium War has been challenged, research on Chinese understandings of Britain before this fateful dispute remains inadequate. Probably because of China's enormous population, Chinese knowledge about Britain in this period was often believed to be minimal or even negligible. Although, at this time, the vast majority of the Chinese people might indeed have had no impression of the British, the initial encounters between the two peoples and governments did make some Chinese aware of this nation from afar.¹⁶ In general, the early notions of Britain were

¹⁶ There has recently been a debate between some western and Chinese historians on the Qing dynasty's multi-ethnic identity. These western scholars tend to emphasise that the Qing dynasty was a multi-ethnic empire that was not entirely synonymous with 'China'. While partly agreeing with this opinion, some Chinese historians point out that the difference between China and 'the Great Qing' has been overstated

introduced into China through two channels: one was the imperial government in Beijing, the other was the local elites and merchants in the southeast coastal areas. As a consequence of their respective contacts with the British, credible as well as inaccurate information about these ‘outsiders’ was produced. With the engagements between the two nations increasingly strengthened, China’s attitudes towards Britain were also gradually changing. Due to the lack of a state-directed effort to understand these foreigners, however, these perceptions that grew in the court and on the coast sometimes had an impact on each other, but sometimes remained largely separate and distinct.

In the reign of Qianlong, the southeastern coastal Chinese reached a deeper understanding of Britain, largely because of their easier access to western traders and products, while similar progress in knowledge was not so clearly seen in the imperial court at Beijing. From the latter part of the seventeenth century, Britain’s commercial intercourse with China had increased steadily. During the Qianlong period, Britain replaced Holland as China’s biggest trading partner from Europe and British merchants who came to trade with China considerably outnumbered those from other western nations. Although, according to Chinese law, commerce with foreign countries was restricted to only a limited number of ports,¹⁷ the smuggling of British goods was in fact widespread along China’s southeast coast, especially near the ports of Xiamen, Ningbo, and Shanghai. In these areas, growing commercial activity enabled local residents to have more contacts with British people and

according to this view and that, in fact, the Manchus’ ethnic identity was not so much in opposition to their national identity as ‘Chinese’. In this regard, an international conference on ‘Politics and national identity in the Qing dynasty’ was held in Beijing in 2010. Scholars from both sides attended this conference and the proceedings of this conference have been published. See *Qingdai zhengzhi yu guojia rentong* 清代政治与国家认同 (*Politics and national identity in the Qing dynasty*), ed. Liu Fengyun 刘凤云, Dong Jianzhong 董建中, Liu Wenpeng 刘文鹏 (2 vols., Beijing: Sheke wenxian chubanshe, 2010); Huang Xingtao 黄兴涛, ‘Qingdai manren de “Zhongguo rentong”’ 清代满人的“中国认同” (‘The Manchus’ national identity in Qing dynasty’), *Qingshi yanjiu*, 1 (2011), 1-12; *Critical Han studies: the history, representation, and identity of China's majority*, ed. Thomas S. Mullaney, et al. (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2012).

¹⁷ In 1757, the Qianlong emperor ordered the closure of all these ports to foreign trade with the exception of Canton.

their culture. In consequence, not only were British commodities more welcomed in this region than in the rest of the Chinese empire, but Britain as a nation was also generally better understood.

In particular, because of the western products, which were generally known as *yanghuo* (foreign stuff), that were introduced mainly by British merchants, Chinese people in these coastal areas acquired some positive impressions of Britain. Since these commodities, such as fragrances, glasses, matches, ‘singsongs’¹⁸ and so on, were usually delicately made and reasonably priced, they were not only greatly admired and sought after, but eventually came into vogue in this region.¹⁹ In general, everything relating to Britain or the West was considered to be in good taste. In Guangdong, for example, in order to satisfy the region’s great demand for tasteful *yanghuo*, some factories were established to fabricate comparable products. In Jiangsu and Zhejiang provinces, ‘whatever was valuable and finely crafted was referred to as western goods’,²⁰ even if they were not really made by westerners. Compared with *Chinoiserie*, the almost concurrent British interest in Chinese goods and Chinese-inspired artifacts, this Chinese craving for western commodities, although largely restricted in the country’s southeast, seemed to be more extensive among the ordinary populace. As Guan Tong, a famous scholar from Jiangning, recalled, ‘*Yanghuo* were heatedly talked about, so

¹⁸ ‘Singsongs’ most typically refers to ‘a clock, watch or fantastically shaped mechanical toy, such as a snuff box that conceals a jewelled bird which sings when the lid is open’, see Zheng Yangwen, *The Social Life of Opium in China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 73.

¹⁹ Details about British exports to China and the circulation of *yanghuo* in China can be found in Patrick Conner, *The China Trade, 1600-1860* (Brighton: Royal Pavilion Art Gallery and Museums, 1986), pp. 141-7; Zheng Yangwen 郑扬文, ‘Qingdai yanghuo de liutong yu chengshi yang pinqian de chuxian’ 清代洋货的流通与城市洋拼嵌的出现 (‘The circulation of foreign goods and the emergence of the foreign urban mosaic during the Qing’), in *Cong chengshi kan Zhongguo de xiandaixing* 从城市看中国的现代性 (*The City and Chinese Modernity*), ed. Wu Renshu 巫仁恕, Paul Katz, Lin Meili 林美莉 (Taipei: Institute of Modern History, Academia Sinica, 2010), pp. 37-52.

²⁰ Bao Shichen 包世臣, *Da xiaomeisheng shu* 答萧枚生书 (1828), in *Jindai Zhongguo renshi xifang jiqi lieqiang ziliao huibian* 近代中国认识西方及其列强资料汇编 (*Collected materials on modern Chinese impressions on the Western powers*, hereafter *Collected materials*), ed. Hu Qiuyuan 胡秋原 (2 vols., Taiwan: Academia Sinica, 1972), I, 800.

much so that even the poorest wanted to exhaust their money in order to follow this trend'.²¹ Since Britain was constantly examined and looked upon favourably from a material point of view, an interest in other aspects of Britain was naturally aroused in this region. As a result, greater knowledge about Britain and the British people was introduced into China by residents on China's southeastern coast.

First, *Huangqing siyi kao* (皇清四裔考; *The Qing imperial examination of the outside peoples*), a book compiled from the oral accounts of a Cantonese sailor who had travelled to Britain, was a notable contribution to Chinese knowledge of Britain at this time. According to Yang Xianyi, the author of *Huangqing siyi kao* landed near Liverpool and visited the north of England.²² In a few sentences, this Chinese sailor not only gave a brief description of what he saw in Lancashire and Hampshire, but introduced some details about Britain such as the succession to the British throne from George I to George III. This kind of first-hand knowledge about Britain had never been communicated to China before, especially by a Chinese person. In addition, it was also from the Qianlong period onwards that visual images of British people began to be circulated among the Chinese. In *Huangqing zhigong tu* (皇清职贡图; *The Qing imperial illustrations of tributaries*), two portraits of a British 'barbarian' male and female were included (as shown below).²³ It is not known whether these pictures were drawn from life or, perhaps more likely, from some imported images. Since no British man or woman had ever travelled to Beijing at this time, nor was any extensive Sino-British commerce conducted in north China, it is almost certain that these images were introduced into China thanks to the early commercial contacts between the British and the southeastern coastal Chinese. This was the first time that British figures were illustrated in an official

²¹ Guan Tong 管同, *Jin chuan yanghuo yi* 禁川洋货议 (1833), in *Collected materials*, I, 819.

²² Yang Xianyi 杨宪益, 'Shiba shiji guanyu yingguo de Zhongguo jizai' 十八世纪关于英国的中国纪载 ('The 18th-century Chinese records on Britain'), *Yiyu Oushi* 译余偶拾 (Beijing: Sanlian shudian, 1983), p. 141.

²³ *Huangqing zhigong tu*, ed. Fu Heng 傅恒, Dong Gao 董诰, et al. (9 vols., 1761; reprinted, Changchun: Jilin chubanshijituan, 2007), I, 121-2.

Chinese publication, by which the physical appearance of British men and women was presented to a wider readership across the country.



(‘A barbarian man from *Ying-ji-li*’) (‘A barbarian woman from *Ying-ji-li*’)

Despite this advance in knowledge of Britain achieved in some southeastern maritime provinces, a similar grasp of British facts or collective interest in British products was not so clearly seen in other parts of the Chinese empire. Even though the Qianlong emperor was known for his appetite for and interest in foreign artifacts, the imperial court in Beijing did not seem to have a strong interest in investigating western nations, let alone Britain. The state-funded *Daqing yitong zhi* (大清一统志; *The great Qing gazetteer*)²⁴ did not mention the country of *Ying-ji-li* at all. Although *Qinding huangqing wenxian tongkao* (钦定皇清文献通考; *Imperial comprehensive investigations based on literary and documentary sources*), a later official work published in 1787, noted some British social customs, such as ‘Its people believe in the Christ’, ‘Their marriages are based on the agreement of the two sides’,

²⁴ This gazetteer was edited under the order of the Qianlong emperor and was published in 1784.

‘Concubinage is prohibited’, ‘In greetings, people take off their hats and shake hands’²⁵ and so on, it seems to be a collection of random findings obtained through actual contacts with British people rather than a careful and in-depth survey of Britain’s social, political, or military situation. Given the enormous size of this work, the tiny section that was devoted to introducing knowledge about Britain shows how little attention or interest was attached by the Qing government to studying Britain at this time.

Although it remains debatable whether the Qianlong emperor was really unaware of the potential threat from Britain,²⁶ some clear signs of the imperial court’s attitudes towards Britain can still be found in the manner in which it received the Macartney mission. In the late eighteenth century, despite the early signs of Qing’s dynastic decline, the Chinese empire still possessed a vast territory and a huge population that easily dwarfed that of any European country. As Mark Elliott has pointed out, with the confidence derived from ‘an unprecedented period of peace and wealth’, there was ‘no pressing reason’ for the Qing court to be curious about European matters, nor did the Qianlong emperor ‘*need* to be interested in them’.²⁷ Probably for this reason, in 1792, when the Qing court was first informed of the proposed visit from a British royal embassy, no official in Beijing was certain from which country this embassy was despatched or its exact geographical location.²⁸ It was with the help

²⁵ *Qinding huangqing wenxian tongkao*, ed. Zhang Tingyu 张廷玉, *et al.* (300 vols., 1787; reprinted, Hangzhou: Zhejiang guji chubanshe, 2000), CCXCVIII, 7471.

²⁶ Mosca has pointed out that not until the mid-1830s the Qing government had been holding a ‘regionally fragmented worldview’. According to this research, although ‘links between different frontiers were occasionally recognized’ by the Qing court, they were not systematically pursued. ‘Each remained a distinct field of strategic analysis; the empire’s overall strategic position was not considered’. See Matthew W. Mosca, *From Frontier Policy to Foreign Policy: The Question of India and the Transformation of Geopolitics in Qing China* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2013), p. 164.

²⁷ Mark C. Elliott, *Emperor Qianlong: Son of Heaven, Man of the World* (New York: Longman, 2009), pp. 140-2. Italics in the original.

²⁸ Mark Elliott, however, maintains that the Qianlong emperor ‘was unquestionably familiar with Western geography’, particularly because he had a world map painted as a mural upon a wall in the Yuanming yuan palace. This viewpoint does not seem tenable, however, because Elliott did not take into account that even though the Qianlong emperor possessed some world maps, it did not necessarily mean that he knew where exactly particular European countries were located on them. Since Elliott could not explain why the Qianlong emperor inquired of Macartney how far Britain was from Russia and whether Italy and Portugal were not near Britain and tributary to it, Elliott suggested that the Qianlong emperor might have asked

of some European missionaries that they found out that ‘It is just the country of the Red Hair. It is situated in the north of the west ocean, and to the northwest of our celestial empire’.²⁹ As the Macartney mission was despatched under the pretext of presenting congratulations on the Qianlong emperor’s eightieth birthday, the Qing government was largely unaware of the embassy’s real commercial and diplomatic intentions. Although, as Hevia and Mosca have suggested, the Qianlong court might have known something of Britain’s influence,³⁰ particularly in India and in the vicinity of China’s southwestern frontiers, the British envoy was nevertheless regarded as a tribute bearer and was received in the traditional Chinese court manner. In this respect, it can be clearly seen that, no matter how much the Qing government really knew of Britain in 1793, or how much the Qianlong emperor was offended personally by Macartney’s refusal to kowtow, the imperial court was keen to represent Britain as a sincere and reverent barbarian state which admired Chinese civilisation. For instance, the Qianlong emperor stated in his letter to the British monarch:

Although your country, O King, lies in the far oceans, yet inclining your heart towards civilisation you have specifically sent an envoy respectfully to present a state message, and sailing the seas he has come to our court to kowtow and to present congratulations for the imperial birthday, and also to present local products, thereby showing your sincerity.³¹

In line with this tone, Macartney’s refusal to comply with the kowtow ceremony was interpreted in a tolerant light. According to the Qing government’s representation, it was the unique British custom rather than the envoy’s personal feelings that prevented the British

these questions deliberately in order to conceal his knowledge about Britain. No evidence, however, has been presented to support this conjecture. See *ibid.*, p. 140.

²⁹ *Zhanggu congbian* 掌故丛编 (*The Collection of Historical Anecdotes*, hereafter ZGCB], ed. Department of Historical Anecdotes, the Palace Museum 故宫博物院掌故部 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1990), p. 616.

³⁰ Hevia, *Cherishing men from afar*, pp. 181-91; Matthew W. Mosca, *From Frontier Policy to Foreign Policy*, pp. 127-160.

³¹ Imperial edict from the Qianlong emperor to King George III of Britain, in *An Embassy to China: Being the journal kept by Lord Macartney during his embassy to the Emperor Ch’ien-lung 1793-1794*, ed. J.L. Cranmer-Byng (London: Longmans, 1962), p. 337.

visitors from performing kowtow, because ‘It is this country’s custom to bind people’s legs by cloth. This practice makes prostrations very difficult for them. They are ignorant of the ritual of paying respect by kowtows’.³² Since kowtow in Chinese culture was such an essential ritual that required every polished person’s observance, those who were notified of this official explanation, but were out of touch with the British mission or merchants, might reasonably infer that Britain was just an uncivilised country.

In sum, during the Qianlong reign, compared to the imperial government in Beijing, the southeastern coastal Chinese achieved a deeper understanding of Britain. Although some of this new knowledge might have been communicated to Beijing, the Qing government was largely unaware of Britain being a rising global power or of its real purpose in sending the Macartney mission. In consequence, no serious attention was paid to studying this major partner in external trade. Instead, whether intentionally or not, the Qianlong court tended to imagine and believe that Britain was but one of the many barbarian countries that admired and revered the refined and sophisticated Chinese culture. In other words, no matter how much it believed this itself, the Qing government at this time was certainly eager to promote a twofold image of this little known country: first, in terms of civilisation, uncivilised Britain could not compare with the great Middle Kingdom; second, this peaceful and submissive barbarian state could not pose a threat to the existing order of China’s ‘world’.

III

Chinese perceptions of Britain in the Jiaqing period

As shown above, it can be seen that the limited Chinese perceptions of Britain, whether along the southeastern coast or within the imperial court, were without serious negative elements during the Qianlong period. These impressions, however, began to change at a rapid pace

³² ZGCB, p. 671.

during the reign of Jiaqing. As Britain and its merchants continued to strengthen their presence in south China, tensions between the two nations gradually built up. For this reason, not only did some of the coastal Chinese but so did the Qing government itself begin to feel concerned about the difficulties for China that the British might cause. Possible challenges from Britain became imaginable. Even though the Jiaqing emperor and his courtiers remained optimistic about China's ability to check Britain in any emergency, the image of a deferential and peaceful Britain was quickly diminishing. Instead, the British were increasingly viewed as insolent and crafty savages.

British merchants had come to dominate China's foreign trade through Canton not long after the Macartney mission left China. On the one hand, they contributed eighty per cent of the tariff paid to Canton customs (approximately 900,000 taels³³ of silver per annum around 1816).³⁴ On the other hand, the number of economic and civil disputes between British merchants and coastal Chinese people increased significantly. Perhaps as a result, among the well-informed people in the southeast, their image of Britain shifted from a focus on the attractiveness of British goods to a consciousness of Britain's maritime influence as well as its powerful military strength. For example, it was reported by Wang Dahai, a Fujian native who travelled around southeast Asia, that Britain 'predominates in northwest Europe in terms of military instruments',³⁵ and that it 'occupies the most crucial forts on the world's main trade sea-routes; ... Countries like Holland and France are often harassed by them'.³⁶ In 1820, a Cantonese sailor named Xie Qinggao verified these facts as a result of his visit to Britain. In

³³ The tael of currency at Canton was treated as equivalent to 6s. 8d. It was a hypothetical coin of pure silver used only in the East India Company's accounts and in all cotton transactions. The basic circulating coin in foreign commerce at Canton during this period was the Spanish dollar, with an intrinsic value of 4s. 2d. and an exchange value ranging from 3s. 11d. to 5s. See Michael Greenberg, *British Trade and the Opening of China 1800-42* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1951), p. vii.

³⁴ Report from the viceroy of Guangdong and Guangxi to the Jiaqing emperor (1816), in *Qingdai waijiao shiliao (Jiaqing chao)* 清代外交史料 (嘉庆朝) (*Qing dynasty diplomatic documents (the Jiaqing period)*), hereafter *QWS*), ed. The Palace museum 故宫博物院 (6 vols., Taiwan: Chengwen chubanshe, 1968), I, 22.

³⁵ Wang Dahai 王大海, *Haidao yizhi* 海岛逸志 (*Lost gazetteer of the islands in the sea*) (6 vols., 1806), III, 6, *Ying-ji-li* section, in *Collected materials*, I, 752.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 751.

Hai lu (海录; *An Account of the Seas*), his maritime record, Xie confirmed the widespread opinion that ‘Britain vies to obtain all profitable places within the seas ... it uses powerful military forces to back its mercantile activities’.³⁷

In addition to this apprehension among the Chinese coastal people, causes of discontent with Britain were also beginning to influence the Jiaqing government. In 1802 and 1808, in particular, in order to take advantage of the chaotic situation resulting from the Napoleonic wars, as well as to secure its trade with China, Britain made two attempts to occupy Macao, the Portuguese settlement near Canton.³⁸ These expeditions, although unsuccessful, greatly heightened the Qing court’s concern over Britain’s naval ambitions. From then on, in the official letters that the Jiaqing emperor received from Canton, positive words about Britain can rarely be found. Instead, the character of the British was represented in a clearly unfavourable light. In contrast to what was noted in the Qianlong period, the British were now denounced as ‘crafty (狡诈; *jiaozha*)’,³⁹ ‘greedy (贪利; *tanli*)’,⁴⁰ ‘fierce and cunning (强横奸诈; *qiangheng jianzha*)’,⁴¹ ‘interest-oriented (利欲熏心; *liyu xunxin*)’⁴² and they were, in general, ‘the most harsh and cruel barbarians (诸番中最为桀骜; *zhufan zhong zuiwei*

³⁷ Xie Qinggao, *Hai lu* (c. 1820), in Wei Yuan 魏源, *Haiguo tuzhi* 海国图志 (*Illustrated treatise on the maritime kingdoms*) (100 vols., 1852; reprinted, Changsha: Yuelu shushe, 2011), LII, 1432. *Hai lu* was edited from Xie Qinggao’s oral accounts.

³⁸ Details about these two expeditions can be found in Hosea Ballou Morse, *The Chronicles of the East India Company Trading to China, 1635-1834* (5 vols., Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1926), II, 357-72, III, 76-95; Ma Lianpo 马廉颇, Huang Dingping 黄定平, ‘Shilun Jiaqing qi nian yingguo jiyu aomen shijian’ 试论嘉庆七年英国觊觎澳门事件 (‘On British invasion of Macao in the seventh year of the Jiaqing reign’), *Guangdong minzu xueyuan xuebao* 广东民族学院学报 (*Journal of Guangdong Institute for Nationalities*), 1 (1996), 21-7.

³⁹ Report from the governor of Guangdong to the Jiaqing emperor on Britain’s occupation of Macao, 28 Oct. (lunar calendar), the thirteenth year of the Jiaqing reign (1808), in *QWS*, II, 35.

⁴⁰ Report from the viceroy of Guangdong and Guangxi to the Jiaqing emperor on the cause of Britain’s intrusion into Macao, 20 Sep. (lunar calendar), the thirteenth year of the Jiaqing reign (1808), in *QWS*, II, 28.

⁴¹ Report from the viceroy of Guangdong and Guangxi to the Jiaqing emperor on the current state of Britain, 8 Apr. (lunar calendar), the fourteenth year of the Jiaqing reign (1809), in *QWS*, III, 6.

⁴² Report from the viceroy of Guangdong and Guangxi to the Jiaqing emperor on the British ships’ intrusion into Macao, 13 Oct. (lunar calendar), the thirteenth year of the Jiaqing reign (1808), in *QWS*, II, 32.

jie'ao)',⁴³ who 'live[d] by plunder (劫掠为生; *jielue weisheng*)'.⁴⁴ Although, at this time, neither the central government nor the coastal Chinese had pointed out that the British might be able to threaten the order of the Chinese empire, an awareness of some potential challenge from Britain became embedded in the minds of the Jiaqing emperor and his courtiers.

In this context, when the Amherst embassy arrived in 1816, the Chinese government was no longer deluded about the British mission's pretence that it had come to pay respect to the emperor. Instead, it was assumed that the crafty British must have some ulterior motives. The Jiaqing emperor, for example, openly stated that:

In the letter of *Ying-ji-li*'s tributary bearer, it is alleged that their people are adorers of the Middle Kingdom's morals and greatness. This is the barbarians' usual statement. They travelled an extremely long distance to my court under the name of paying respect, but in fact they must have other intentions and demands.⁴⁵

The Jiaqing emperor's suspicions about the intentions of this British mission were increased by Amherst's refusal to comply with the Qing court ritual. The British envoy's claimed reverence for the Chinese empire was hence further distrusted. For this reason, Amherst's insistence on not performing kowtow was not interpreted in as tolerant a spirit as it had been in Macartney's case. On the contrary, it strengthened the Jiaqing emperor's personal dislike of the British, who His Majesty had already found 'disgusting in the extreme (可恶极矣; *kewu jiyi*)'.⁴⁶ In consequence, contrary to the Qianlong emperor's declared willingness to

⁴³ Letter from the viceroy of Guangdong and Guangxi to the Jiaqing emperor on Britain's intrusion into Macao and the stoppage of Britain's trade, 4 Sep. (lunar calendar), the thirteenth year of the Jiaqing reign (1808), in *QWS*, II, 23.

⁴⁴ Report from the viceroy of Guangdong and Guangxi to the Jiaqing emperor on the mission to drive out the British barbarians, 27 Oct. (lunar calendar), the thirteenth year of the Jiaqing reign (1808), in *QWS*, II, 35.

⁴⁵ *QWS*, V, 5.

⁴⁶ The Jiaqing emperor's remark on the viceroy of Guangdong and Guangxi's report on the cause of Britain's intrusion into Macao, 20 Sep. (lunar calendar), the thirteenth year of the Jiaqing reign (1808), in *QWS*, II, 27.

receive more British missions after the Macartney embassy, the Jiaqing emperor clearly stated in his letter to the Prince Regent, the future George IV, that:

Hereafter there is no occasion for you to send an Ambassador so far, to be at the trouble, passing over mountains and crossing seas. If you can but pour out the heart in dutiful obedience, it is not necessary at stated times to come to Court, ere it be pronounced that you turn towards the transforming influences (which emanate from this Land).⁴⁷

From these words, it can be observed that the Qing court's attitude towards Britain had indeed changed remarkably by the Jiaqing reign. The image of a sincere and deferential Britain that had previously been held by the Qianlong court had largely been discarded.

In spite of this changed view of the British character, the Jiaqing government did not entirely abandon all earlier notions about Britain. In particular, the Qing court considerably overestimated the importance of the tea trade to Britain, so that it was still believed that the British were unable to afford to lose this crucial trade by challenging the authority of the Chinese empire. According to John Francis Davis, one of the 'China experts' who participated in the Amherst embassy, some Chinese officials even claimed to him privately that it was only through the tea trade, which was granted by the benevolent Chinese emperor, that all the British people were able to survive.⁴⁸ On the basis of these unfounded assumptions, the Jiaqing emperor and his courtiers gained the impression that, even though the British might dare to cause some disturbances, they could be checked with ease simply by applying some pressure on Britain's tea trade with Canton. Confirmation of this can be found in the well-known conversation between the Jiaqing emperor and Sun Yuting, who recorded it when he was the governor of Guangdong:

⁴⁷ The Jiaqing emperor's letter to the British monarch, in Morse, *The Chronicles*, III, 302.

⁴⁸ John Francis Davis, *Sketches of China* (2 vols., London: Charles Knight, 1841), I, 179.

The Jiaqing emperor: Is Britain wealthy and powerful?

Sun Yuting: This country is larger than other west ocean countries, therefore powerful. Its power is owing to its wealth, which is derived from China.

The Jiaqing emperor: Why is that?

Sun Yuting: This country trades at Canton. It exchanges its goods for our tea. It then resells the tea to its neighbouring small countries in the west ocean, thus becoming wealthy and powerful. Yet, tea to the West is like rhubarb to Russia. If we put an embargo on tea exports, that country will fall into poverty and its people into sickness, then how can it be powerful?⁴⁹

Because of this perception, Britain's power and influence were once again seen as being significantly overshadowed by the imagined might of the vast empire of China. This optimism in the Jiaqing court, to some extent, did not differ greatly from the well-established notion in the Qianlong period that Britain was not capable of posing a serious challenge to China. In consequence, as in the previous reign, no effective measures were taken by the Chinese state either to prevent potential British aggression or to learn more about this emerging western power.

In the reign of Jiaqing, therefore, some negative perceptions of Britain quickly took root in China. Both the central government in Beijing and informed people in the coastal areas gained clearer views of the character, ambition and military strength of the encroaching British. China's attitudes towards Britain, especially the notion that Britain was a peaceful and submissive state, changed significantly compared to the views previously held during the Qianlong period. Nevertheless, both China's ability to check Britain by restricting its tea trade, and the way the British would most likely respond to this threat from the Chinese state, were greatly exaggerated. For this reason, the Chinese government during the Jiaqing reign was still not alarmed about the critical external threat that might be posed by the British. This

⁴⁹ Sun Yuting 孙玉庭, 'Jipu laoren ziji nianpu' 寄圃老人自记年谱 ('Sun Yuting's biographical annual accounts'), in *Yanlitang ji (fu)* 延厘堂集(附) (*The collection from the Yanli studio (Appendix)*), see Qiu Ke 邱克, 'Biguan shidai Zhongguo ren de xifang zhishi' 闭关时代中国人的西方知识 ('Chinese people's knowledge about the West in the closed-door age'), *Jinan xuebao (zhexue shehui kexue ban)* 暨南学报 (哲学社会科学版) (*Journal of Jinan (Philosophy and social sciences edition)*), 2 (1988), 50.

conviction of Britain's inability to cause China any trouble was soon to change, however, during the Daoguang period.

IV

Chinese perceptions of Britain in the early Daoguang period (prior to 1840)

In September 1820, the Daoguang emperor, son of the Jiaqing emperor, ascended the imperial throne. In the first two decades of the Daoguang reign, China became more conscious of Britain's worldwide influence as well as more aware of the severe domestic problems which rose from the opium trade. Under such circumstances, some perceptive individuals within and without the Chinese government made considerable progress in learning about Britain. A growing number of British studies were produced both in Beijing and in the southeastern coastal areas. Although, as a result of these individual efforts, the uncivilised image of the British, which had been a key element in the Qing government's earlier propaganda, was greatly modified, this increase in knowledge of Britain still did not result in a state-directed search for reliable intelligence about Britain. Some of the Qing government's misunderstandings about Sino-British relations even misled the public, including some coastal elites, into underestimating Britain's ability to strike against the Chinese empire.

In the 1820s and 1830s, as discussed in chapter five, the rampant opium smuggling caused a range of social and financial crises for the already declining Qing empire. As the harmful effects of the opium trade became progressively serious, not only did the Chinese government, but many coastal Chinese people, came to believe that this trade was in fact a British plot against the Chinese empire. In this regard, Yao Ying, a famous scholar-official from Anhui, maintained that, '*Ying-ji-li* has malicious intent. With the aim of poisoning China, it produces opium and tobacco. They not only exhaust our nation's wealth, but also

drive our people to sickness'.⁵⁰ Apart from this impression of Britain's 'sinister' intentions towards China, Britain's influence all over the world was also better known to the Chinese as contacts between the two peoples continued to increase. Xiao Lingyu, a Jiangsu geographer working for the Canton provincial government, stated that:

[*Ying-ji-li*] has a practical tradition, and is very interest-oriented. It lives on its commerce at sea. They try to take control of every seaport that they may take advantage of. They build powerful ships and cannons to serve this purpose.⁵¹

...

In the later Qianlong period, it has already had strong influence overseas; its power grows progressively in the Jiaqing reign. ... The British have garrison forces in all its possessions in America, India, and southeast Asia, where they impose taxes and annual tributes.⁵²

Britain's occupation of Singapore in 1819 and its expansion in southeast Asia in the 1820s, in particular, made the menace from the British more perceptible than ever to the better-informed people in the coastal areas of China. For example, He Dageng, a Zhejiang scholar who resided in Canton, claimed that:

The British influence used to be thousands of miles northwest from us. Since Britain is extraordinarily distant from the Canton sea, it did not pose an immediate concern to the Middle Kingdom. At present, however, all maritime countries in the south ocean [Indian ocean] ... are compelled to pay tribute to the British. ... Britain's ambition is growing day by day. When are they going to be satisfied?⁵³

Yan Sizong, another intellectual from Guangdong, also expressed his apprehension of the looming threat from Britain. He maintained that:

⁵⁰ Yao Ying 姚莹, 'Haidao yizhi' 海岛逸志 ('Lost gazetteer of the islands in the sea'), in Yao Ying 姚莹, *Zhongyou tang quanji kangyou jixing* 中友堂全集康輶纪行 (*Travel report of an emissary*) (16 vols., 1845), X, in *Jindai Zhongguo shiliao congkan xubian* 近代中国史料丛刊续编 (*Sequel to the collection of materials on modern Chinese history*), ed. Shen Yunlong 沈云龙 (100 vols., Taiwan: Wenhai chubanshe, 1974-82), VI, 3327-8.

⁵¹ Xiao Lingyu 萧令裕, *Ji Ying-ji-li* 记英吉利 (*Treatise on Britain*) (1832), in *Collected materials*, I, 509.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 766. It can be seen that Xiao Lingyu was interpreting Britain according to the Chinese practices. British gains were actually by trade rather than by tribute.

⁵³ He Dageng 何大庚, *Yingyi shuo* 英夷说 (*An account of the British barbarians*), in Wei Yuan, *Haiguo tuzhi*, XV, 578.

Throughout history, no commerce has been supported by military forces in such a way as the British barbarians are doing at present. ... Despite the distance up to thousands of miles, Britain now does not differ greatly from a bordering nation. ... Its ambition is ... to monopolise the Chinese market, so that all other countries can be within its grasp.⁵⁴

Because of these concerns over a potential British threat, a number of perceptive individuals, whether they were independent of or working for the Qing government, pointed out the importance of learning more about Britain as well as about current affairs in the western world. For instance, Yan Sizong stated that, ‘in order to contain these barbarians, first and foremost, we ought to know about their circumstances; thereafter we will be able to subdue their insolent spirit’.⁵⁵ Cheng Enze, an eminent scholar-official, also declared that, ‘Attention should be paid to the information that was formerly ignored ... in case warfare should happen ... This knowledge could then be used as guidance for tens of thousands of people’.⁵⁶ Ye Zhongjin, another Anhui scholar in Canton, specifically mentioned that it was advisable to collect and study the foreign-language publications that were being circulated in China, because ‘they provide intelligence on foreign affairs and hence cannot be overlooked by the coastal defence’.⁵⁷ Perhaps due to similar concerns, when Commissioner Lin Zexu reached Guangdong in 1839 on his mission to stamp out the opium trade, ‘on a daily basis, [he] sent people to pry into western affairs, to translate western books, and to buy their newspapers’.⁵⁸

⁵⁴ Yan Sizong 颜斯综, *Nanyang lice* 南洋蠡测 (*A brief examination of the south ocean*), in *Collected materials*, I, 798.

⁵⁵ Yan Sizong 颜斯综, *Haifang yulun* 海防余论 (*Additional observations on the coast defense*), in *Collected materials*, I, 797.

⁵⁶ Cheng Enze 程恩泽, *Cheng shilang yiji* 程侍郎遗集 (*The collected works of the late Cheng Enze*), ed. Wang Yunwu 王云武 (10 vols., Shanghai: Shangwu yinshuguan, 1935), VII, 142.

⁵⁷ Ye Zhongjin 叶钟进, *Ying-ji-li guo yiqing jilüe* 英吉利国夷情纪略 (*A Brief account of the condition of the British barbarians*) (c. 1834), in *Collected materials*, I, 792.

⁵⁸ Wei Yuan 魏源, ‘Daoguang yangsuo zhengfu ji’ 道光洋艘征抚记 (‘Daoguang’s campaign against and soothing the foreign ships’) in *Wei Yuan ji* 魏源集 (*A collection of Wei Yuan’s works*) (2 vols., Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1983), I, 174.

As a result of this growing awareness of the necessity to learn more about Britain, a number of studies on Britain were produced in China in the 1820s and 1830s.⁵⁹ Various hitherto unrevealed facts were introduced to the Chinese for the very first time and knowledge about Britain hence increased significantly. Compared to what was known previously by even quite well-informed Chinese people, these works referred to different aspects of Britain's politics, society, and economy, which generally showed that Britain was not at all backward in terms of its civilisation. For example, in *Yingguo luelun* (英国略论; *Brief observations on Britain*), British parliamentary politics, insurance system, and modern industrial techniques were noted:

Important issues are discussed in the parliament, where members exchange their viewpoints. The aristocracy [of the House of Lords] is categorised into five classes: duke, marquis, earl, viscount and baron. They are the masters of the parliament. In addition, residents of each city are able to elect one or two trusted representatives to participate in the meetings at the nation's capital. If the monarch would like to impose a tax, he would have to have the permission of the gentry. If the gentry do not approve, the monarch will not be allowed to do so.

...

As the safety of ships and cargoes is always uncertain, there are persons in Britain who are paid to take the risk. The principle is, if the ship arrives safely, three to four hundred taels of silver would be paid out of every ten thousand. That is to say, if somebody's cargo is worth twenty thousand taels, he pays eight hundred in advance to insure its safety. If his ship sinks, all twenty thousand would be paid back to him.

...

In mills, fabrics are not manufactured by people's hands or feet. Machines are powered by fire and smoke instead of human power. They produce textiles from wool and cotton smoothly and swiftly. ... Fire-powered ships sail through rivers and seas, regardless of the wind and water conditions. Railways are made for trains to travel on. The speed [of these trains] could reach 180 *li* per hour.⁶⁰

⁵⁹ For example, Xie Qinggao, *Hai lu* (c. 1820); Li Zhaoluo 李兆洛, *Haiguo jiwen xu* 海国纪闻序 (*An introduction to the accounts of overseas countries*) (1821); Bao Shichen, *Da xiaomeisheng shu* (1828), Xiao Lingyu, *Ji Ying-ji-li* (1832), Ye Zhongjin, *Ying-ji-li guo yiqing jilüe* (c. 1834), Tang Yi 汤彝, *Ying-ji-li bingchuan ji* 英吉利兵船记 (*A note of Britain's military and naval power*) (1834); Tang Yi 汤彝, *Jue Ying-ji-li hushi lun* 绝英吉利互市论 (*On the stoppage of Britain's trade*) (1835); Liang Tingnan 梁廷柅, *Ying-ji-li-guo ji* 英吉利国记 (*On the country of Ying-ji-li*) (1838), etc.

⁶⁰ [Xi Li 息力], *Yingguo luelun* 英国略论 (*Brief observations on Britain*) (1835), in Wei Yuan, *Haiguo tuzhi*, LI, 1408-9. One *li* equals 0.5 kilometre and a Chinese hour at that time is two hours by western standards.

The landscape and social life of London, as well as British education and patent systems, were introduced to Chinese readers by Ye Zhongjin:

Its [British] monarch resides in the city of London. Bridges are built over rivers. Horses and vehicles travel above; boats and ships sail below. Affluent families all have their own gardens. ... Oil lamps are hung all over the streets in the evening. ... There are comedies performing from nightfall onward. They are prohibited during the day because they may disturb people's work.

...

The state sets up universities. Counties found middle schools. Towns build primary schools. [These institutions] extend teaching to the people to make sure they can read. ... If somebody has a brilliant invention, he will obtain a patent for thirty years. During this period, others are not allowed to copy it.⁶¹

With regard to British social customs, Xiao Lingyu described marriage in Britain and some of the British court's rituals:

Women are entitled to choose their husbands. They have their own property. Husbands are prohibited from taking concubines. Below the Crown, more respect is paid to women rather than men. When ministers greet each other, they take off their hats. The supreme form of salute is to put a hand on the forehead. They stand upright even when the monarch is present.⁶²

It can be observed from these examples that, in the first two decades of the Daoguang reign, both the deferential and the uncivilised images of Britain, which were advocated by the Qianlong government, were considerably revised. Despite this notable progress, it should be noted that this new knowledge was being obtained through some individual efforts made by a small number of perceptive and well-informed people, rather than through a state-directed effort for the sake of improving the nation's defence. As a matter of fact, the Daoguang government was more concerned to exterminate the immediate evils occasioned by the opium

⁶¹ Ye Zhongjin, *Ying-ji-li guo yiqing jilüe*, in *Collected materials*, I, 787-8.

⁶² Xiao Lingyu, *Ji Ying-ji-li*, in *Collected materials*, I, 767. For China's male ruling class, however, this might not necessarily be a positive sign of Britain's civilisation, because it indicated that the British people did not pay sufficient respect to social hierarchy and deference, which were more highly admired in China.

trade than make preparations to meet any future British threat. In this respect, no direct government involvement was made in China's search for accurate intelligence about Britain, in spite of rising concern over the opium trade. As a result, the majority of the Chinese people, including some of the aforementioned persons in and out of the government, were unaware of some of their critical misconceptions about Britain. For these reasons, if China's knowledge of Britain before the 1840s is examined from a utilitarian or defensive point of view, it was weakened by some mistaken views and was inadequate to meet China's defensive needs.

First, although a looming British threat was perceived by a number of Chinese scholars and officials, it was still widely believed that, despite or even because of their maritime dominance, the British 'are on the ocean all the time. [They] rise up and fall down with the wave every day, hence they cannot stand firmly when they are on land', and that 'their legs are bound so they can hardly bend ... These barbarians will lose their skills as soon as they reach land'.⁶³ On account of such misconceived assumptions, the British were regarded as being incapable of launching an attack on China.

In addition, the overestimation of the importance of the China trade to the British economy, as during the Jiaqing reign, led most influential Chinese to believe that the British would not be bold enough to invade the Chinese empire. Even though it was known to some informed Chinese that 'its [Britain's] strategy is to ... hang up cannons on the masts and set fire on land',⁶⁴ there was no real anxiety on the part of the Chinese that the British might apply the same violent approach to China. In this respect, even Yan Sizong alleged that, if China stopped the British trade in Canton, 'where could their piece goods and Indian cotton

⁶³ *Chouban yiwu shimo (Daoguang chao)* 筹办夷务始末 (道光朝) (*Complete record of the management of barbarian affairs (the Daoguang period)*), ed. Wen Qing 文庆, et al., (80 vols.) VIII, 7, in *Jindai Zhongguo shiliao congkan* 近代中国史料丛刊 (*The collection of materials on modern Chinese history*, hereafter *The collection of materials*), ed. Shen Yunlong 沈云龙 (100 vols., Taiwan: Wenhai chubanshe, 1966), LVI, 516.

⁶⁴ Yan Sizong, *Haifang yulun*, in *Collected materials*, I, 797.

be sold? Where could they purchase tea and other Chinese products? In consequence, would not it matter greatly to the survival of the British nation?’⁶⁵

In particular, with regard to the British demand for Chinese tea, the Qing court’s misunderstanding of its significance to British society did not lessen in the early Daoguang period. On the contrary, the notion that the British people could not live without Chinese tea became even more engrained in the Chinese imagination and even some local elites in the coastal areas were influenced by this opinion. For example, just as with some government officials who reported to the Daoguang emperor that ‘If the barbarians do not use our tea and rhubarb, they will get blind in a few months, with intestines blocked. Their whole nation, therefore, can hardly survive’,⁶⁶ Ye Zhongjin was convinced that ‘Tea and rhubarb are indeed crucial to their lives’.⁶⁷ Xiao Lingyu, furthermore, developed the idea that ‘The [British] barbarians are fond of milk and cheese, which block their stomach and intestines. Only Chinese tea and rhubarb can dissolve them. Once the barbarians fail to obtain [them], they will fall into illness’.⁶⁸ As a consequence of these gross misunderstandings, a stoppage of the tea trade had long been regarded as the most effective means of compelling the British to return to a position of obedience should a conflict break out. For this reason, in both Beijing and the coastal areas, the general belief that the British could be handled with ease was strengthened, regardless of the fact that a threat from Britain was becoming more conceivable than ever. This belief seemed justified when minor disputes occurred in the decades before the Opium War and China was not subject to attack, but, in this regard, both the Qing government and the southeastern elites oversimplified the reasons why the British compromised on these occasions. Since no intensive state-directed investigation was undertaken to understand British power and objectives, when a serious challenge from Britain

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ Chouban yiwu shimo (Daoguang Chao) II, 10, in *The collection of materials*, LVI, 115.

⁶⁷ Ye Zhongjin, *Ying-ji-li guo yiqing jilüe*, in *Collected materials*, I, 792.

⁶⁸ Xiao Lingyu 萧令裕, *Yuedong shibo lun* 粤东市舶论 (*On foreign trade and shipping in Canton*), in *Collected materials*, I, 776.

did occur in the form of the Opium War, both the imperial court and the majority of coastal elites were caught unprepared for the scale and extent of British power.

In conclusion, it can be seen from the evidence provided in this chapter that, from the Qianlong reign to the eve of the Opium War, although knowledge of Britain in China was indeed limited, this was not a period in which Chinese perceptions of Britain were entirely negligible or unchanging. As the British increased their influence on China's coastal areas, Chinese understanding of Britain advanced accordingly. Both the local elite in the southeastern coastal areas and the elite at the imperial court in Beijing obtained credible as well as inaccurate information about Britain and its people. In this regard, the Qing governors and some perceptive individuals gradually realised that Britain was by no means a submissive and uncivilised state and, as a result, potential threats from Britain became increasingly imaginable. Despite this progress in understanding British power and the British character, in the pre-Opium War era, China did not seek to institute a state-directed investigation of British power and influence. Since active state involvement was crucial to almost every major undertaking in late imperial China, Chinese perceptions of Britain prior to the 1840s, from a defensive point of view, were still superficial and fragmentary, and were undermined by a variety of mistaken views. Some seriously misconceived perceptions, such as the overestimation of the importance of the tea trade to the British economy and to the health of British people, ensured that the Qing government was poorly prepared to meet the serious threat which Britain posed in the early 1840s.

Conclusion

The Opium War lasted a little longer than the British government had expected. This was partly because the British forces encountered more resolute resistance than anticipated from the Chinese army and people, partly because the British did not launch a full-scale attack because of Charles Elliot's 'fight-and-talk' strategy. In August 1841, as Sir Henry Pottinger arrived in China and replaced Elliot as the plenipotentiary, Britain's determination to win this war by force became evident. Within a year, the British troops stormed up China's south coast, blockaded the Grand Canal, and occupied the large island of Zhoushan at the mouth of the Yangzi, as well as several ports to the south, including Canton, Amoy, Ningbo and Shanghai. Despite the fact that the Chinese soldiers fought with great bravery and even desperation, they were clearly no match for British arms and discipline. When the British expedition pushed on to the walls of Nanjing, the second city of the empire, the Qing court sued for peace. On 29 August 1842, the Treaty of Nanjing was signed aboard the *Cornwallis*, the British fleet's flagship moored in the Yangzi River. The First Anglo-Chinese War had come to an end.

The Treaty of Nanjing, with its supplementary agreement signed in October 1843, has been widely regarded as 'the most important treaty settlement in China's modern history'.¹ According to these historic documents, Britain achieved all that it had failed for so long to obtain by diplomacy. The restrictive Canton Cohong system was eventually abolished and five 'treaty ports' were opened to British trade and residence. Twenty-one million dollars had to be paid by the Chinese government to Britain as compensation for the war costs as well as the previously destroyed opium. The island of Hong Kong, in addition, was transferred to

¹ Jonathan D. Spence, *The Search for Modern China* (New York; London: Norton, 1999), p. 160.

British sovereignty as Britain's long-desired permanent base near China. No matter how widely the 'barbaric' image and behaviour of the British had spread over China as a result of the war, derogatory and subordinate terms of address were no longer to be used against the British in China's official correspondence with Britain. As the British had wished and insisted upon for more than half a century, the equality between officers of the British queen and those of the Chinese emperor was formally acknowledged by the Qing government.² To the Chinese, the conclusion of the Opium War, as well as the signing of the Treaty of Nanjing, not only meant that their once secure and self-contained empire was forced to open, it also signified that the era when it was China which determined the terms of Sino-British relations was now over. Instead, China was ushered into a century-long period of 'Western domination and increasing Chinese humiliation',³ in which the Qing court gradually lost control of the key elements of its commercial, social, and foreign policies. As Gregory has stated, from the middle years of the nineteenth century, 'the Chinese world began to be turned upside down'.⁴

This thesis has traced British-Chinese encounters in the half century before the Opium War, a medium-term period that existing research has failed to scrutinise in sufficient depth. Unlike previous studies on China's early relations with Britain or the West, this thesis has focused closely on perceptions and attitudes, with emphasis on British people's knowledge of and attitudes towards China developed as a result of a series of recent encounters. It has shown that British perceptions of China, by and large, became increasingly adverse and critical over this period. These developing unfavourable views, to a great extent, became important underlying forces that helped justify Britain's decision to embark on a war against China. In retrospect, members of the Macartney embassy tended to believe that it was a very few hostile ministers in the Qing court that had obstructed the mission's official business in

² Full details of the treaty can be found in Hosea Ballou Morse, *The International Relations of the Chinese Empire* (3 vols., London: Longmans, 1910-18; reprinted, Folkestone: Global Oriental, 2008), I, 298-302.

³ John S. Gregory, *The West and China since 1500* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), p. 73.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 88.

1793, while the emperor himself was an amicable and open-minded figure who was prepared and determined to protect Britain's trade. Even though some of these British observers, during their travels across the Chinese empire, had discovered that the patriarchal government of China had rendered Chinese civilisation stagnant, they still held significant respect for that regime. Despite the fact that the Macartney mission failed to achieve its commercial and diplomatic objectives, Macartney and Staunton, as leaders of the embassy, did not find anything inappropriate in the course of conduct that Britain had adopted in its approach to the Chinese government. Instead of suggesting a radical change of policy, they maintained that patience and perseverance were extremely important in Britain's future relations with China. They were convinced that the Chinese government 'would not stand always against reason'⁵ and that, 'by time and management',⁶ favourable results would eventually follow, while 'no shorter way will do it'.⁷ Macartney, in particular, pointed out that an aggressive line of action against China was inadvisable, because it would be harmful to the interests of Britain and its eastern empire. Although Macartney also mentioned a possible breakdown in Sino-British relations, he asserted that 'nothing could be urged in favour of an hostile conduct, but an irresistible conviction of failure by forbearance'.⁸

When the Amherst mission visited the Qing court in 1816, the impressions these men formed of China were rather different. In particular, the benevolent image of the Chinese emperor, which was promoted by Macartney's embassy, was completely overthrown. Instead, the Chinese sovereign was perceived as a capricious despot whose 'personal character' was

⁵ George L. Staunton, *An Authentic Account of an Embassy from the King of Great Britain to the Emperor of China* (2 vols., London: W. Bulmer, 1798) II, 219.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 334.

⁷ *An Embassy to China: Being the journal kept by Lord Macartney during his embassy to the Emperor Ch'ien-lung 1793-1794*, ed. J.L. Cranmer-Byng (London: Longmans, 1962), p. 210.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 213.

regarded as the very reason for the failure of Amherst's mission.⁹ Moreover, as renewed opportunities were provided for British travellers to explore the interior of China, the backward state of Chinese civilisation was increasingly exposed to British eyes. As a result, a general consensus was reached among the embassy on the half-civilised image of China and the Qing government was further seen as the primary cause of China's decay or lack of progress. This discovery not only lowered these British observers' respect for the current Chinese government, but provided new perspectives for Britain to deal with in its relation with China. Since experience had shown that, to obtain an objective in China, it was more effective either to ignore the authority of the government or offer a firm remonstrance, the previous conciliatory line of action advised by Macartney was seen as problematical. Accordingly, complimentary embassies were no longer considered helpful. Instead, in order to produce favourable results, a 'determined step' was deemed to be 'more requisite'.¹⁰ Even though plans to adopt coercive measures were still not popular at this time, a change of attitude towards China, as well as a demonstration of Britain's steadfast image, first appeared on the agenda.

Not long after the Amherst embassy, British merchants who traded with China replaced diplomatic visitors as the main providers and interpreters of images of China. In the early 1830s, the debate on the renewal of the East India Company's China trade monopoly touched off a heated controversy over the China question. To justify the claim that the free trade theory was inapplicable to the case of China and that the Company was irreplaceable in dealing with the Chinese, the EIC and its supporters stressed the peculiarity, or cultural otherness, of China. They maintained that China's unique history and self-contained economy had determined its people to believe they were 'in no need of intercourse of other

⁹ British Library, London: India Office Library and Records: India Office Amherst Correspondence, Lord Amherst's Embassy, 1815-17, G/12/197/295. Letter from Amherst to George Canning, 8 Mar. 1817; Henry Ellis, *Journal of the Proceedings of the late Embassy to China* (London: John Murray, 1817), p. 122.

¹⁰ John Francis Davis, *Sketches of China; partly during an inland journey of four months between Peking, Nanking, and Canton* (2 vols., London: Charles Knight, 1841), II, 143.

countries'.¹¹ Since Chinese institutions were simply different from, but not backward compared to the European models, the EIC's campaigners considered it necessary to respect the Chinese government and its laws, as well as China's sovereignty in regulating its own affairs. Given the Chinese people's natural disposition to 'appeal to reason',¹² persuasion and a peaceful approach were regarded as more useful than any aggressive course of action in increasing Britain's commerce with China. In contrast, the free traders, who wished the Chinese market to be opened to all, presented diametrically different views. They insisted that the eternal and universal laws of commerce could certainly be applied to the China trade, because the Chinese people were, in fact, friendly, commercially-minded, and desirous of communication with foreigners. The principal problem for China was that the current government, which by no means represented the voice of the people, had set itself against the interests of both the Chinese and foreign people. For this reason, the free trade advocates supposed it to be fully legitimate to challenge the authority of the Qing government and to hold its restrictive laws in defiance. Since 'it is a Chinese maxim to trample on the voluntary submissive and abject, while they respect firmness and decision',¹³ the notion that 'much more may be gained by an appeal to their fears than to their friendship'¹⁴ was widely promoted. Although, at this time, opinions were divided on whether a display of military force was appropriate, with the abolition of the EIC's monopoly in 1834, the necessity for a more determined stance against China was strengthened.

In the mid-1830s, Napier's failed effort to create fear in the Chinese government excited new discussions on Britain's future policy in China. British communities in Canton alleged

¹¹ R. Montgomery Martin, *The Past and Present State of the Tea Trade of England, and of the Continents of Europe and America* (London: Parbury, Allen, 1832), p. 6.

¹² Thomas Fisher, 'Statistical Notices of China', *The Gentleman's Magazine*, 103 (May 1833), 389.

¹³ Charles Gützlaff, *Journal of Three Voyages along the Coast of China, in 1831, 1832, & 1833* (London: Frederick Westley and A. H. Davis, 1834), p. 12.

¹⁴ Hugh Hamilton Lindsay's Report, in *Report of Proceedings on a Voyage to the Northern Ports of China, in the Ship Lord Amherst: extracted from papers, printed by order of the House of Commons, relating to the trade with China* (London: B. Fellowes, 1833), p. 57.

that it was now time to abandon officially the conciliatory course of conduct and to adopt a 'show of force' policy. According to this view, the key to success was to impress the Chinese government with a sense of Britain's power and firmness. To achieve this end, a determined plenipotentiary, 'attended by sufficient maritime force',¹⁵ should be sent to the vicinity of Beijing, in order to demand a mutually beneficial commercial treaty. Given the perceived timidity of the Chinese government, it was assumed that once such an approach was pursued, the Qing court would make every sacrifice to avoid a clash with the formidable force at Britain's disposal and thus speedily to comply with Britain's just demands. Although the 'show of force' advocates proposed an aggressive stance and a display of Britain's naval force, it should be noted that very few of them supported the actual use of arms. The majority of British residents in China at this time, as with the British government, regarded it as unjust and impractical to resort to a significant use of force against China or to wage an open war. Due to the fact that the 'show of force' theory aimed only to intimidate the Chinese authorities by the presence of British force and clearly to avoid armed conflict and open hostilities, the mid-1830s cannot be viewed as the beginning of Britain's pro-war attitude towards China, even though it made a war with China more imaginable than ever.

In the late-1830s, the ever-growing opium trade on the China coast and the ensuing crisis, in which Commissioner Lin Zexu suppressed the opium traffic with a strong hand, brought Chinese affairs to the forefront of British attention. Although, by and large, the opium merchants' arguments in favour of their trade were not well supported, they successfully produced an impression that the British nation was suffering gross insult in China as a result of Lin's actions. In this context, since history had repeatedly proved that it was utterly useless to attempt to conciliate the Chinese authorities, the actual use of arms was much more favoured by the British than it has been a few years earlier. On the basis of this

¹⁵ Anon., 'British authorities in China', *The Chinese Repository*, 3:8 (Dec. 1834), 363.

general sentiment, and because of a variety of concerns over the honour and interests of Britain and its empire, the justice, necessity and timeliness of a war against China were finally approved by the British government. A new chapter in British-Chinese relations unfolded. Although this fateful conflict between Britain and China was indeed derived from the controversy over the opium trade, it was Lin Zexu's conduct that endangered the lives and property of British subjects, rather than the trade itself which had lasted for decades, that immediately triggered Britain's decision vigorously to involve itself in Chinese affairs. The underlying causes of this war, from a perceptual point of view, can be attributed to the constant reinforcement of various negative images of China, as well as to the notion that the Chinese government could not be communicated with by appeals to reason. These impressions, of course, had not determined the outbreak of the First Anglo-Chinese War, but open hostilities with China would very probably not have appeared justifiable or acceptable without these perceptions that had slowly evolved from the Macartney mission to the eve of the Opium War.

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