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Britain through Chinese Eyes: early perceptions of Britain in pre-Opium War China¹

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Abstract

This article explores early Chinese perceptions of Britain prior to the 1840s. It shows 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 understanding of Britain was either negligible or unchanging. As contacts between the two nations increased, both the local elite in the south-eastern coastal areas and the elite at the imperial court in Beijing obtained credible as well as inaccurate information on Britain and the British people. Although in these years a potential challenge from the British was becoming increasingly imaginable and China's attitude towards Britain was quickly changing, the Qing government did not pay serious attention to studying Britain as an emerging world power. Nor did it institute a wide-ranging investigation of British power and influence as a preparation for self-defence. As a result of some misperceptions, the Chinese government and people were largely unprepared for serious aggression from Britain, even though they had been aware of Britain's naval ambition for decades.

Keywords: China, Britain, perceptions, encounter, the Opium War

Introduction

The First Anglo-Chinese War (1840-42), also known as the 'Opium War', was a fateful conflict that had profound consequences for the histories of both China and Great Britain. Although the periodisation of modern Chinese history as

¹ The author would like to thank Professor Harry T. Dickinson, Dr Felix Boecking, Professor Alfred J. Andrea, Professor Paul Bailey and Professor Antonia Finnane for their critique and suggestions. Thanks also go to the editors and the two anonymous reviewers.

beginning with the Opium War has been challenged,² research on China's engagements with Britain prior to the 1840s remains inadequate. In terms of early Chinese knowledge about Britain and the rest of the Western world, previous scholarship has usually highlighted the Chinese people's extreme ignorance of Western geography, science and technological innovations. Based on accounts written by early British travellers to China, some scholarly books, such as Michael Adas' *Machines as the Measure of Men*, provide a sharp contrast 'between static, past-minded, backward China and the continually improving, forward-looking, industrializing states of Europe' (Adas, 1989: 180). Since Edward Said's *Orientalism* influentially challenged the patronising attitudes which Westerners often adopted towards oriental societies during their encounters with the latter (Said, 1995: 1-28), a wave of new scholarship has interpreted Chinese society as being more advanced than was previously thought. By studying, for example, primarily the imperial court's knowledge about Western technology, Joanna Waley-Cohen has maintained that, during the Qianlong reign, 'the Chinese were extremely interested in technological advances and in what the West had to offer' (Waley-Cohen, 1993: 1543-4). Mark Elliott, in his recent book, has asserted that the Qianlong emperor 'was unquestionably familiar with Western geography' (Elliott, 2009: 140) especially because His Majesty had a world map painted as a mural upon a wall in the Yuanmingyuan palace. These studies are useful correctives to the previous belief about the Chinese 'ignorance' of the West, but they may have gone too far the other way in claiming that the Chinese, including their Manchu rulers, were generally better informed than they may have been. Although the debate between James Hevia and Joseph Esherick has prompted widespread discussion on the applicability of 'post-modern' theory to this period of Qing history (Hevia, 2000; Hevia, 1998; Esherick, 1998a; Esherick, 1998b; Bickers, 1993; Huang, 2007), this controversy, which concentrates on court ritual, has not seriously investigated how Britain was known to or perceived by the Chinese government and people at this time. Matthew Mosca's new book, *From Frontier Policy to Foreign Policy*, tells his readers much about the representation of British India in Qing strategic thought from the mid-

² Philip A. Kuhn, for example, doubts 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 Kuhn, 1970: 5-8.

seventeenth century to 1860 (Mosca, 2013), but it does not sufficiently explain the exact extent to which the Chinese, within and without the imperial government, were acquainted with the British during the pre-Opium War era. This article, based on a wealth of primary materials in the Chinese language, shows that, as Sino-British contacts increased dramatically in this period, both the central government in Beijing and the local elite in the south-east of China achieved a certain degree of understanding of Britain and the British people. Despite an awareness of the potential trouble which the British might cause, the imperial government did not pay serious attention to Britain as an emerging world power. Since a serious state-directed effort to understand the British and the extent to which they could really threaten the safety of the Chinese empire was not undertaken, precautions were not taken to prevent possible military aggression by Britain. As a result, when the Opium War broke out in 1840, both the imperial court and the majority of the south-eastern elites were caught unprepared for the extent of British power, even though they had been conscious of Britain's naval ambition for decades.

From the late-eighteenth century, significant changes had begun to take place in both the British and the Chinese empires. After the American War of Independence, growing importance was attached by Britain to its trade with Asia. Britain's trade with China hence became increasingly crucial to British overseas commerce. Nevertheless, China's Canton commercial system, which confined the country's foreign trade to a small area outside the city walls of Canton (Guangzhou) and only allowed it to be conducted through a handful of state-authorised merchants, resulted in a trade imbalance unfavourable to the British. In order to reverse this situation, from the late 1780s to the 1810s, three British embassies were sent to China with the aim of securing improved trading rights. Although the first mission, the Cathcart embassy of 1788, was called off because of the sudden death of Lord Cathcart, the latter two, the Macartney embassy of 1793 and the Amherst embassy of 1816, did reach the imperial court of China. An era of official Sino-British encounters was hence begun. As engagements between the two countries were being intensified, however, China's '*Kang-Qian shengshi* (prosperous age of the Kangxi until the Qianlong reigns, 1662-1795)' was drawing to a close and the Chinese empire was encountering a series of crises. Overpopulation, land shortage, the fiscal weakness of the government, and unceasing rebellions had a major impact

upon China's internal history.³ The task of maintaining order over an expanding and increasingly belligerent population became more and more difficult for the financially troubled Qing government. In the context of the Qing dynasty's decline, the three major Sino-British encounters between 1793 and 1840, namely the Macartney and Amherst embassies and the lead-up to the Opium War, took place in the three different reigns of these decades. In the following sections, details about the Chinese people's and government's perceptions of Britain in each of these reigns will be introduced and analysed.

Chinese perceptions of Britain in the Qianlong period

Probably because of China's enormous population, Chinese knowledge about Britain in the Qianlong period (1735-95) was often believed to be minimal or even negligible. Although at this time the vast majority of 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. In general, the early notions of Britain were introduced into China through two channels: one was the imperial government in Beijing, the other was the local elites and merchants in the south-eastern coastal areas. As a result of their respective contacts with the British, credible as well as inaccurate information about these 'outsiders' was introduced into China.

Although the Qianlong emperor was known for his appetite for and interest in foreign artifacts, it was his subjects who lived in the south-eastern coastal areas who reached a deeper understanding of Britain during the Qianlong reign. 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,⁴ the smuggling of British goods was in fact widespread along China's south-east coast, especially near the ports of Amoy (Xiamen), Ningbo and Shanghai. In these areas, growing commercial activity enabled local residents

³ Details about Qing's dynastic decline can be found in Johns & Kuhn, 1978: 107-62; Naquin & Rawski, 1987: 217-32, and Wei, 1992: 39-44.

⁴ In 1757, the Qianlong emperor ordered the closure of all these ports to foreign trade, with the exception of Canton.

to have more contacts with the British people and 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 areas acquired some positive impressions of Britain. Since these commodities, such as fragrances, glasses, matches, 'singsongs'⁵ 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.⁶ 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' (Bao, 1828: 800), 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 to the south-east of the country, seems to have been more extensive among the ordinary populace. As Guan Tong, a famous scholar from Jiangning, recalled, '*Yanghuo* were heatedly talked about, so much so that even the poorest wanted to exhaust their money in order to follow this trend' (Guan, 1833: 819). 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 south-east coast.

First, *Huang Qing siyi kao* (*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 the research of Yang Xianyi, the author of

⁵ '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, 2005: 73.

⁶ Details about British exports to China and the circulation of *yanghuo* in China can be found in Conner, 1986: 141-7 and Zheng, 2010: 37-52.

Huang Qing siyi kao landed near Liverpool and visited the north of England (Yang, 1983: 141). In a few sentences, this Chinese sailor not only gave a brief description of what he saw in Lancashire and Hampshire, but he also 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 *Huang Qing zhigong tu* (*The Qing imperial illustrations of tributaries*), two portraits of a British 'barbarian' male and female were included (as shown below) (Fu & Dong, 1761: 121-2). It is not known whether these pictures were drawn from life or, which is 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 being 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 south-eastern coastal Chinese. This is the first time British figures were illustrated in an official 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*’⁷‘A barbarian woman from *Ying-ji-li*’

Despite this advance in knowledge of Britain achieved in some south-eastern 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. The imperial court in Beijing, in particular, does not seem to have had a strong interest in investigating Western nations, let alone Britain. The state-funded *Da Qing yitong zhi* (*The great Qing gazetteer*)⁸ does not mention the country of *Ying-ji-li* at all. Although *Qinding huangqing wenxian tongkao* (*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’, ‘Concubinage is prohibited’, ‘In greetings, people take off their hats and shake hands’ (Zhang, 1787: 7471) and so on, it seems to be a collection of random findings obtained through actual contacts with

⁷ *Ying-ji-li* was probably transliterated from the word ‘English’, or ‘England’.

⁸ This gazetteer was edited under the order of the Qianlong emperor and was published in 1784.

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 is devoted to introducing knowledge about Britain shows how little importance was attached by the Qianlong court to studying Britain at this time.

Although it remains debatable whether the Qianlong emperor was really unaware of the potential threat from Britain, some clear signs of the imperial court's attitudes towards Britain can be found in the manner in which it received the Macartney mission. In the late eighteenth century, despite the early signs of the 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*' (Elliott, 2009: 140-2).⁹ 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.¹⁰ It was with the help of some European missionaries that the Qianlong court found out that 'It is situated in the north of the west ocean, and to the northwest of our celestial empire' (Department of Historical Anecdotes, the Palace Museum, 1990: 616). As the Macartney mission was despatched under the pretext of presenting congratulations on the Qianlong emperor's eightieth birthday, the Qing government was largely unconscious 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 (Hevia, 2000: 181-91; Mosca, 2013: 127-60), particularly in India and

⁹ Italics in the original.

¹⁰ Elliott's assertion that the Qianlong emperor 'was unquestionably familiar with Western geography' does not seem tenable, because even though the Qianlong emperor indeed possessed some world maps, this does not necessarily mean that he knew where exactly particular European countries were located on them. Since Elliott is unable to 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 suggests that the Qianlong emperor might have asked these questions deliberately in order to conceal his knowledge about Britain. No evidence, however, has been presented to support this conjecture. See Elliott, 2009: 140.

in the vicinity of China's south-western 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 official 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 (Cranmer-Byng, 1962: 337).

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 more the unique British custom than the envoy's personal feelings that prevented the British 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' (The Palace Museum, 1990: 671). 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 who 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 south-eastern coastal Chinese achieved a deeper understanding of Britain. Although some of this new knowledge might have been communicated to Beijing, the Qianlong emperor's 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'.

Chinese perceptions of Britain in the Jiaqing period

As shown above, Chinese perceptions of Britain, whether along the south-eastern 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 during the reign of Jiaqing (1796-1820). 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 some of the coastal Chinese but also the Qing government itself began to feel concerned about the difficulties the British might cause China. 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 taels¹¹ of silver per annum around 1816) (The Palace Museum, 1968: I, 22). On the other hand, the number of economic and civil disputes between British merchants and coastal Chinese people increased significantly. Perhaps as a result, the image of Britain among the well informed people in the south-east 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

¹¹ The tael 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 Greenberg, 1951, vii.

Fujian native who travelled around South-east Asia, that Britain ‘predominates in northwest Europe in terms of military instruments’ (Wang, 1806: 752), 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’ (Wang, 1806: 751). In 1820, a Cantonese sailor named Xie Qinggao verified these facts as a result of his visit to Britain. In *Hai lu* (*An Account of the Seas*), his maritime record,¹² 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’ (Xie, 1820: 1432).

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 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.¹³ 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 (*jiaozha*)’,¹⁴ ‘greedy (*tanli*)’,¹⁵ ‘fierce and cunning (*qiangheng jianzha*)’,¹⁶ ‘interest-oriented (*liyu xunxin*)’¹⁷ and they were, in general, ‘the most harsh

¹² *Hai lu* was edited from Xie Qinggao’s oral accounts.

¹³ Details about these two expeditions can be found in Morse, 1926: II, 357-72, III, 76-95 and Ma & Huang, 1996, 21-7.

¹⁴ Report from the governor of Guangdong to the Jiaqing emperor on Britain’s occupation of Macao, 28 October (lunar calendar), the thirteenth year of the Jiaqing reign (1808), in The Palace Museum, 1968: II, 35.

¹⁵ Report from the viceroy of Guangdong and Guangxi to the Jiaqing emperor on the cause of Britain’s intrusion into Macao, 20 September (lunar calendar), the thirteenth year of the Jiaqing reign (1808), in The Palace Museum, 1968: II, 28.

¹⁶ Report from the viceroy of Guangdong and Guangxi to the Jiaqing emperor on the current state of Britain, 8 April (lunar calendar), the fourteenth year of the Jiaqing reign (1809), in The Palace Museum, 1968: III, 6.

¹⁷ Report from the viceroy of Guangdong and Guangxi to the Jiaqing emperor on the British ships’ intrusion into Macao, 13 October (lunar calendar), the thirteenth year of the Jiaqing reign (1808), in The Palace Museum, 1968: II, 32.

and cruel barbarians (*zhufan zhong zuiwei jie'ao*),¹⁸ who 'live[d] by plunder (*jielue weisheng*)'.¹⁹ Although, at this time, neither the Chinese government nor the coastal Chinese people 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 Qing government was no longer deluded about the British mission's pretence that it had come to pay respect to the emperor. Instead, the imperial court believed 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 imperial court under the name of paying respect, but in fact they must have other intentions (The Palace Museum, 1968: V, 6).

The Jiaqing emperor's suspicions about the intentions of this British mission, moreover, 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 (*kewu yiji*)'.²⁰ In consequence, contrary to the Qianlong emperor's declared willingness to receive more British missions after the

¹⁸ 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 September (lunar calendar), the thirteenth year of the Jiaqing reign (1808), in The Palace Museum, 1968: II, 23.

¹⁹ Report from the viceroy of Guangdong and Guangxi to the Jiaqing emperor on the mission to drive out the British barbarians, 27 October (lunar calendar), the thirteenth year of the Jiaqing reign (1808), in The Palace Museum, 1968: II, 35.

²⁰ The Jiaqing emperor's remark on the viceroy of Guangdong and Guangxi's report on the cause of Britain's intrusion into Macao, 20 September (lunar calendar), the thirteenth year of the Jiaqing reign (1808), in The Palace Museum, 1968: II, 27.

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).²¹

From these words, it can be observed that the Qing court's attitude towards Britain had indeed changed remarkably during 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 (Davis, 1841: 179). 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:

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.

²¹ The Jiaqing emperor's letter to the British monarch, in Morse, 1926: III, 302.

The Jiaqing emperor: Why?

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? (Sun: 50)

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, as well as the way the British were most likely to 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 conviction of Britain's inability to cause China any trouble was soon to change, however, during the Daoguang period.

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 (1820-50), China became more conscious of Britain's worldwide influence as well as more aware of the severe domestic problems which arose from the opium trade. Under these 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 south-eastern 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, 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 the Qing government, but also many coastal Chinese people, came to believe that this trade was 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. It produces opium and tobacco in order to poison China. These products not only exhaust our nation's wealth, but also drive our people to sickness' (Yao, 1845: 3327-8). 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 (Xiao, 1832: 509).

...

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 South-east Asia, where they impose taxes and annual tributes (Xiao, 1832: 766).²²

²² 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.

Britain's occupation of Singapore in 1819 and its expansion in South-east 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? (He: 578)

Yan Sizong, another intellectual from Guangdong, also expressed his apprehension about the looming threat from Britain. He maintained that:

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 (Yan: b, 798).

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' (Yan: a, 797). Cheng Enze, an eminent scholar-official, also declared that, 'Attention should be paid to the information that was formerly ignored ... This knowledge could be used as guidance for tens of thousands of people in China' (Cheng, 1935: 142). 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’ (Ye, 1834: 792). Perhaps owing 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’ (Wei, 1983: 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. 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* (*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 are 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 (Xi, 1835: 1408-9).²³

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. (Ye, 1834: 787-8)

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 than men. When ministers greet each other, they take off their hats. The supreme

²³ One *li* equals 0.5 kilometre, and a Chinese hour at that time was two hours by Western standard.

form of salute is to put a hand on the forehead. They stand upright even when the monarch is present. (Xiao, 1832: 767)²⁴

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 wide-ranging state-directed effort for the sake of improving the nation's defence. As a matter of fact, the Daoguang government was more concerned with exterminating the immediate evils occasioned by the opium trade than with making preparations to meet any future British threat. In this respect, there was no direct government involvement 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 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' (Wen, 516). 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

²⁴ 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.

[Britain's] strategy is to ... hang up cannons on the masts and set fire on land' (Yan: a, 797), 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 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?' (Yan: a, 797).

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 during 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' (Wen, 115), Ye Zhongjin was convinced that 'Tea and rhubarb are indeed crucial to their lives' (Ye, 1834: 792). 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' (Xiao, 776). 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 south-eastern 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 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 presented above that, from the Qianlong reign to the eve of the Opium War, although in China knowledge of Britain 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 coast, Chinese understanding of Britain advanced accordingly. Both the local elite in the south-eastern 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 serious misperceptions, 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.

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