

Going to War against the Middle Kingdom?

Continuity and Change in British Attitudes towards Qing China (1793-1840)

Abstract

This article investigates British attitudes towards Qing China as a consequence of their early encounters from the Macartney embassy to the opium crisis. By examining this medium-term timespan to which previous scholarship has paid inadequate attention, it shows the continuity and change of these attitudes through different historical contexts. With its focus on war-related discussions, this article reveals how the idea of war against the Chinese empire was developed and debated on the basis of these changing ideas. The First Anglo-Chinese War, to a great extent, could not have developed into the form and scale it did without these developments.

Key words

The First Anglo-Chinese War, Sino-British relations, opium, perceptions

The First Anglo-Chinese War (1840-2), popularly referred to as the ‘Opium War’, was a deeply consequential event in the history of Sino-British relations. As a defining moment which marked the opening of a ‘century of humiliation’ for Chinese nationalists, the Opium War has been much commented upon by historians. In explaining its outbreak, many scholars have emphasised the irreconcilability of Britain’s commercial interests and China’s restrictive policies.¹ Other historians, however, have challenged this view from a variety of perspectives. In the late 1960s, John K. Fairbank maintained that the war was in essence inevitable because of the wide cultural differences between the conservative East and the progressive West.² About a decade later, Tan Chung, a Chinese historian based in India, claimed that the vital importance of the opium trade had been underestimated as a cause of the war by Fairbank and

others. After a detailed investigation into the triangular trade between Britain, India and China, Chung maintained that the clash of socio-economic interests around the opium question was the primary cause of the First Anglo-Chinese War.³ In addition to these interpretations, which aimed to pinpoint the fundamental cause of this conflict, other scholars addressed some less discernible but still significant causes. Peter Fay, for example, claimed that the determination of Protestant missionaries to ‘open up’ China was crucial to the outbreak of the war.⁴ Glenn Melancon has added that Britain’s concern for its national honour, as well as the domestic political crisis facing the Whig government in the late 1830s, were also important factors in influencing the decision to go to war with China.⁵

These studies have revealed many interesting aspects of the Opium War, but they share some common weaknesses. First, in explaining the origins of the war, previous research has produced either grand narratives which have overlooked some important historical details (such as Fairbank’s case challenged by Chung),⁶ or specific ‘short-term (*courte durée*)’ studies of the kind which ‘centred on the drama of “great events”’ only.⁷ Much research concentrating on the Opium War itself has traced its origins back no earlier than the rise of the opium trade and more attention has therefore been paid to the immediate causes of hostilities.⁸ This article will argue for the necessity of surveying a longer timespan. It will examine British attitudes formed as a result of Sino-British encounters both before and during the heyday of the opium trade, in order to understand the origins of the war more fully.

Second, although work has already been carried out on the developing western images of China, there has been little attempt to explore the complex interplay between changing cultural representations and policy towards China, as a way of understanding the outbreak of the Opium War. Previous studies on western images of the East often do not differentiate clearly between Britain and the West or between China and Asia.⁹ Even though some of them have indeed made such distinction, they tend to dwell on how China as a civilisation was

understood by the western public, especially by intellectuals.¹⁰ Here I argue that we need to focus on the question of *political* reception. Only by analysing the attitudes and perceptions formed by political actors who had first-hand experience of China or possessed political influence in Britain, can we fully grasp how changing British attitudes towards China influenced the government's policy.

Furthermore, attempts have recently been made to offer close cultural investigations of early Sino-British interactions, but the existing scholarship is still unclear about how exactly the idea of open warfare against China was produced, developed and justified on the basis of changing British perceptions. English literature scholars Elizabeth Hope Chang and David Porter have examined the cultural awareness of China in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century England/Britain in their respective books, with a focus on aesthetic value and practice.¹¹ Peter J. Kitson has explored the place of China in the culture and literature of Britain during the Romantic period.¹² In these studies, again, a clear line has not been drawn between Britain's direct discoveries in China and the multifarious representations of China's image made by those who had no or little experience of East Asia. Ulrike Hillemann did place more emphasis on perceptions formed in the 'contact zone', a term coined by Mary Louise Pratt,¹³ and has indicated that changing British knowledge of its empire in Asia might have made a military attack on China more imaginable.¹⁴ She has not, however, explored this specific aspect in great detail.

Unlike previous research which shares such limitations, this article attempts to examine the critical but understudied half-century before the Opium War, a medium-term (*moyenne durée*) period which produced a range of Sino-British political moments of connection, from the Macartney embassy (1793-94), through the Amherst embassy (1816-17) to the Napier incident (1834) and the lead-up to the opium crisis (1839-40). It will pursue questions of how changing images of China were connected to British discussion over whether to pursue a

pacific or aggressive policy towards the Qing court. By investigating how opinion-formers and decision-makers developed and justified their views on this matter, this article will show how the continuity and changes in British attitudes towards China through this important period shaped the final decision to attack the Middle Kingdom.

I

Between the 1790s and the 1810s, Britain witnessed two major diplomatic failures in its efforts to establish good relations with China. In these decades, as more and more British merchants came to trade in East Asia, both the British East India Company [EIC] and the government in London became increasingly dissatisfied with China's 'Canton system' which confined the empire's foreign trade to the single port of Canton (Guangzhou) and restricted it to being conducted through only a handful of Chinese merchants. In Canton, foreigners were subject to strict regulations on their personal movements and they were not allowed to communicate directly with Qing officials but could communicate only through the government-authorised Hong merchants.¹⁵ With the hope of persuading the Chinese emperor to relax these irksome restrictions and even to establish western-style diplomatic relations with Britain, the Macartney and Amherst embassies arrived in China in 1793 and 1816 respectively. Partly because of the famous dispute over performing the kowtow ceremony, a Chinese court ritual which required bending both knees and bowing the head to the ground before the emperor, neither embassy achieved its original goals. Macartney was relatively well received by the Qianlong emperor at his eighty-second birthday party, whereas Amherst did not even manage to arrange an audience with the Jiaqing emperor, Qianlong's son and successor. Although these early British embassies to China, especially Macartney's, have been much studied, existing publications and academic debates have mainly concentrated on the kowtow controversy or the kind of western presents which Macartney offered to the

Qianlong court.¹⁶ This sizable literature has succeeded in offering detailed cultural investigations of these early Sino-British encounters (especially the Macartney embassy), but the emphasis on highly specific topics has meant that the wider significance of these failed embassies has been neglected. The emphasis on the dispute about performing the kowtow has led to a failure to appreciate the significance of the embassy leaders' changing assessments of the Chinese government as well as their attitude towards adopting coercive measures against China.

To explain their failure to achieve all their desired objectives, and perhaps also to show that they had in fact gained some 'useful' knowledge about China, leading members of both embassies were anxious to answer two self-raised questions in the published accounts of their mission – why was the embassy unsuccessful and what line of action should Britain adopt next? To explain the reason why their mission failed, Macartney and his deputy George L. Staunton blamed the prejudices and hostility of a few senior ministers at the Qianlong court rather than the emperor himself. Based on his recently-obtained 'local knowledge', Macartney asserted in his diary that, contrary to the assumption that the emperor had absolute control over all state affairs, 'the power and administration of the State resided in the great councils or tribunals ... The government as it now stands is properly the tyranny of a handful of Tartars over more than three hundred millions of Chinese'.¹⁷ Influenced by this belief, Macartney concluded that, '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 ... have been among the chief obstacles to my business'.¹⁸

Compared to Macartney's general comment, Staunton's criticism of these principal ministers was more specific. He placed most blame on Fukang-an, one of the six grand councillors, and Heshen, the chief councillor. Fukang-an, as Staunton was informed, was a senior Manchu general who had governed a number of provinces including Canton. Not long

before 1793, Fukang-an had led a military campaign against the Gurkhas on the Tibet-Nepal border, where he claimed to have met interference from the British. Perhaps for these reasons, no matter how hard Macartney attempted to please Fukang-an, the general remained extremely hostile to the embassy. Fukang-an's animosity towards the British was so strong and obvious that Staunton could not protesting 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'.¹⁹ Heshen, the minister who enjoyed the almost exclusive confidence of the Qianlong emperor, was portrayed by Staunton as 'The Vizier of China, who ... possess[es], in fact, under the Emperor, the whole power of the empire'.²⁰ Although they admitted that Heshen 'displayed all the good breeding and politeness of an experienced courtier',²¹ both Staunton and Macartney agreed that Heshen's real attitude towards the British was the same as that of Fukang-an's. In Macartney's estimation, it was Heshen, rather than anybody else, who prevented him from communicating the real purposes of his embassy to the Qianlong emperor. 'It is much regretted', Macartney wrote, 'that the first Minister was determined not to give me such opportunities'.²²

Despite blaming these senior ministers for the failure of their embassy, Macartney and Staunton presented rather positive images of almost everybody else they met in China, particularly the Qianlong emperor himself. In their accounts, the emperor was described as a liberal, amicable and father-like figure. They repeatedly insisted that the Qianlong emperor was 'a leader of a calm judgement',²³ who had 'a high esteem for the Ambassador and his nation ... and ... [was] determined to protect their trade'.²⁴ Even on the controversy over performing the kowtow, Staunton 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'.²⁵ It was a few ministers 'more than the Emperor himself, [who] adhered to this antiquated claim of superiority over

other nations'.²⁶ In commenting upon the disposition of lower-ranking officials as well as the attitudes of the common Chinese people, Macartney 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 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.²⁷

As a result of these constructed images, the failure of Macartney's mission seemed to be the result of the prejudices of a handful of Manchu ministers, while the vast majority of the Chinese, including their Manchu emperor, were better disposed towards the British as well as towards Britain's trade with China.

Based on their assessments of Chinese affairs, Macartney and Staunton made clear suggestions on what course of conduct Britain should subsequently adopt towards China. In their opinion, there was nothing wrong in Britain's present means of engagement with the Chinese empire. Since the emperor 'entertained kind intensions [*sic*] with regard to us',²⁸ they believed that favourable relations with China would eventually be established 'by time and management',²⁹ despite the failure of the present mission. In particular, Macartney stressed that patience and perseverance were extremely important in obtaining beneficial results in China in the next few decades. Given the extraordinary character of the Chinese government, he wrote, 'it would certainly require in us great skill, caution, temper and perseverance ... no shorter way will do it'.³⁰

Despite proffering this advice, Macartney is very well known for having suggested a violent line of action against China. Macartney did claim that, in the event of a breakdown in Sino-British relations, '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 [Bei-zhili]'.³¹ Despite this seemingly belligerent

statement, however, Macartney was by no means an advocate of war against China. In fact, in the same place where he made his statement, he also solemnly reminded his readers of the devastating effects that a Sino-British war would have on Britain and its eastern empire. He wrote:

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.³²

It was because of these considerations, when Macartney was concluding his comments on Britain's future engagement with China, that he earnestly reaffirmed the absolute necessity of avoiding an aggressive line of action – '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'.³³ From this, it can be clearly seen that, military aggression against China was still deemed by Macartney as inadvisable and likely to be very harmful to Britain's interests. Macartney was strongly opposed to any hostile measures and so he should be recognised as an advocate of peaceful relations with China, rather than being an early agitator for a war against China.

Probably as a result of the positive image of the Chinese emperor transmitted by the Macartney embassy, twenty-two years later, the Amherst mission arrived in China with the hope of establishing British trade with China in future 'upon a secure, solid, equitable footing ... under the protection of the Emperor'.³⁴ Nevertheless, in stark contrast to the

assumption that the emperor was benevolent and concerned about the welfare of the British merchants trading with China, the Amherst embassy ended up deeply disillusioned with the character of the Jiaqing emperor. When reflecting upon what caused this second embassy to be unsuccessful, leading members of Amherst's mission unanimously ascribed it to 'the personal character of the monarch',³⁵ rather than any prominent official at his court. In Amherst's correspondence with George Canning, the President of the Board of Control for India, he clearly explained his reasons for refusing to kowtow before the Chinese emperor. Amherst maintained that the main reason for his 'want of success' was that this present monarch, 'whose reign has been frequently and very lately disturbed by insurrections',³⁶ was less ready to 'dispense with outward fame of respect than his Father, whose reign was long and victorious, ... [and so] might attach less consequence to any shew of external homage'.³⁷

In addition to Amherst's dissatisfaction with the Jiaqing emperor on the kowtow issue, members of the Amherst embassy were also greatly exasperated by the way they were treated and rejected by the Chinese sovereign. To explain some very strange and unexpected occurrences throughout the visit, they represented the Jiaqing emperor as a capricious despot rather than as an enlightened monarch. In Tianjin, for example, when the British delegation was fully prepared to proceed to Beijing, Amherst was suddenly told that his musical band was not allowed to enter the capital and that these musicians had to be left behind at once. This unexpected command from the emperor created much anxiety among the embassy. Its members did not want to separate from each other at such a late stage, especially since no clear explanation was given on why they had to do so.³⁸ While the leaders of the embassy were hesitating whether to make a protest, this order was swiftly countermanded for no apparent reason. On this occasion, Henry Ellis, the embassy's third commissioner, commented 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'.³⁹ What was more hurtful to the British delegation, however, was that just a few hours after they reached Beijing, which had required an exhausting overnight journey,⁴⁰ not only was the embassy rejected as a whole, but it was ordered to depart immediately with hardly any time to rest.⁴¹ This imperial order ignited so much indignation across the embassy that no one could withhold expressing his anger at the monarch's arbitrary and capricious decisions. John Francis Davis, one of the embassy's translators, claimed that, 'This certainly was a barbarous, not to say brutal, measure, considering that we had only just arrived from a most fatiguing night journey. ... The insult offered had been so gross'.⁴² Clarke Abel, the chief medical officer, found it impossible to explain what had occurred 'in any probable chain of cause and effect'. He concluded 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'.⁴³

As this capricious and arbitrary image of the Jiaqing emperor was repeatedly discussed and reinforced during the embassy's return journey, the members of the Amherst embassy reached different opinions about China than had the leading members of the Macartney mission and these were eventually widely disseminated back in Britain. Most important, criticism was now directed almost exclusively at the unreliable and unfriendly Jiaqing emperor and the conciliatory approach advocated by Macartney came under criticism. Leading members of the Amherst embassy maintained that the means of dispatching complimentary embassies to China was so inappropriate and that Britain should never send such a mission again. Instead, their experiences led them to suggest that a more effective line of action would be to ignore the Chinese authorities as far as possible and promote in the minds of Chinese officials the image of a powerful and determined Britain. For instance, during the long return voyage from Beijing to Canton, Basil Hall, the commander of HMS

Lyra, noted that, ‘whenever we began by soliciting leave to walk into the country or to look at anything, our request was almost invariably refused’, however, when ‘[we] go straight ... by seeming to imagine any permission [un]necessary’,⁴⁴ a Chinese official would rarely come to stop them. To account for this phenomenon, Henry Hayne, Amherst’s private secretary, maintained 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’.⁴⁵ What also influenced the attitudes of those involved in the Amherst mission was that, during the return voyage, whenever their interests were neglected by the Chinese, such as when daily supplies were deficient, it proved important for the British to make their voices heard and, if necessary, to express their demands in a firm manner. Davis noted in this respect that every time the British remonstrated strongly and officially, their grievances were not only soon redressed, but were handled with great care and attention. As a result of his experiences, Davis was convinced that, in dealing with the Chinese government, ‘[a] determined step was the more requisite’.⁴⁶

These different interpretations of the situation in China, as well as the different conclusions reached about the character of the Chinese emperor and the Chinese people, persuaded some members of the Amherst embassy to suggest that Britain should in future adopt a firm line of action against China. Ellis, for example, suggested that if ‘it still be deemed advisable to assist our commerce by political intercourse’,⁴⁷ 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’.⁴⁸ By this means, Ellis expected that,

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.⁴⁹

John Macleod, a surgeon aboard the *Alceste*, advocated an even more militant approach. He wrote with assurance that, because 'so feeble is their naval force ... the appearance of a few of our lightest cruisers on their coasts, would throw the whole of this *celestial* empire into confusion'.⁵⁰ Unlike Macartney, Macleod opposed a policy of forbearance. He quoted Krusenstern, a Russian navigator who had previously been to China and had alleged that 'the forbearance and mistaken lenity of the greater civilized powers have emboldened these savages [the Chinese], not only to consider as barbarians all Europeans, but actually to treat them as such'.⁵¹ By referring to this statement, Macleod was clearly implying that western nations had been too weak in their relations with China. Although Macleod was not a leading member of the Amherst embassy and his suggestion was not given serious consideration by the British government at this stage, the published accounts of Amherst's mission did lead to the gradual development of a general consensus that a policy of appeasing the Chinese emperor was not an appropriate tactic for Britain to adopt. Britain should not send another diplomatic mission to China. Instead, it should ensure that the Chinese government should learn to appreciate the power and resolution of Britain in its relations with other nations. Macartney's caution against an aggressive policy towards China was gradually forgotten and new British attitudes towards China began to take its place.

II

British-Chinese relations underwent further significant changes from the mid-1830s, largely because the EIC's monopoly of Britain's trade with China was abolished by the British government and parliament in 1833. As a direct consequence, instead of using the Company's Select Committee at Canton, the British government had itself to take on the task

of representing British merchants in China and dealing directly with the Chinese authorities. William John, ninth Lord Napier, reached Canton in 1834 as Britain's first superintendent of trade in China. Assuming himself to be the representative of the British crown, however, Napier refused to accept Hong merchants as the proper channel of communications between himself and viceroy Lu Kun, the highest authority at Canton. This decision challenged China's century-long Canton system. After wantonly transgressing a series of other local laws in Canton, Napier roused much anger in the Chinese government. The Canton authorities not only stopped all trade with Britain, but put Napier under house arrest until his weakened health compelled him to withdraw.⁵² Since the Napier incident transpired at a time when the British were becoming increasingly convinced that a policy of forbearance and conciliation was inadvisable when dealing with the Chinese government, the mid-1830s has often been regarded as the beginning of Britain's 'forward policy' towards China, and the prelude to the Opium War.⁵³ This view has, however, been recently challenged from different perspectives. By exploring records of the Foreign Office, Melancon found that 'the British government had no policy of aggression toward China' in 1834.⁵⁴ Hao Gao has examined public opinion among the British community in China. Gao has discovered that although a 'show of force' policy was indeed popular in the mid-1830s, most British residents in Canton at this time were actually opposed to a policy of advocating the use of military and naval forces against China.⁵⁵ These recent studies have analysed various aspects as a consequence of the Napier incident, but Napier's own attitude towards a possible war against China remains unclear.

Since Napier died shortly after he returned to Macao from Canton, he had no opportunity to reflect on why his mission was as unsuccessful as Macartney's and Amherst's had been. Nevertheless, Napier's assessment of the Chinese affairs, as well as his attitudes towards Britain's conduct in China can be found in his correspondence with the British

government during his superintendency. From this source, we can discover that Napier held the typical 'show of force' attitude which was becoming prevalent in the mid-1830s. He declared that he had 'no delight in war',⁵⁶ but he did believe that a small-scale demonstration of Britain's arms, in line with a resolute attitude, would earn Britain respect in China. Napier, unquestionably, developed some of his key attitudes from opinions formed as a result of the earlier British embassies to China, especially those published by members of the Amherst mission. For example, Napier came to the same conclusion as several members of that mission that the vast majority of Chinese people were commercially-minded and hence in favour of British trade with China. He noted that 'the house of every Chinaman ... is a shop of one sort or another. ... in fact, every man is a merchant'.⁵⁷ Perhaps for this reason, Napier concluded that 'the Chinese people are most anxious for our trade – from the Great Wall to the southern extremity of the empire', while 'the Tartar Government alone being anti-commercial'.⁵⁸ Based on this interpretation of the Chinese character as well as having the same negative view of the nature of the Qing government as leading members of the Amherst mission, Napier became convinced that a firm British stand against the Chinese government would be crucial to the success of his mission. Before he ever set foot on China, Napier had asserted that 'every act of violence on our part has been productive of instant redress and other beneficial results', while 'every concession made ... has been followed by ensued oppression and spoliation'.⁵⁹ In this light, a few months later, Napier wrote to Foreign Secretary Viscount Palmerston in order to justify his forceful practices in Canton. He claimed that:

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 vigor? ⁶⁰

These lines are obviously similar to the hardline attitude that had evolved after the Amherst embassy, but it is clear that Napier did not simply inherit all his views of Chinese affairs by reading the accounts published by members of the Amherst mission. In particular, Napier disagreed with members of the Amherst embassy on their utterly negative image of the Chinese emperor. Instead of accusing the emperor of being responsible for the difficulties which the British faced in trading with China, Napier clearly entertained some favourable images of the Daoguang emperor. In his opinion, Britain's grievances in Canton was caused solely by the misconduct of the local authorities, rather than being the result of the capricious and arbitrary personal conduct of the monarch. In order to obtain justice for British merchants, therefore, it was essential to bypass the Canton government and to protest directly to the emperor in Beijing. Napier maintained that it was the 'unprecedented tyranny and injustice ... by the said viceroy' and the 'absurd and tyrannical assumption of power on the part of the governor and lieutenant-governor'⁶¹ that prevented a stable Sino-British trade being established. To remedy this situation, the only way was to protest 'with firmness and spirit'⁶² to no other than the emperor himself. In this spirit, Napier wrote in his open warning to the Canton government 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!⁶³

From this statement, it can be shown that, unlike members of the Amherst embassy, Napier definitely entertained a rather favourable image of the present Chinese monarch. Although Napier had never had an opportunity to meet the Daoguang emperor in person, he did indeed pin his hope of establishing good relations on the character of his imperial majesty, whose

positive image overall and impartiality in particular he simply took for granted.

Napier's confidence in the validity of protesting to the emperor in a firm manner was also founded on his belief that the Qing ruler and his army had lost their warlike character, so a dangerous military clash between China and Britain would be virtually impossible. Napier was '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'.⁶⁴ Even if his imperial majesty would not compromise at once, Napier believed that 'three or four frigates and brigs, with a few steady British troops ... would settle the thing in a space of time inconceivably short'.⁶⁵ By suggesting this line of action, Napier promised that the Chinese 'would never dare to show a front'⁶⁶ and that, with respect to Britain, and perhaps to China as well, this approach would cause 'not the loss of a single man'.⁶⁷ Although, as Gao has suggested, this 'show of force' strategy was more the result of the popular clamour among the Anglophone community in Canton than Napier's own invention,⁶⁸ Napier did bring such a hardline policy to the attention of the British government for the first time.

Napier could not have foreseen, however, that tension over the opium question in 1839 would trigger a large-scale military confrontation between Britain and China. From the late eighteenth century, China's rocketing consumption of Indian-made opium had benefited British merchants considerably, while causing a series of social and financial problems for the Qing government. In order to eliminate the evils caused by this illegal drug, the Daoguang emperor ordered Commissioner Lin Zexu to eradicate the opium trade. Lin, a strong-minded man, adopted some drastic measures after he had reached Canton. He not only suspended all trade with foreigners (mainly the British), but detained the merchants within their factories until they had handed over all the opium in their possession. Shortly after 20,283 chests of opium had been surrendered and the British merchants had retreated from Canton, a riot took

place near Hong Kong. A Chinese native named Lin Weixi was allegedly killed by a British seaman, but the murderer could not be identified by the British investigators. In response, Lin Zexu cut off supplies to the British community, including women and children, who were compelled to seek refuge on board the merchant fleet off Hong Kong. Determined to drive the British entirely out of the Chinese territory, Lin even commanded the native Chinese along the coast to fire upon and seize the British whenever they went on shore to purchase provisions.⁶⁹ These actions taken by Lin Zexu stirred up much anxiety among the British both in China and in Britain. Chinese affairs received much greater attention than ever before in English-language publications in Canton and in debates in the Westminster parliament in Britain. British attitude towards an open war against China, as a result, changed considerably within this new context.

The most notable change after the opium crisis was that in Parliament ‘no member was willing to declare himself directly opposed to a war with China’.⁷⁰ Although opinions still varied on the specific means of intervention, or the scale of any possible war, the pressing demand for the British government to intervene in Chinese affairs was widely accepted by MPs in the House of Commons. To explain this decisive shift in British attitudes towards China, historians have stressed Britain’s need to open up overseas markets for its manufactured goods and the British public’s concern for the country’s national honour.⁷¹ Two other interpretations of the changing British attitude to Chinese affairs have, however, received less attention.

First, British commentators on China, no matter whether they had ever been there or not, now began to emphasise that the China question was closely associated with the preservation of Britain’s empire in India. Since the greater part of the EIC’s revenue derived from the China trade and ‘one-sixth of the whole united revenue of Great Britain and India depended on our commercial relations with that country’,⁷² the elimination of Britain’s trade with China

would be ‘one of the greatest calamities which could befall the East India Company and the nation’.⁷³ Moreover, it was pointed out that ‘the peace of India greatly depended on our vindicating British supremacy before China’.⁷⁴ Some British observers were worried that, if Britain continued to show forbearance in response to China’s aggressive actions, this would 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’.⁷⁵ In that case, as George T. Staunton, Lord Amherst’s deputy in 1816 and an old China hand, maintained, ‘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’.⁷⁶

Second, as a consequence of Commissioner Lin’s sudden and unexpected campaign against the opium trade, the British finally became disillusioned with the disposition of the Chinese emperor. Previously, with the exception of the Amherst mission, no matter how hard the British commentators had censured the local authorities of Canton, they had entertained a more or less positive image of the Chinese monarch. The emperor had long been assumed to be a merciful and impartial sovereign who was kept in ignorance of the occurrences in Canton. Even shortly before the Opium War, Charles Elliot, Britain’s superintendent of China trade during the crisis, still pinned his hopes of establishing ‘peace and honorable trade on a permanent footing’ by making ‘known to the Emperor the falsehood, violence, and venality of the Mandarins’.⁷⁷ This impression of the situation in China changed dramatically as a result of the opium crisis. For one thing, it was common knowledge that the Daoguang emperor attached considerable importance to the opium question. Since the imperial commissionership to which Lin Zexu was appointed was an office of extreme significance that had only been conferred four times before in the history of the Qing dynasty, Lin was seen as ‘the interpreter of the Imperial wishes and of the principles that actuate the administration’.⁷⁸ Moreover, intelligence also confirmed the view that the Chinese sovereign

had quite unkind intentions towards British merchants. In particular, it was known that, during the crisis the emperor had forwarded to Lin Zexu a memorial, presented by another mandarin, which 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*’.⁷⁹ When such information reached the British, it was not surprising 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 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!⁸⁰

Perhaps for these reasons, most British observers of China began seriously to doubt whether the Chinese emperor could be, or indeed had ever been, a reliable protector of Britain’s interests and honour in China.

Since the China question had become more prominent and the favourable image of the emperor was under question, British attitudes towards Chinese affairs underwent some sudden and significant changes during the opium crisis. Because of growing disillusionment with the Chinese sovereign, nothing now seemed dependable to the British but to rely upon their own power. In the late-1830s, the actual use of force against China was more advocated by British commentators than ever before. Unlike advocates of the ‘show of force’ strategy in the mid-1830s, during and after the opium crisis of the late 1830s, quite a number of British commentators insisted that the desire to improve commercial and political relations with China ‘must be enforced at the cannon’s mouth’.⁸¹ They stressed, on the one hand, that previous interactions between the two countries had repeatedly proved that a policy of

conciliating the Chinese authorities had proved ineffective. On the other hand, since, in the recent crisis, China had insulted Britain's national honour and caused injury to her commercial interests, the Chinese certainly deserved 'the most signal chastisement in our power'.⁸² Accordingly, some of these commentators suggested that 'a powerful armament'⁸³ should be sent to China, first, to blow up 'every fort at the mouth of the Canton river',⁸⁴ 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'.⁸⁵ It was believed that, in comparison with a mere 'show of force' which had been advocated by Napier and others, this more aggressive line of action would more effectively check the Chinese government's insolence and compel it to make concessions. Otherwise, 'as long as the forts are allowed to remain in the hands of the Chinese, all negotiation will be useless'.⁸⁶

It is worth noting, however, that a lot of those who were now in favour of open hostilities with China were no longer disposed to underestimate the difficulty of overawing the Chinese. Ever since Macartney's mission, British observers of China had entertained a rather optimistic view of the weakness of the Chinese defences. They all seemed to have been extremely confident that a small-scale demonstration of Britain's naval force, such as 'three or four frigates and brigs',⁸⁷ would be enough to create such a strong impact that the timid Qing court would soon yield to Britain's demand. By the time Britain had encountered Lin Zexu's tough and aggressive policy, however, this view had altered drastically. Quite a number of commentators now began to maintain that 'the conviction [that] the Chinese are a nation of cowards, is a very unwarranted and a very unsafe one',⁸⁸ and that 'we are equally erroneous in our estimate of their resources and their power'.⁸⁹ On this basis, it was proposed for the first time, in official documents as well as in popular publications, that if an expedition were indeed to be launched, not only as many ships of war as possible should be

deployed, but a sufficient military force would also be desirable.⁹⁰ To justify this proposal, some of these British commentators 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’.⁹¹ It was, therefore, difficult to imagine that the Chinese would succumb to a foreign invasion without offering stiff resistance. For this reason, it was claimed that, in order to produce the most favourable results, it was vital to make sure that the British expedition sent out to China succeeded in all its undertakings, so that the Chinese would be sufficiently impressed with and overawed by Britain’s formidable 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.⁹²

Hence, in the late 1830s, a war against China not only became more conceivable than ever before, but it seemed more sensible that, in the anticipated conflict, the British expedition should be composed of sufficient strength to ensure ultimate success.

At variance with these commentators who were calling for immediate open violence against China, those who challenged the British government’s motion for war based their opinions mostly on the suspicion that a large-scale military clash with China might actually end up being harmful to Britain’s long-term interests in the East.⁹³ Among these observers, some were concerned that firm military action might arouse hostile feelings among ordinary Chinese people. They feared that, since Britain’s ultimate goal in China was simply to improve commercial intercourse with the Chinese, ‘a war of blood and of reprisals’⁹⁴ might

exceed what was necessary in order to achieve these limited objectives. Others were apprehensive of the possibility that initial military action might lead to the over-extension of Britain's strength in China. Hugh Hamilton Lindsay, who had worked for the EIC in Canton since 1820, had no doubt that a war with China would be a just one, but he was worried that 'if we once planted our flag and built a fort within the Chinese dominions, circumstances would compel us to extend our limits, and our career of British India would be repeated in China'.⁹⁵ Since China was not only much bigger in size and population than India, but also very different, any attempt to fight a war in that country might impose on Britain an enormous burden which might weaken its existing empire in the East. Based on these concerns, raised because of the appeal for an immediate large-scale war, a call was made that any military action against China should proceed with the utmost caution, or that '*every peaceful resort must be exhausted, before force is employed against China*'.⁹⁶ Taking these views on war with China into consideration, it can be seen that Britain's attitudes towards a possible British-Chinese war had profoundly changed in the late 1830s. Without such a change of opinion, Sir Robert Peel, for example, could not have stated in Parliament that, if extreme measures had to be adopted, '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'.⁹⁷ Clearly, from such a viewpoint, even though it might not be considered as the best option, war against the so-called Middle Kingdom, at any rate, became an acceptable prospect for many influential people in Britain.

In conclusion, by focusing on a *moyenne durée* timespan in the history of early Sino-British encounters, we can discover that Britain's decision to go to war against China developed as a result of both continuing and changing attitudes towards that country. It has been shown that,

from the Macartney embassy to the opium crisis which eventually triggered the war, informed and influential British observers of China, most of whom had participated in these political events, developed increasingly hostile feelings towards Qing China. They disagreed with each other, however, on various aspects of the Chinese affairs, such as the disposition of the Chinese emperor, the extent to which Britain should adopt coercive measures against China and whether a small-scale demonstration of Britain's military strength would be enough to compel China to make concessions. Over this half-century, war against the Chinese empire became increasingly imaginable to opinion-formers and decision-makers in Britain. Nevertheless, throughout these years, there had always been considerable opposition in Britain to large-scale military actions against China, even at the height of the opium crisis. In the discussions about a possible war with China in the late 1830s, it can be seen that Britain's decision to go to war was to a great extent justified on the basis that the Chinese emperor could no longer be trusted and that a limited-scale 'show of force' would not be sufficient to overawe the Chinese. Both these views were influenced by Lin Zexu's unexpected campaign against the opium trade. A Sino-British military engagement, therefore, was not due only to the 'irreconcilable' economic or cultural conflicts between the two countries, but it was also made possible by these changing British attitudes since the Macartney mission and by the unexpected actions of Lin Zexu in the late 1830s.

Notes

¹ See, for example, Costin, *Great Britain and China*; Chang, *Commissioner Lin*; Greenberg, *British Trade*; and Graham, *The China Station*.

² Fairbank, *Trade and Diplomacy*, 74.

³ Chung, *China and the Brave New World*.

⁴ Fay, 'The Protestant Mission', 145-161.

⁵ Melancon, 'Honour in Opium', 855-874; and Melancon, *Britain's China Policy*, 5-6, 133-139.

⁶ See, for example, Waley-Cohen, *The Sextants of Beijing*; Gregory, *The West and China*; and Mungello, *The Great Encounter*.

⁷ Braudel, *On History*, 28.

⁸ See, for example, Fay, *The Opium War*; Polachek, *The Inner Opium War*; Mao, *Tianchao de bengkui*; and Gelber, *Opium, Soldiers and Evangelicals*.

⁹ See, for example, Lach, *Asia in the Making of Europe*; Marshall and Williams, *The Great Map of Mankind*; Myers, ed. *Western Views of China*; and Kiernan, *The Lords of Human Kind*.

¹⁰ See, for example, Dawson, 'Western Conceptions of Chinese Civilization', 1-27; Blue, 'China and Western social thought in the modern period', 57-109; and Spence, *The Chan's Great Continent*.

¹¹ Chang, *Britain's Chinese Eye*; Porter, *The Chinese Taste*. See also, Pagani, 'Chinese material culture'.

¹² Kitson, *Forging Romantic China*.

¹³ In 1992, Pratt pointed out the importance of studying cross-cultural perceptions from the perspective of a 'contact zone'. See Pratt, *Imperial Eyes*.

¹⁴ Hillemann, *Asian Empire and British Knowledge*, 104-105.

¹⁵ Van Dyke has shown that, despite such restrictions, the trade in Canton was generally stable, predictable and secure. See Van Dyke, *The Canton Trade*.

¹⁶ For discussions on the kowtow controversy, see Bickers, ed. *Ritual and Diplomacy*; Hevia, *Cherishing men from afar*; Esherick, 'Cherishing sources from afar', 135-161; Huang, 'Yinxiang yu zhenxiang', 35-106; Min, 'Narrating the Far East', 160-180. For research on the British presents in 1793, see Adas, *Machines as the Measure of Men*, 177-193; Waley-Cohen, 'China and Western Technology', 1525-1544; and Berg, 'Britain, industry and perceptions of China', 269-288.

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- ¹⁷ Macartney, *An Embassy to China*, 236.
- ¹⁸ Ibid., 153.
- ¹⁹ Staunton, *An Authentic Account*, II, 274.
- ²⁰ Ibid., II, 210-211.
- ²¹ Ibid., II, 246.
- ²² Macartney, *An Embassy to China*, 163.
- ²³ Ibid., 236.
- ²⁴ Staunton, *An Authentic Account*, II, 413-414.
- ²⁵ Ibid., II, 219.
- ²⁶ Ibid., II, 134.
- ²⁷ Macartney, *An Embassy to China*, 153.
- ²⁸ Ibid., 166.
- ²⁹ Staunton, *An Authentic Account*, II, 334.
- ³⁰ Macartney, *An Embassy to China*, 210.
- ³¹ Ibid., 210-211.
- ³² Ibid., 212.
- ³³ Ibid., 213.
- ³⁴ British Library, London: India Office Library and Records [IOLR], Factory Records, G/12/197/284-285. Letter from Amherst to George Canning, 8 March 1817.
- ³⁵ Ibid., G/12/197/295. Same letter.
- ³⁶ The early decades of the nineteenth century saw a rash of rebellions and secret societies across many parts of the Chinese empire. As these movements were often associated with persistent Ming loyalism whose political orientation was to ‘overthrow the Qing and restore the Ming (*fanqing fuming*)’, the Qing government was extremely anxious to guard against threats from these difficult-to-control societies.
- ³⁷ IOLR, Factory Records, G/12/197/387. Letter from Amherst to George Canning, 8 March 1817. It was and is widely believed that Macartney bent only one knee, instead of two, in his meeting with the Qianlong emperor. This was considered as a sign of Qianlong’s concession to the British.
- ³⁸ This is perhaps because, in order to slow the drain of revenues which became increasingly clear from the turn of the century, the Jiaqing emperor had initiated a public campaign to reduce spending by curbing waste and unnecessary consumption at court. Unlike his father

who enjoyed an extravagant lifestyle, Jiaqing extolled frugality through personal example. Rumours had it that even his imperial robes were repeatedly patched.

³⁹ Ellis, *Journal of the Proceedings*, 115.

⁴⁰ After Tongzhou, the terminus of the Grand Canal, the embassy had to leave behind their comfortable barges and travel the final leg of the journey overland.

⁴¹ After his arrival in Beijing, Amherst was informed that the Jiaqing emperor would receive him almost immediately. Exhausted from the journey and unaccompanied with his credentials and costumes, Amherst pleaded for another time. Unable to produce Amherst, Duke Ho, the embassy's conducting officer, falsely reported that Amherst was sick. Suspecting the British envoy of fabrication, the emperor sent his own surgeon to attend him. After receiving the surgeon's report that Amherst was shamming illness and the fact that Amherst was determined not to kowtow, the emperor ordered the dismissal of the mission.

⁴² Davis, *Sketches of China*, I, 155.

⁴³ Abel, *Narrative of a Journey*, 11.

⁴⁴ Hall, *Narrative of a Voyage*, 11.

⁴⁵ Hayne, *Henry Hayne Dairy*, 68.

⁴⁶ Davis, *Sketches of China*, II, 143.

⁴⁷ Ellis, *Journal of the Proceedings*, 438.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Macleod, *Narrative of a Voyage*, 142. Italics in the original.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² For more detailed accounts of the Napier incident, see Hibbert, *The Dragon Wakes*; Napier, *Barbarian Eye*; and Gelber, *Opium, Soldiers and Evangelicals*, etc.

⁵³ For example, Greenberg, *British Trade*, 191; Collis, *Foreign Mud*; and Lovell, *The Opium War*, 8.

⁵⁴ Melancon, 'Peaceful intentions', 47.

⁵⁵ Gao argued that by advocating a 'show of force' strategy, the British community in China simply aimed to make the Chinese authorities recognise the strength of the forces at Britain's disposal. This did not mean that they were in favour of a large-scale war against China at this stage. See Gao, 'Prelude to the Opium War'.

⁵⁶ *Correspondence Relating to China* (Parliamentary Papers 1840 [223], xxxvi), p. 14; Napier to Palmerston, 14 Aug. 1834.

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- ⁵⁷ Ibid., 12.
- ⁵⁸ Ibid., 26; Napier to Grey, 21 Aug. 1834.
- ⁵⁹ Napier, 10 March 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*, 37. Napier, however, was not specific about these past experiences.
- ⁶⁰ *Correspondence Relating to China*, 14; Napier to Palmerston, 14 Aug. 1834.
- ⁶¹ Ibid., 36; Napier to the Hong merchants and Chinese authorities, 8 Sept. 1834.
- ⁶² Ibid., 15; Napier to Palmerston, 14 Aug. 1834.
- ⁶³ Ibid., 36; Napier to the Hong merchants and Chinese authorities, 8 Sept. 1834.
- ⁶⁴ Ibid., 14; Napier to Palmerston, 14 Aug. 1834.
- ⁶⁵ Ibid., 13-14.
- ⁶⁶ Ibid., 28; Napier to Grey, 21 Aug. 1834.
- ⁶⁷ Ibid., 13; Napier to Palmerston, 14 Aug. 1834.
- ⁶⁸ Gao, 'Prelude to the Opium War', 498-505.
- ⁶⁹ For more details on the opium crisis, see Hanes and Sanello, *The Opium Wars*; and Bello, *Opium and the Limits of Empire*, etc.
- ⁷⁰ *Hansard's Parliamentary Debates*, House of Commons, 8 Apr. 1840, Third series, vol. 53, 836.
- ⁷¹ Chang, *Commissioner Lin*; Greenberg, *British Trade*; Graham, *The China Station*; and Melancon, 'Honour in Opium'.
- ⁷² *Hansard's Parliamentary Debates*, House of Commons, 7 Apr. 1840, Third series, vol. 53, 670.
- ⁷³ Ibid., 674.
- ⁷⁴ *Hansard's Parliamentary Debates*, House of Commons, 27 July 1840, Third series, vol. 55, 1052.
- ⁷⁵ Anon., *Some Pros and Cons*, 39-40.
- ⁷⁶ *Corrected Report of the Speech*, 14-15.
- ⁷⁷ *Correspondence Relating to China*, 410; Elliot to Palmerston, Canton, 18 May 1839.
- ⁷⁸ *The Canton Press*, 23 Nov. 1839, 5 (8).
- ⁷⁹ A resident in China, *Remarks on Occurrences in China*, 28. Italics in the original.
- ⁸⁰ Ibid., 27, 29.
- ⁸¹ Anon., *Chinese Commerce and Disputes*, 31.

⁸² Warren, *The Opium Question*, 108. There were, of course, some writers putting a different point of view.

⁸³ James Matheson in Canton to William Jardine in London, 1 May 1839, in *China Trade and Empire*, 359. William Jardine (1784-1843) and James Matheson (1796–1878) were the leading opium traders at the time and founders of Jardine, Matheson and Company. After the opium crisis in 1839, Jardine returned to London and pressed Palmerston for a forceful response to China's actions against British merchants.

⁸⁴ Lindsay, *Is the War with China a Just One?*, p. 37.

⁸⁵ *The Canton Press*, 18 Jan. 1840, 5 (16), One long resident in China, 'The Opium Trade, to John Harsley Palmer, ESQ'.

⁸⁶ *The Canton Press*, 5 Dec. 1840, 6 (10).

⁸⁷ *Correspondence Relating to China*, 13; Napier to the Hong merchants and Chinese authorities, 8 Sept. 1834.

⁸⁸ *The Canton Press*, 14 Dec. 1839, 5 (11), 'Ramrod: To the Editor of the Canton Press'.

⁸⁹ Anon., *British Opium Trade*, 18.

⁹⁰ See, for example, *Correspondence Relating to China*, 431; Elliot to Auckland, Governor-General of India, Canton, 16 Apr. 1839; Graham, *The Right, Obligation, and Interest*, 16; and A resident in China, *The Rupture with China*, 56, etc.

⁹¹ *Hansard's Parliamentary Debates*, House of Lords, 12 May 1840, vol. 54, 25.

⁹² *The Canton Press*, 12 Oct. 1839, 5 (2), 'Ramrod: To the Editor of the Canton Press'. Italics in the original.

⁹³ Even though it is well-known that the idea of war against China excited much controversy in Parliament and that the Whig government won the motion for war eventually by only a narrow majority (271 votes to 262), a careful investigation of the parliamentary debates shows that only a small number of MPs spoke against the war purely on the ground of the immorality of the opium trade, see *Hansard's Parliamentary Debates*, Third series, vols. 53-55. This fact verifies my earlier quotation of an MP who stated that in Parliament 'no member was willing to declare himself directly opposed to a war with China'.

⁹⁴ *Hansard's Parliamentary Debates*, House of Commons, 9 Apr. 1840, Third series, vol. 53, 866.

⁹⁵ Lindsay, *Is the War with China a Just One?*, 36-37.

⁹⁶ *The Chinese Repository*, Jan. 1839, 8 (9), 476, C. R., 'Progress of the difficulties between the English and Chinese'. Italics in the original.

⁹⁷ *Hansard's Parliamentary Debates*, House of Commons, 9 Apr. 1840, Third series, vol. 53, 924.

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