The "Inner Kowtow Controversy" during the Amherst Embassy to China (1816-1817)

The Amherst embassy has long been viewed as a diplomatic failure in Britain's early relations with China. This article concentrates on the greatly overlooked aspect of the Amherst mission – the controversy within the embassy's leadership about whether to perform kowtow before the Jiaqing emperor. George Thomas Staunton, basing his arguments on some "local inside knowledge", successfully prevailed on Amherst to refuse to kowtow. This decision directly resulted in the rejection of the embassy from Beijing. To explain this unpleasant outcome, both sides of the controversy downplayed the importance of their decision and, instead, constructed a capricious image of the Chinese emperor, which helped to lay the foundations for the deterioration of Sino-British relations in the run up to the Opium War.

THE "INNER KOWTOW CONTROVERSY"

Modern historiography of early Sino-British relations primarily focuses on two events: the kowtow controversy during the Macartney embassy (1792-4) and the outbreak of the First Anglo-Chinese War (the "Opium War", 1839-42). The major British contact with China between these two incidents, the Amherst embassy of 1816-17, has been largely neglected by historians. Dispatched twenty-two years after the unsuccessful Macartney embassy, the Amherst mission has traditionally been regarded as more fruitless than the former, mainly because Lord Amherst did not even achieve an audience with the Chinese emperor. Largely for this reason, unlike Macartney's mission which has attracted much scholarly attention, very little work has been done on the Amherst embassy and, where it has been mentioned, the evidence provided is rather brief and is largely descriptive.[1] It was not until recently that Patrick Tuck and the author of this article started to point out that the Amherst mission is worthy of closer study and the failure to investigate the complexity of this event has left much valuable information unexplored.[2] In particular, because of the neglect of the Amherst mission, the Macartney embassy has commonly been believed to be the only event of significance before the Opium War. Nevertheless, since members of the Macartney embassy considered it inappropriate to abandon the policy of currying favour with the Chinese emperor,[3] when historians have analysed the origins of the Opium War, they have found no strong links between the views of leading war agitators in the 1830s and the attitude held by members of the early British embassies to China.

Although an in-depth investigation into the Amherst embassy can offer new insights into the deterioration of British-Chinese relations in the pre-Opium War era, little effort has been made to explore precisely what happened during the mission. Two doctoral dissertations, by J. Eastberg and Zhang Shunhong respectively, have attempted to examine the Amherst embassy from a perceptional point of view,[4] but neither of them has explored how these British perceptions of China were related to the later mode of engagement between the two countries.

Moreover, because Amherst's refusal to kowtow to the Jiaqing emperor has been regarded as the main reason for the embassy's failure, some East Asian scholars have attempted to study this renewed kowtow controversy from the Chinese perspective.[5] Important inner workings of the Amherst embassy, however, remain under-researched. In particular, little attention has been paid to a major difference between the Amherst and the Macartney embassies – When Macartney was visiting China, no one in his mission had had prior experience of that country. Unassisted by any "local inside knowledge", Macartney had to make most of the decisions himself. Amherst, however, had an advisory team consisting of a group of the East India Company's employees in Canton. George Thomas Staunton, then president of the Select Committee, was appointed as the second commissioner and minister plenipotentiary of the embassy. Other persons such as Robert Morrison, John Francis Davis, Francis Toone, Thomas Manning and Alexander Pearson all had a command of the Chinese language and had lived in Canton and Macao for extended periods of time. Since these EIC staff members had had experience dealing with the Chinese authorities at Canton, Amherst, instead of relying entirely on his own judgment, sometimes felt obliged to solicit opinions from these so-called "China experts". Although there was little disagreement between Amherst and these EIC employees on most of the proceedings of the mission, on some occasions, they did indeed entertain different aspirations and held contrasting attitudes. These subtle but critical differences of opinion, as well as the impact of these EIC staff members on the proceedings of the embassy, have been mentioned briefly by Tuck in his introductory essay,[6] but were never seriously researched by any historian. In particular, previous scholars have failed to examine the "inner kowtow controversy" by adopting a similar approach to that which James Polachek used in his book, *The Inner Opium War*,[7] which explores the behind-the-scenes political struggles within the Qing court that shaped China's foreign policy in the 1830s and 1840s. This important disagreement within the Amherst embassy, on whether or not to

kowtow before the Jiaqing emperor, was in fact an early example of the collision between the appeasing and the hard-line diplomatic attitudes that Britain ought to adopt towards China. Amherst's decision to adopt an uncompromising stance, as strongly demanded by Staunton, not only directly resulted in the rejection of the embassy from Beijing, but encouraged many Britons thereafter to dispute the necessity of persisting in the deferential posture towards China that had been advocated by Macartney. In this sense, therefore, the Amherst embassy should not be viewed simply as an insignificant diplomatic failure. To a great extent, it provides a vital link connecting the Macartney embassy and the Opium War in the progress of British-Chinese relations, by laying the foundations for the increasingly belligerent attitude adopted by Britain in the lead-up to the Opium War.

Eleven members of the Amherst mission have left us more than fifteen accounts of their visit to China. Although Amherst's diary was lost because of the shipwreck of the embassy's main ship, the *Alceste*, on its return voyage, some of Amherst's observations on China can still be found in the India Office Library and Records held in the British Library. The second and third commissioners of the embassy, George Thomas Staunton and Henry Ellis, produced several works on the mission after they returned to Britain. Other members of the embassy also kept or published journals of their visit to China. These individuals include: Robert Morrison and John Francis Davis, who both served as translators to the embassy; Clarke Abel, the chief medical officer and naturalist; John Macleod, a surgeon aboard the *Alceste*; Basil Hall, the commander of HMS *Lyra*; and Henry Hayne, Amherst's private secretary.

Despite the existence of these materials, historians have not revealed the complex reasons for launching the Amherst embassy. The prevailing explanation for the occasion of this mission is clear and straightforward. Christopher Hibbert maintains that "neither the merchants at Canton nor the British government were content to let matters rest where the failure of Lord Macartney's mission had left them; and on the death of the old Emperor

Ch'ien-lung [Qianlong] in 1799 hope was revived that a satisfactory trade agreement might be negotiated".[8] Alain Peyrefitte claims that "the British, having vanquished Napoleon, now had the means – and the need – to try one last diplomatic approach",[9] in order to place Britain's commercial and political relations with China on a secure footing. These arguments have indicated the consistency between the two British missions, but they have overlooked the different expectations entertained by the East India Company and the British government.

In the two decades after the Macartney embassy, according to Staunton, British citizens in Canton were "neither protected by the physical force of armies, nor by that moral security which is derived from the plighted faith of treaties".[10] Their trade continued to be overseen by the "highly jealous, despotic, and arbitrary" [11] government of Canton. The East India Company's trade monopoly in India, except for the tea trade and trade with China, was terminated in 1813. As a result, its commerce with China became more important than ever to the Company. Given the perceived character of the local Chinese authorities, the EIC's Select Committee at Canton believed that, in order to maintain its China trade, there was a serious need to appeal directly to the imperial court in Beijing. Under such circumstances, the EIC's Court of Directors in London pleaded to the British government for a royal ambassador to be sent to the Qing court. The Amherst embassy, in consequence, was formed at the request of and at the expense of the East India Company.

It can be seen that the Amherst mission was initiated primarily by the EIC's anxiety about the preservation of its China trade, rather than because of any broader design of the British government to develop further its relations with the Chinese court. For the EIC, the trade in Canton was its only concern, because experience had shown that nothing more could be expected under the current circumstances. Staunton even maintained that the embassy "was sent out for the single purpose of settling the Canton disputes and re-establishing the trade".[12] This sentiment, however, did not entirely coincide with the expectations of the

British government. In addition to the EIC's objective to defend its commerce in Canton, the government wished that, "every opportunity should be taken to enquire how the purchase of British manufactured goods in China could be *increased*".[13] This difference between the objectives of the British government and the EIC did not seem remarkable at the beginning, but it turned out to be increasingly significant as the Amherst mission proceeded.

Once Staunton joined the embassy in July 1816 off the China coast, it can be seen that he was keen to stress that his advice was pivotal to the embassy. It was Staunton's belief that, "from my local experience, and from habits of long and deep reflection upon it, I ought to be fully prepared to offer a well-grounded opinion".[14] In his *Miscellaneous Notices*, Staunton even implied that Amherst's opinion was in no way superior to his, while all decisions ought to have been made collectively. He wrote:

> the *principle* upon which this embassy was constituted, was extremely judicious. – The appointment of a commission in which a nobleman was to preside, with two members of the select committee for his assessors, combined two very essential requisites upon the occasion, which it was impossible to find centred in any one individual, in an equal degree. [15]

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

> It [the embassy] grew so entirely out of the measures which had been adopted by the Company's authorities there … and was so especially designed to strengthen their hands, and to obtain, if possible, the emperor's confirmation of the

> provincial adjustment which they had already obtained … any scheme of an embassy which had not included persons who were locally, and in the fullest manner acquainted, both with what had been done, and with what was still required, would, however complete in other respects, have been obviously worse than useless. [16]

The reason why Staunton attached so much importance to his own advice and that of other EIC staff was that he did not think the Amherst embassy had arrived at a good time. Staunton maintained that the Company had requested an embassy to be dispatched "when the alarm for the safety of the trade was at the highest".[17] This situation had changed considerably, however, by the time that the Select Committee at Canton was informed that an embassy was on its way. For this reason, Staunton claimed that, "had the measure however been postponed for six months, it very probably would never have been adopted at all; for it would have become evident … that the peculiar ground for attempting to re-open a diplomatic intercourse with the court of Pekin … no longer existed".[18] Because of these concerns, Staunton maintained that the main purpose of the Amherst mission was "not to propose any innovation, but merely to secure and consolidate … the ordinary commercial intercourse between the two countries".[19] In particular, he deemed it inappropriate to undertake the embassy "with any special view towards the attainment of additional privileges, such as the opening of a new port for the extension of our commerce, or any other of the wild and visionary projects".[20] Since those with local knowledge all agreed that the embassy was unlikely to obtain any additional benefits from the Qing court, Staunton explained the embassy's paramount objective: "If it were found, that no *good* could be done; at least, to take especial care to do no *harm* – Not to *lose* any of the ground that the select committee had gained – not to *frustrate* the success of the line of policy they had adopted".[21]

In response to Staunton's view, there is no evidence that Amherst or any member of the embassy raised a straightforward objection. Nevertheless, although some of them did show respect for the advice of these "China experts", they were neither as committed to the instructions of the EIC, nor as convinced that no positive good could be achieved. Compared to the EIC representatives in the embassy, Amherst was less prepared for the difficulties that he might encounter. His relative optimism was reinforced by a favourable impression of the Chinese emperor. By 1816, both the British government and the EIC's employees at Canton still entertained a perception of a somewhat enlightened Chinese sovereign.[22] This impression was apparently derived from the opinions of early Catholic missionaries in China as well as from the views of some members of the Macartney embassy. Based on these positive views of the emperor's character, the British, including the EIC's employees at Canton, attributed the difficulties in Canton entirely to the misconduct of the local authorities. They believed that it was concealed from the emperor and, hence, once their oppressive actions against foreign merchants were communicated to His Imperial Majesty, the grievances in Canton would soon be redressed. Based on this belief, in the EIC's instructions to Amherst, it was clearly stated that the anticipated outcome of the mission was "the establishment of the Company's trade upon a secure, solid, equitable footing, free from the capricious arbitrary aggressions of the local Authorities, and under the protection of the Emperor, and the sanction of Regulations to be appointed by himself".[23] It can be seen that, at this stage, a favourable response from the Chinese sovereign had almost been taken for granted. This confidence placed upon the Jiaqing emperor, however, was considerably revised as the Amherst mission progressed.

The Amherst embassy to and from Beijing travelled on the Chinese mainland for approximately four months, but the most significant intercourse with the Qing government lasted only about twenty days. It is worth noting, however, that in the years before the Amherst embassy, the Qing court under the Jiaqing reign had been increasingly concerned

about Britain's naval ambitions in the China Seas. Particularly in 1802 and 1808, the British made two attempts to occupy Macao. These maritime expeditions, although unsuccessful, led the Guangdong government to represent the British as "the most harsh and cruel barbarians (*zhufan zhong zuiwei jie'ao*)" [24] who "live[d] by plunder (*jielue weisheng*)" [25] in its correspondence with the Jiaqing emperor. In addition, as soon as Amherst and his party came ashore in Dagu and embarked on the overland journey to Beijing, the British ships sailed back to Canton to await the embassy there. This act of sending away ships without first notifying the Chinese officials was taken as an insult to the Jiaqing emperor. It not only entailed that the embassy had to be escorted back to Canton though another route, which caused additional trouble and expense to the Qing court, but gave the British ships an opportunity to survey the Chinese coast, thus making the Jiaqing government more sensitive to the issue of British naval presence in Chinese waters. Perhaps for these reasons, compared to the Qianlong period, the Jiaqing court seemed even more determined to insist that the kowtow ceremony had to be performed by the British. For Amherst and his fellow Britons, this meant that the kowtow controversy was renewed as soon as their contact with the Chinese began. On the embassy's way to Beijing, two rounds of negotiations were organised by the Qing court to test Amherst's willingness to perform kowtow. As a result, the kowtow issue became not only a central cause of dispute between Britain and China, but a highly controversial subject within the Amherst embassy as well.

The first negotiation on the kowtow issue took place in Tianjin on 13 August 1816, four days after Amherst's mission set foot on Chinese soil. An imperial banquet was prepared by two royal legates, Soo (Su Leng'e) and Kwang (Guang Hui), at the command of the Jiaqing emperor to provide the British with an opportunity to rehearse the kowtow ceremony. For this purpose, a table covered with yellow silk was laid out as a symbol of the Imperial Majesty's presence and kowtow was expected to be paid to it by the British delegation. Although,

according to the instructions given by the British government, much latitude was left to the ambassador's discretion with regard to the observation of Chinese court ritual, Amherst, at this stage, was determined not to prostrate himself before any representative of the sovereign. Instead, he paid some reverential low bows, without indicating whether or not he was going to perform kowtow before the emperor himself.

The second test of Amherst's readiness to kowtow was conducted in Tongzhou, twelve miles from the capital. Two mandarins of very high rank, Duke Ho (He Shitai) and Duke Moo (Muke Deng'e),[26] were deputed by the emperor to meet the British delegation. According to the accounts of the Amherst embassy, in the first of the two meetings held, the dukes adopted a haughty manner. They maintained that under no circumstances would the Qing court dispense with its established usages. Five days later, however, when the two parties met for the second time, the dukes' attitude had become more courteous. Duke Ho first asked what the British side expected from this mission. After Amherst informed him of the various wishes entertained by the EIC and the British government, Duke Ho suggested that all these expectations might be satisfied once the British envoys agreed to perform kowtow.[27] In this context, Amherst replied that some further deliberations were needed before he could provide a definite answer. When Amherst solicited opinions from Staunton and Ellis, an internal kowtow controversy transpired. Ellis, as well as Amherst himself, was more inclined to go ahead with the ceremony to secure Chinese trade concessions, while Staunton insisted that the Chinese would only respect the British if the British stuck to what they had said and done in the past.

It can be noticed that such conflicting views were advanced by the leaders of the Amherst embassy because of their different views of the mission's ultimate objectives. For Amherst and Ellis, since the British government clearly stated that it was not advisable to "let any trifling punctilio stand in the way of the important benefits which may be obtained by

engaging the favourable disposition of the Emperor and his Ministers",[28] their attitudes towards kowtow were more flexible. In particular, with Duke Ho's hint of a favourable response in mind, they were of the opinion that too much emphasis on the ceremonial details would be injurious to the overall aims of the embassy. For this reason, a compromise on formality was considered not entirely unacceptable. Ellis maintained that,

> the sole chance of success to the ulterior objects of the embassy exists in producing a favourable impression upon the mind of the Emperor; and this can only be effected by complying with the particular usages of the court and nation, as far as a due sense of our own dignity, combined with considerations of policy, will permit.[29]

Although, Ellis admitted that, the kowtow ceremony was certainly disagreeable to the sense of honour and propriety of every British visitor, "it could scarcely be deemed advisable to sacrifice the more important objects of the embassy to any supposed maintenance of dignity by insisting upon such a point of etiquette, in such a scene".[30]

Amherst, as head of the mission, basically concurred with Ellis in this view. He pointed out that, once the Qing court was offended, it was possible that "not only former grievances would not have been removed, but new misunderstandings would have arisen; and new evils would have been incurred", whereas "a prospect was held out to us of positive good by a compliance with the Emperor's wishes".[31] With such statements, it can be suggested that Amherst was in some sense attempting to show that he was not biased against either the EIC's or the British government's vision of the embassy's ultimate objectives. On the one hand, he was worried that any insistence on not performing kowtow might induce the emperor to treat the EIC's trade ungraciously in future. On the other hand, in order to achieve the "positive

good" the government desired, he deemed it worthwhile to keep that prospect alive by making a reasonable concession to the Chinese emperor.

Ellis's contention on the propriety of performing kowtow, as well as Amherst's efforts to support this opinion, however, were not acceptable to Staunton, the second commissioner of the embassy. In conflict with the above views, Staunton asserted that, "judging from my general knowledge and experience of the Chinese character", compromise on the court ritual "would not be likely to promote the attainment of any of the objects we have in view".[32] With respect to Amherst's apprehensions about the EIC's interests at Canton, he believed that refusal to kowtow would not cause any serious trouble to British interests in China. Again, based on his knowledge, Staunton maintained that, "It is not agreeable to the Chinese character to have recourse to violent measures, or to push matters to extremities unnecessarily, especially when they have (as I may safely say, in this case) no color or ground for proceeding".[33] To prove this, he referred to the Russian embassy in 1806. Although in that year the Russian ambassador had refused to kowtow and was hence rejected by the Jiaqing emperor, that event "did not occasion any interruption of the commercial intercourse between the two nations".[34] Moreover, with regard to the aim of achieving certain "positive good" beyond Canton, Staunton alleged that it was an unrealistic assumption that favourable actions would result from such a concession. He stated that,

> I am fully sensible of the importance of the objects of the present mission; but I cannot bring myself to believe that their attainment would be in the smallest degree be promoted by the compliance in question; and the mere reception, (it could be hardly be termed honorable reception) of the Embassy, would, I think, be too dearly purchased by such a sacrifice.[35]

Because of these considerations, Staunton came to the conclusion that kowtow should be avoided by all means, even though it might result in the rejection of the embassy. "Under such very singular circumstances", he later wrote, "the mere ceremonies of a court reception, had they taken place, would have been nothing compared to the moral effect which the judiciously sustained proceedings of the British Mission would be calculated to produce".[36]

Apart from these arguments based on his own "local" knowledge, it is interesting to observe how Staunton, in the minority of the embassy's three-man leadership, managed to convince the other two of his viewpoint. When the answer to the kowtow question was shortly to be confirmed in Tongzhou, Staunton stressed that, because the embassy was sent out to China "solely and entirely for the sake of the local interests of the Company", it was "not unnatural that the opinion of the persons connected with that interest should preponderate".[37] Since this was a subject of extreme importance, not only were the attitudes of the envoys important, but the advice of the five EIC representatives who accompanied him should also be seriously considered, especially given the fact that they "possessed such acknowledged talents, judgment, and local experience, as must necessarily entitle their opinions to considerable weight".[38] On these grounds, Staunton was allowed to consult with these men individually. Unsurprisingly, all of them, either firmly or conditionally, turned out to agree with Staunton that it was unwise to comply with the kowtow ceremony.[39] In this way, Staunton artfully turned his minority position in the dispute with Ellis and Amherst into a six-to-two advantage. Amherst was eventually persuaded to give up the idea of performing kowtow and, probably as a result, of winning the chance of achieving any "positive good".

Although it sounds as if it was the embassy's collective decision to proceed according to Staunton's advice, deeper analysis into primary sources shows that, in fact, not everyone in the mission was convinced by Staunton's arguments. In particular, previous scholarship has overlooked an underlying debate between Ellis and Staunton after the resolution not to

perform kowtow had been reached. From Staunton's accounts, it can be discovered that he was anxious to prove that he had helped the embassy to make a correct decision in 1816. Even four decades later, Staunton was referring to various sources in his and others' memoirs, in order to support this view. In particular, he highlighted some passages from one of Ellis's books, in which Ellis had stated:

> I do not in the least blame myself for having surrendered my opinion to the experience of Sir George Staunton … I must confess that I could not have found another person to whose character and acquirements I would have preferred yielding the guidance of my actions.[40]

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

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

> I have naturally felt deep regret at the prospect of being denied reception [at the Chinese court] from a continued refusal to comply with the wishes of the Chinese, and yet I do not in the least blame myself for having surrendered my opinion to the experience of Sir George Staunton. I am ready, when called upon to act, to yield crude notions to experienced opinion, but regarding the question as matter of speculation, my sentiments remain unchanged;[41]

To elaborate on this point, Ellis not only questioned "whether a contrary result would have been too dearly bought by sacrificing the distinction between nine prostrations of the head to the ground upon two knees, and nine profound bows upon one knee",[42] but maintained that, even without regard to the major objectives of the embassy, "I shall still be inclined to believe, that the irritation produced by protracted contest has been, in some measure, an obstacle to their favourable consideration".[43]

Second, it can be seen from the evidence above that Ellis suggested that the inflexible stance which the British envoys decided to adopt in their negotiations was harmful to the success of the mission. This view produced another underlying debate between the second and the third commissioners. In contrast to what Ellis stated, it was Staunton's conviction that, when dealing with the Chinese court, the British had not in the past been resolute enough, rather than being overly inflexible. Staunton maintained that, despite the fact that many people were in favour of the policy that questions relating to Chinese court ceremony should be determined on the spot, "the delay, which ensued in consequence, was fatal".[44] Ellis, in his journal, made it very clear that he was opposed to this view. He claimed that, "I cannot but regret this inevitable multiplication of subjects of ceremonial discussion, for I consider every victory upon these points as a diminution of the chances of success upon the more material objects of the embassy".[45] Although his opinion was not based on any prior knowledge or experience, concerning the kowtow question, it had always been Ellis's belief that "the time employed in contending for the manner in which the embassy is to be received, and the temper generated by even successful inflexibility, are not calculated to dispose the mind of the Emperor, or his ministers, to listen favourably to propositions in which they do not see any reciprocal advantage".[46] Moreover, Ellis added that, "the dismissal of the embassy, without access being obtained to the imperial presence, would be a confirmation to the present and future Viceroys of Canton, that their own interest is the only check to their extortion and

injustice".[47] Because of these considerations, Ellis's personal opinion on this issue was never influenced by Staunton's efforts at persuasion. In concluding his explanation, Ellis stated distinctly that:

> should the reception or rejection of the embassy depend upon an adherence, on the present occasion, to the mode observed in the case of all former European ambassadors admitted to an audience, except Lord Macartney, I should have no hesitation in giving up the maintenance of the single exception as a precedent.[48]

Furthermore, Ellis cast a great deal of doubt on the value of the local knowledge which Staunton was so proud of possessing. The third commissioner was also sceptical about the allegedly "extensive acquaintance with the language"[49] of the other "China experts", who were simply, in his opinion, "*more or less* acquainted with the Chinese language".[50] Most important, Ellis argued that this local knowledge was obtained only from Canton. Since the situation in Beijing was vastly different, experiences gained in Canton might not necessarily be applicable elsewhere in China. For these reasons, Ellis claimed that he was "*uninfluenced* and unaided by local knowledge",[51] a statement which probably implies that, in his view, the so-called "local" knowledge, if insufficient, might rather mislead than assist the possessor's judgment. To further support his perspective, Ellis took every opportunity to note the instances when Staunton failed to deliver the right message. For example, Ellis recorded that, in Tongzhou, the embassy was once unofficially informed by the Chinese side that the kowtow had already been dispensed with by the emperor. On hearing the news, "Sir George had no doubt that the point was conceded, and that we might be perfectly satisfied".[52] This belief soon proved to be utterly erroneous. As for Staunton's interpretation that the kowtow implied political submission, Ellis was also suspicious. Instead, Ellis was more inclined to

perceive the kowtow as a mere formality and as part of the Chinese court's normal conventions. Ellis noted that he was informed by a Chinese official that, "His Majesty … was not greater, nor we [the British] lower, by the performance; … the ko-tou did not constitute us tributaries".[53] In another conversation, Ellis reported that the embassy's conducting officer, Chang (Zhang Wuwei), observed that:

> he was aware our resistance arose from a belief that the ko-tou [kowtow] was an admission of political dependence, but in this we were mistaken; that if he met a friend of superior rank, he went upon his knees to salute him; that however he neither considered himself a servant, nor did his friend pretend to be his master; the ko-tou was merely a court ceremony, and the Emperor considered it rude in the ambassador to refuse compliance.[54]

Although these statements might well be untruthful allegations made by the Chinese authorities, it is interesting to note that Staunton and other EIC representatives never attempted to disprove these views, but chose to ignore them. Because of his lack of understanding of Chinese customs, Ellis was certainly unable to provide a more definite interpretation of the implications of performing or not performing the kowtow. His efforts to challenge Staunton's "local inside knowledge" shown in this internal kowtow controversy, however, offered valuable perspectives on the existing degree of understanding of Chinese customs and practices by the Amherst embassy.

Because of Staunton's strong and skilful opposition to the suggestion of complying with the kowtow ceremony, Amherst was eventually persuaded to "shew deference to an opinion [advanced by Staunton and] founded on long observation and on local experience".[55] Although the embassy was still allowed to proceed to Beijing, Amherst's insistence on not

performing kowtow finally irritated the Jiaqing emperor.[56] Only a few hours after the embassy's arrival in Yuan-ming-yuan, the palace in which the imperial audience was supposed to be granted, the emperor issued an order for the embassy's immediate departure from his court. The official proceedings of the Amherst mission were terminated.

It can be observed that, when the kowtow question arose, the slight difference between the expectations of the EIC and those of the British government for the Amherst embassy was greatly magnified. The outcome of this "inner kowtow controversy", however, signified that the balance between Britain's appeasing and its uncompromising attitude towards China was shifting away from the former and towards the latter. Unlike Macartney who generally spoke positively about the Qianlong emperor in 1793, Amherst and others in his embassy held the Jiaqing emperor responsible for the mission's failure. Regardless of their different views about the kowtow ceremony, Amherst and Staunton agreed that "the personal character of the monarch"[57] was the primary reason for the failure of their embassy. In this respect, Staunton maintained that, "the emperor's violence and precipitation must … be considered as the main cause of what has happened. … his conduct throughout has certainly been ungracious in the extreme, and totally unlike that of his predecessor, upon the occasion of the former embassy".[58] In a similar vein, Amherst argued that, "my want of success is not to be attributed to want either of zeal or discretion in the performance of my duty".[59] The real reason for the mission's failure was, Amherst believed, that the Jiaqing emperor, "whose reign has been frequently and very lately disturbed by insurrections", was less ready to "dispense with outward fame of respect than his Father, whose reign was long and victorious, and who, being firm in the possession of real power and authority, might attach less consequence to any shew of external homage".[60]

In particular, the emperor's ejection of the embassy from Beijing, immediately after a exhausting overnight journey, ignited so much indignation across the entire British delegation

that no one was willing to suppress his anger. John Davis, one of the translators and the EIC representatives, 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".[61] The naturalist Clarke Abel, who found it impossible to explain what had occurred "in any probable chain of cause and effect", wrote that, "We could only conjecture that we had been hurried to and from Yuen-min-yuen, and subjected to all kinds of indignity and inconvenience, to suit the will of a capricious despot".[62] Moreover, by contrast with the Macartney mission, the Amherst embassy's criticism of the Qing court centred almost exclusively on the emperor himself, rather than on any of his mandarins. These British travellers believed that every transaction between the embassy and the Chinese government was manipulated by the Jiaqing emperor himself, whereas all his mandarins were simply fulfilling the duties imposed upon them. Henry Hayne noted in this regard that, "We all felt much for the situation of the Mandarins attached to us, having had great reason to be perfectly satisfied with their whole conduct toward us, and at the same time extremely zealous in the cause of their Emperor".[63] Ellis fully concurred with Hayne on this point. He maintained that, "we must consider ourselves fortunate in the Mandarins with whom we had to transact business … the rupture must be attributed to the personal character of the Emperor, who is capricious, weak, and timid, and the combined effect of these feelings will account for his pertinacity".[64]

This production of an unfavourable image of the Chinese sovereign, moreover, did not cease with the dismissal of Amherst's mission. In the beginning of the embassy's return journey from Beijing to Canton, Amherst was concerned that the emperor's displeasure would result in much inconvenience for his embassy. Yet, upon his return to Tongzhou, Amherst received a visit from Legates Soo and Kwang, who informed him of the emperor's proposal for a partial exchange of presents. This attempt to keep on good terms with the

British, together with the kindness with which the mission was treated during the rest of its return journey, was considered by Amherst as "a sort of reparation for its abrupt dismissal from Yuen-min-yuen".[65] Nevertheless, since neither an explanation for the rejection nor a clearly stated willingness to preserve good relations with Britain was communicated, the belated graciousness of the Chinese sovereign did not generate much good will on the part of the British. On the contrary, the Jiaqing emperor's quick change of mind was seen as proof of both his caprice and his weakness, as well as an example of his inconsistent mode of government. Ellis, for instance, stressed that:

> This weak and capricious monarch, soon after the flagrant outrage had been committed under the impulse of angry disappointment, may be supposed to have become alarmed at the consequences of his own violence, and the habitual notions of decorum belonging to Chinese character and usage resuming their influence, produced the partial reparation.[66]

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

In light of the perceived unfavourable and unreliable character of the Jiaqing emperor, as well as some experiences they gained during the return journey from Beijing to Canton, members of the Amherst mission analysed the lessons they had learned in China. As a result, some key ideas left by the Macartney embassy regarding how to improve Britain's relations with China were revised. First, the grounds for sending another complimentary embassy to China were seriously challenged. Amherst, based on what he had learned throughout the journey, suggested that China's current financial circumstances, combined with the character

of the present emperor, rendered such a mission unwelcome to the Chinese. He maintained that,

> The disordered state of the Imperial Finances would make it an object to save the expense attending the transport of a numerous company of persons from one extremity of the Empire to the other; and the same reason added, I believe, to the personal fears and jealousies of the Emperor would probably retrench a great part of the train of any future ambassador.[67]

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

> Royal embassies, avowedly complimentary, but really directed to commercial objects, are perhaps, in themselves, somewhat anomalous, and are certainly very opposite, not only to Chinese feelings, but even to those of all Eastern nations; among whom trade, although fostered as a source of revenue, is never reputed honourable.[68]

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

Second, from their daily contacts with officials of the Chinese government, members of the Amherst embassy accumulated some useful knowledge on how to deal with the Chinese authorities in practice. In particular, it was discovered that, under most circumstances, in order to achieve an objective, the best way was simply to ignore government authorities and

not request formal approval before proceeding to business. For example, as had frequently happened on their return voyage from Beijing to Canton, "whenever we [the British] began by soliciting leave to walk into the country or to look at anything, our request was almost invariably refused".[69] The most effective approach, however, proved to be to "go straight forward, without putting difficulties into the people's heads, by seeming to imagine any permission necessary".[70] For this reason, Hayne was convinced that "by experience we have found beyond a doubt, that to obtain an end in China, is to ask no question, and if there is no real objection, it will pass unnoticed".[71] Experience had also shown that on the occasions when British interests were neglected, such as when daily supplies were deficient, it was important for the British to express their demands in a resolute manner. Davis maintained in this regard that it was a well-proven fact that every time the British remonstrated strongly, their grievances were not only soon redressed, but were, in most cases, handled with greater care. Hence, in order to produce a favourable response, a "determined step was the more requisite".[72]

Finally, the various experiences drawn from the minor aspects of the embassy seemed to have influenced some of the subsequent tactics which British observers proposed should be adopted in future British-Chinese relations. Most significant, according to the suggestions coming from the members of the Amherst mission, was the advice to promote a more powerful and steadfast image of Britain in the imperial court of China. Ellis, for instance, suggested that if "it still be deemed advisable to assist our commerce by political intercourse",[73] 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".[74] By this means, he expected that

> there the representative of armed power will encounter its fellow; and if ever impression is to be produced at Pekin, 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.[75]

John Macleod advocated even more coercive measures. He wrote with assurance that, "The removal of our trade for a single year, and the appearance of a few of our lightest cruisers on their coasts, would throw the whole of this *celestial* empire into confusion".[76] Although there is some similarity between this statement and Macartney's famous aggressive comments in 1794,[77] it is worth noting that, unlike Macartney, no preference for a policy of forbearance was supported by Macleod. On the contrary, next to the above passage, Macleod quoted a remark by Krusenstern, a Russian navigator who had experienced similar vexation in China and had alleged that "the forbearance and mistaken lenity of the greater civilized powers have emboldened these savages, not only to consider as barbarians all Europeans, but actually to treat them as such".[78] With reference to this statement, it can be observed that not only was China being viewed as an isolated "other" from the civilised European countries, but Macleod was implying that the wrong approach had been adopted by western nations in their relations with China. Although plans to demonstrate British power and resolution were not yet under serious consideration at this stage, the previous effort to curry favour with the Chinese emperor had been shown to be ineffective.

In conclusion, although, just like in 1793, the Amherst mission failed to achieve its original objectives, this embassy was by no means an unimportant event in the historiography of Sino-British relations. Neither was the result of the embassy a mere repetition of the fate of Macartney's mission. If we examine closely the complexity of its launch and its proceedings,

as well as the reflections left by its participants, we can find that the Amherst embassy actually encountered a range of new situations which did not exist in the case of the Macartney embassy. In particular, the variance between the expectations of the EIC and the British government for the mission did not seem to be a notable factor in the beginning, but its significance was considerably enlarged as the Sino-British kowtow dispute re-emerged. In this context, Staunton, the leading EIC representative whose "local inside knowledge" was supposed to assist Amherst in achieving the diplomatic goals of the embassy, set off an "inner kowtow controversy" which proved critical to the outcome of the mission. As a consequence of this internal struggle, conducted mainly between Staunton and the rest of the embassy's leadership, Amherst had to yield to Staunton's "experience-based" assessment of the situation and adopt an unbending stance which resulted in the dismissal of the mission. To explain this unpleasant outcome, however, the importance of the "inner kowtow controversy" to the failure of the embassy was significantly (perhaps also deliberately) downplayed by both sides. Instead of suggesting that it might have been their fault, these men, who were either primarily or partly responsible for this collective decision, chose to focus on the personal character of the Jiaqing emperor, who they maintained to be extremely capricious and arbitrary. On the basis of this largely invented image, leading members of the Amherst embassy were able to justify the idea that the means of dispatching complimentary embassies to China was problematic *per se*, while a demonstration of Britain's power and firmness would be a better way to conduct Britain's future relations with China. In this sense, we can find that the Amherst mission's significance to the development of Sino-British relations was undoubtedly profound. As subsequent history has shown, in consequence of this embassy, or more specifically of the "inner kowtow controversy", no royal embassy was sent to the Qing court again and the British government ceased to pursue the policy of appeasing the Chinese emperor as suggested by Macartney. Britain's previously deferential posture in its relations

with China was beginning to give way to a more hard-line approach in the decades to come. It can be argued that this change of attitude initiated in 1817, which may not have been possible if the outcome of the "inner kowtow controversy" were different, helped to lay the foundations for the deterioration of Sino-British relations that was apparent by the 1830s. Although we cannot maintain that the Amherst embassy led directly to the Opium War, the seeds of the Sino-British hostilities can definitely be found in this episode in which the opium issue was not yet a major concern to both sides. The open conflict with China in the early 1840s would probably not have been as imaginable or as acceptable without the critical observations advanced by the Amherst mission in the wake of this "inner kowtow controversy".

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Professor Harry Dickinson and the anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments and advice.

[1] For example, H. Morse, *The Chronicles of the East India Company Trading to China, 1635-1834* (5 vols., Oxford, 1926), III, 256-306; C. Hibbert, *The Dragon Wakes: China and the West, 1793-1911* (New York, 1984), 54-69; A. Peyrefitte, *The Collision of Two Civilisations: The British Expedition to China in 1792-4* (1993), 504-11.

[2] Patrick Tuck has written an introductory essay for George Thomas Staunton's private account of the Amherst embassy entitled *Notes of Proceedings and Occurrences during the British Embassy to Pekin in 1816*, which was selected to be printed in the final volume of the *Britain and the China Trade 1635-1842* collection. See Patrick Tuck, 'Introduction: Sir George Thomas Staunton and the Failure of the Amherst embassy of 1816', in *Britain and the China Trade 1635-1842* (10 vols., London, 2000), X, vii-xlii. My own article has examined the Amherst embassy's key discoveries in China during its return journey from

Beijing to Canton. It has pointed out the significance of the Amherst embassy to the development of British views of China prior to the Opium War. See Hao Gao, 'The Amherst embassy and British Discoveries in China', *History*, 99/337 (2014), 568-87.

[3] Some historians assume that the Opium War was almost a natural consequence of the Macartney embassy, because the failure of the latter had shown that diplomacy was no longer an option. A close reading of primary sources, however, shows that both Lord Macartney and his deputy, George L. Staunton, proclaimed that Britain should continue to pursue a conciliatory course of conduct towards the Qing government, while any aggressive action would be harmful to Britain's interests in Asia. See George Macartney*, An Embassy to China: Being the Journal Kept by Lord Macartney during His Embassy to the Emperor Ch'ien-lung 1793-1794*, ed. J.L. Cranmer-Byng (1962), 210-13. George L. Staunton, *An Authentic Account of an Embassy from the King of Great Britain to the Emperor of China* (2 vols., 1798), II, 219, 334.

[4] J. Eastberg, "West Meets East: British Perceptions of China through the Life and Works of Sir George Thomas Staunton, 1781-1859" (Marquette University Ph.D. thesis, 2009); Zhang Shunhong, "British Views on China during the Time of the Embassies of Lord Macartney and Lord Amherst (1790-1820)" (Birkbeck College, University of London Ph.D. thesis, 1990). The latter has recently been published as a monograph. See Zhang Shunhong, *British Views on China at the Dawn of the 19th Century* (Reading, 2013).

[5] See Wu Xiaojun, "A'meishide shijietuan tanxi: yi tianchao guan zhi shijian wei zhongxin" ("On the Amherst mission: with its Focus on the Practice of the World View of the Celestial Empire"), (National Tsing Hua University M.A. thesis, 2008); Eun Kyung Min, "Narrating the Far East: Commercial Civility and Ceremony in the Amherst Embassy to China (1816-1817)", in B. Wells and P. Steward (eds.), *Interpreting Colonialism* (Oxford, 2004), 160-80.

[6] Tuck, 'Introduction', xxii-xxiv.

[7] J. Polachek, *The Inner Opium War* (Cambridge, MA, 1992).

[8] Hibbert, *The Dragon Wakes*, 55-56.

[9] Peyrefitte, *The Collision of Two Civilisations*, 506.

[10] George Thomas Staunton, *Miscellaneous Notices Relating to China, and our Commercial Intercourse with that Country* (1822), 192.

[11] *Ibid.*

[12] George Thomas Staunton, *Memoirs of the Chief Incidents of the Public Life of Sir George T. Staunton* (1856), 65.

[13] Castlereagh to Amherst, 1 January 1816, IOLR [India Office Library and Records, British Library, London, UK], India Office Amherst Correspondence, Lord Amherst's Embassy, 1815-17, G/12/196. Italics added.

[14] Staunton, *Notes of Proceedings*, 31. Between 1798 and 1818, Staunton was employed by the EIC to work in its factory at Canton. He spent most of his time in Canton and Macao. It should be noted that these two places are further from Beijing than Naples is from Hamburg, both geographically and culturally. Except the visit to the Qianlong court with his father and Lord Macartney when he was twelve, Staunton had never been to the interior of China before the arrival of the Amherst embassy.

[15] Staunton, *Miscellaneous Notices*, 232-33. Italics in the original. The initial arrangement was that John Elphinstone and Staunton, both members of the EIC's factory at Canton, would serve as the second and third commissioners. By the time the embassy arrived, however, Elphinstone had already resigned as president of the Select Committee at Canton and had decided to withdraw from the mission. As a result, Staunton was advanced to the second place. Ellis, originally the secretary to the embassy and a former Bengal Company servant, succeeded to the vacancy as third commissioner.

[16] *Ibid.*, 233.

[17] George Thomas Staunton, *Notes of Proceedings and Occurrences during the British Embassy to Pekin in 1816* (1824), vii.

[18] *Ibid*.

[19] Staunton, *Miscellaneous Notices*, 239.

[20] *Ibid.*, 237-38.

[21] *Ibid.*, 240. Italics in the original.

[22] In 1793, when Staunton met the Qianlong emperor as Macartney's page, the emperor showed much favour to him. Perhaps for this reason, Staunton also had a favourable impression of the Qianlong emperor.

[23] Letter from the Secret Commercial Committee to the Right Honble Lord Amherst, 17 January 1816, in Morse, *The Chronicles*, III, 285.

[24] 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 (ed.), *Qingdai waijiao shiliao (jiaqing chao)* (*Qing dynasty diplomatic documents (the Jiaqing period)*) (6 vols., Taipei, 1968), II, 23.

[25] 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 *ibid.*, II, 35.

[26] He Shitai was the brother of the empress and president of the board for foreign affairs. Muke Deng'e was president of the tribunal of ceremonies.

[27] Amherst to Canning, 28 February 1817, IOLR, G/12/197/267.

[28] Castlereagh to Amherst, January 1816, in Morse, *The Chronicles*, III, 281.

[29] Henry Ellis, *Journal of the Proceedings of the Late Embassy to China* (1817), 52-53.

[30] *Ibid.*, 50-51.

[31] Amherst to Canning, 28 February 1817, IOLR, G/12/197/269.

[32] Staunton, *Notes of Proceedings*, 31-32.

[33] *Ibid*., 100.

[34] *Ibid.*, 100-101.

[35] *Ibid.*, 32.

[36] Staunton, *Memoirs*, 67. This view was also shared by Davis, see Davis, *Sketches of China*, I, 56-57.

[37] Staunton, *Miscellaneous Notices*, 211.

[38] Staunton, *Notes of Proceedings*, 102.

[39] *Ibid.*, 102-3.

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

[41] Ellis, *Journal of the Proceedings*, 151.

[42] *Ibid.*, 153.

[43] *Ibid*.

[44] Staunton, *Miscellaneous Notices*, 233.

[45] Ellis, *Journal of the Proceedings*, 108.

[46] *Ibid.*, 109.

[47] *Ibid.*, 53.

[48] *Ibid*.

[49] Staunton, *Miscellaneous Notices*, 242.

[50] Ellis, *Journal of the Proceedings*, 58. Italics added.

[51] *Ibid.*, 151. Italics added.

[52] *Ibid.*, 173.

[53] *Ibid.*, 228.

[54] *Ibid.*, 155.

[55] Amherst to Canning, 28 February 1817, IOLR, G/12/197/271.

[56] This was also because, after his arrival in Beijing, Amherst was informed that the Jiaqing emperor would receive him almost immediately. Exhausted from the overland journey from Tongzhou and unaccompanied with his credentials and costumes, Amherst pleaded for another time. Duke Ho, unable to produce Amherst, falsely reported that Amherst was sick. Suspecting the British envoy of fabrication, the emperor sent his own surgeon to attend him. After knowing the surgeon's report that Amherst was shamming illness and the fact that Amherst had been determined not to kowtow, the emperor ordered the dismissal of the mission.

[57] Amherst to Canning, 8 March 1817, IOLR, G/12/197/295.

[58] Staunton, *Notes of Proceedings*, 144.

[59] Amherst to Canning, 21 April 1817, IOLR, G/12/197/381.

[60] Same letter, IOLR, G/12/197/387. As Amherst suggested, the early decades of the nineteenth century saw a surge of rebellions and secret societies across many parts of China. The Qing government was extremely anxious to guard against threats from these difficult-to-control societies. Especially after the Eight Trigrams uprising of 1813, when a contingent of the Heavenly Principle Society (*Tianli jiao*)

penetrated into the Forbidden City, the Jiaqing court became particularly alarmed. This context may account in part for the Jiaqing emperor's indifferent attitude towards the Amherst mission, who was to travel through areas affected by this society.

[61] Davis, *Sketches of China*, I, 155.

[62] Clarke Abel, *Narrative of a Journey in the Interior of China in the Years 1816-1817* (1818), 11.

[63] Henry Hayne, *Henry Hayne Dairy 1816-1817*, in *China through Western Eyes: Manuscript Records of Traders, Travellers, Missionaries and Diplomats, 1792-1942* [microform] (Marlborough, 1996), 44-45.

[64] Ellis, *Journal of the Proceedings*, 122.

[65] Amherst to Canning, 22 March 1817, IOLR, G/12/197/305-6.

[66] Ellis, *Journal of the Proceedings*, 425.

[67] Amherst to Canning, 21 April 1817, IOLR, G/12/197/378-79. Since the Jiaqing emperor ascended the throne in 1796, it became increasingly clear that the Qing dynasty was declining from the apogee of its power. The enormous cost of Qianlong's military campaigns, as well as the luxury of official lives, seriously depleted the Chinese treasury's once healthy finances. In order to slow the drain of revenues, the Jiaqing emperor initiated a publicised campaign to reduce spending by curbing waste and unnecessary consumption at court. See S. Jones and P. Kuhn, "Dynastic decline and the roots of rebellion", in *The Cambridge History of China*, ed. J. Fairbank, *et al*. (15 vols., Cambridge, 1978), X, 118.

[68] Ellis, *Journal of the Proceedings*, 437-38.

[69] Basil Hall, *Narrative of a Voyage to Java, China and the Great Loo-Choo Island* (1840), 11.

[70] *Ibid*.

[71] Hayne, *Henry Hayne Dairy*, 68.

[72] Davis, *Sketches of China*, II, 143.

[73] Ellis, *Journal of the Proceedings*, 438.

[74] *Ibid*.

[75] *Ibid*.

[76] John Macleod, *Narrative of a Voyage in His Majesty's Late Ship Alceste to the Yellow Sea, along the Coast of Corea, and through its Numerous Hitherto Undiscovered Islands, to the Island of Lewchew* (1817), 142. Italics in the original.

[77] See Macartney, *An Embassy to China*, 210-11.

[78] Macleod, *Narrative of a Voyage*, 142.