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Creating the Opium War: British imperial attitudes towards China, 1792–1840. By GAO Hao. ix + 210 pages. Studies in Imperialism. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020. ISBN 978-1-5261-3342-7 (hardback).

Much has already been written on the 50 odd years preceding the so-called First Opium War (1839–1842), the first military conflict between Britain and China. There are many different theories about what precisely led to the outbreak of that war, so it is certainly not so easy to justify why a further book might be helpful on top of the flood of existing records, narratives and theories on the subject. But the author, Gao Hao, who wrote his PhD dissertation on this topic at the University of Edinburgh and who is now working as a senior lecturer at the Centre of Imperial and Global History at the University of Exeter, seems to be perfectly aware of this problem, since he writes in the introduction of his book:

The purpose of this study [...] is not to replace the existing theories on the causes of the war with a brand new one. Its aim is to explore some hitherto under-researched aspects of Sino-British relations through a new perspective, to analyze the important factors *without* which open hostilities between Britain and China could not have been possible, in order to understand the origins of the Opium War more fully. (p. 4)

As Gao argues, the existing studies have mainly explored the course of events that finally led to the Opium War, some of them having diagnosed a clash of cultures, and others having concentrated on the question of whether opium was the main trigger of the war. Gao's main interest, however, is to pursue the questions of who the important opinion-makers in the years preceding the war were and to what degree they influenced the decision-makers, as well as which images of China were constructed by whom and for what purpose. In his own words,

Only by investigating how key opinion-formers and decision-makers developed and justified their views on the matter can we ascertain how the idea of open warfare against China gradually became acceptable and why the First Anglo-Chinese War broke out at such a point in time. On this basis, this book eventually illuminates the underlying causes as well as immediate triggers of the Opium War from a perceptual point of view. (p. 7)

Gao has arranged his book in five chapters, which display five stage or steps that finally culminated in that war in chronological order, starting with the Macartney embassy (1792–1794) [chap. 1]; followed 22 years later by the Amherst embassy (1816–1817) [chap. 2]; the so-called Napier incident (1834), which resulted from the success of the “free traders” against the British East India Company (EIC) [chap. 3]; the eponymous “show of force” by the British, supported by the Parliament [chap. 4]; and finally the discussions leading to the decision to wage war against China [chap. 5]. In each of these chapters Gao reassesses the various existing theories about the impact of the related events, records, and discussions, and offers the reader his own interpretation of a process that started quite hopefully with the chance of getting into closer contact with a far-away country about which the British knew almost nothing at the outset and which ended with an outburst of anger on both sides, probably caused mainly by a lack of mutual understanding and care and the construction of an increasingly negative image of China, its emperor and its government on the part of the British.

Let us now take a closer look at the main results Gao reaches in each of these chapters, with a special focus on the role of these early “influencers”.

In chap. 1, Gao argues that among the many records written by members of the Macartney embassy to China (1793–1794), it was particularly the “authorized” reports by George Leonhard Staunton and Macartney himself that “created a set of images which were essentially ‘self-serving’ and ‘face serving’” (p. 36) and which blamed “a handful of hostile ministers”, rather than the Qianlong emperor (r. 1736–1795) himself or the leaders of the embassy, for having prevented the embassy from achieving more positive conditions for future trade relations between Britain and China. Interestingly, here, Gao adds the remark

We do not know whether it was due to their [= Staunton’s and Macartney’s] lack of ability or willingness (or a combination of both) that the two leaders failed to ascertain the true behind-the-scene-motives on the Chinese side. It is, however, worth remembering that both of them were eager to demonstrate that a good job had been done by the embassy, probably to prepare for the blame they might face after their return to Britain. (p. 46)

Gao points out two observations on China made by members of the embassy: firstly the fact that China had been conquered by a people and was ruled by an emperor of non-Chinese origin, as the Chinese who accompanied the mission let them know, and secondly, that judging by the fortifications the British had seen along the coast, it would not be so difficult to attack China with warships – but, basing himself on the recommendation the Jesuit missionary Joseph Amiot had made to him during his stay in China, Macartney emphasized that

one should instead keep peace and hope that, in the long run, China would be willing to intensify its trade relations with Britain. (pp. 35, 47)

Chap. 2 revisits the results and the impact of the Amherst embassy, which took place 22 years after the Macartney embassy. As is generally known, George Thomas Staunton (1781–1859), G. Leonhard Staunton's son, who had previously accompanied the Macartney mission as a twelve-year-old boy, played a central role in this embassy as Lord Amherst's advisor. He, who had learned Chinese during that earlier embassy and later served for many years, first as a writer and then as one of the directors of the factory of the East India Company (EIC) in Canton, was an expert acknowledged as an authority on China, and it was he who recommended Lord Amherst not to perform the extreme form of kowtow that the Qing government requested, arguing that if one fulfills the will of the Chinese, one will merely be regarded as the representative of a country that accepts China's superiority. Lord Amherst followed his advice, and, as is generally known, the embassy was therefore not even granted an audience at the Jiaqing emperor's (reg. 1796–1820) palace in Beijing. However, in several of his writings, Staunton emphasized later that the decision Lord Amherst had made was a good one in spite of its consequences, which in his view did not impede the trade relations between Britain and China in any respect. (p. 60f)

In chap. 3, Gao analyses the relationship between the EIC and the "free traders". One prominent example of a free trader who was formerly a member of the EIC but later started his own business is Hugh Hamilton Lindsay (1802–1881). He and others like him wrote pamphlets in which they argued that the monopoly on trade with East Asia that the EIC had maintained for so long should now finally be cancelled in favor of free trade, as proposed by Adam Smith (1723–1790) in his book on the *Wealth of Nations*. It was high time, according to Lindsay, that different companies and private traders be given the opportunity to compete with each other. (p. 99f) Gao writes that some British merchants in Calcutta employed John Crawford (1783–1868), an ethnologist who lived in India, to write articles against the EIC's justification for keeping their privileges in the trade with China, in order to convince the British public that the "Canton system", which confined foreigners' trade with China to the port of Canton, was not an insurmountable barrier to free trade with China. (pp. 105f) An important role in spreading a new image of the Chinese as having the desire to enter into direct trade with the British, Gao points out, was also played by Karl Gützlaff (1803–1851), who reported on his personal experiences with Chinese people during three voyages he undertook along the Chinese coast in 1831, 1832, and 1833, coming to the conclusion that the Chinese people were much interested in trade and merely being blocked by the central government in Beijing. (p. 108)

Chap. 4, titled "Show of Force", traces the British government's decision to send Lord Napier to China as Britain's first "chief superintendent of trade", after the EIC's monopoly on the China trade had finally been abolished. Because Napier signaled to the Chinese authorities that he, unlike the EIC representatives, would ignore the "Canton system"

with its Hong merchants as brokers and instead insisted on making contact with the highest authority in Canton, the Chinese government perceived Napier's mission as an eminently aggressive act of the Britain government and reacted by sending Napier back to Macao in a small boat, which resulted in his dying along the way due to bad health. In Gao's view, the "Napier fizzle" was clearly an event that caused so much anger both among the British "China experts" and the British government that it served as a further step towards war between China and Britain.

Finally, in chap. 5 Gao weighs the various opinions as to what actually led to the outbreak of the Opium war. Were Lin Zexu's draconian measures forcing the opium merchants to deliver all their opium to the Chinese authorities the trigger for the British to react in this way? Did the British justify waging the war based on the fact that the illegal goods, which had belonged to free traders, were declared by Sir Elliot to be property of the Crown shortly before they were destroyed, such that they perceived this as a violation of national honor?

On the whole, Gao has plausibly demonstrated that in all stages of this five-act-process that finally led to the First Opium War, the image of China in the eyes of the British public was mainly shaped by the books, pamphlets and other works produced by certain opinion-makers among the acknowledged experts on China. This approach may indeed justly be considered to present a new perspective.

An important factor in opinion building during the decisive phase shortly before the war was the British residents in Canton. As Gao shows, they used the newspapers and journals in Canton to narrate stories that certainly strengthened the feeling, also among the British public, that Britons were being menaced by China's government. One example Gao adduces is a rumor according to which the Daoguang emperor (r. 1821–1850) suggested that Lin Zexu send swimmers to the ships of the British merchants during the night to kill the crews. (p. 168) In an endnote Gao writes that it was probably Lindsay who had authored this text. And he adds that there is no evidence in Chinese sources that the Daoguang emperor had ever written a memorial with this content and sent it to Lin Zexu. (p. 178, n. 122)

One thing that may be a bit misleading to some is the subtitle of this book, "British Imperial Attitudes towards China", because at the center of this work are not only the attitudes and decisions of the British government but also the perceptions of various members of society, all of whom exerted influence on the government's decision making. As the reviewer has seen, the original title of Gao's doctoral thesis was "British-Chinese Encounters: Changing Perceptions and Attitudes from the Macartney Mission to the Opium War (1792–1840)", and this title fits with what the author actually did exactly. Even more interesting, the original PhD thesis also has a sixth chapter, its title being "Britain through Chinese Eyes: Chinese Perceptions of Britain during the Early Sino-British Encounters". Unfortunately, this chapter has not been included in the present book, although it would, of course, not fit with the book's title, but hope may be expressed that the

author will expand the original sixth chapter of his dissertation into another book or article on this topic, which has as yet certainly not been studied that much.

In sum, this is a well-written and well-researched book, which also includes, by the way, a lucid index at its end that makes it easy to look up names and key terms in the main text. It will prove a very helpful guide for any student dealing with the time prior to the First Opium war and may serve as a perfect point of departure for any further research, as it bundles information from both primary sources and secondary literature related to the various aspects of that topic. No scholar who deals with early Sino-British relations should be without it.

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