

# Macao and the British, 1637–1842

## Prelude to Hong Kong

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## INTRODUCTION

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AS THE TOURIST BROCHURE unambiguously states, the British first occupied Hongkong in 1841 during the Opium War. In fact, the acquisition of Hongkong and the conflict that went with it—one of the most extraordinary encounters in the history of any two nations—cannot be seen in isolation, being the outcome of a historical process of which the development from origins takes us back at least two hundred years prior to 1841, and if the experience of the Portuguese, who were the pioneer Europeans on the China coast, is included, well back over a further hundred years.

For the greater part of this long period Hongkong was a nameless island, not an issue between anyone, not even known to any save the handful of Chinese villagers who lived on it and the minor Chinese district officials in whose area it lay, a region of innumerable and similarly nameless islands. The scene of history lay between two places: Canton, the largest city of South China, in those days considerably larger than any city in Europe; and the tiny Portuguese enclave of Macao, eighty-three miles south of Canton at the mouth of the Pearl River.

The Portuguese entered the picture with their first voyage to China in 1513. Against many obstacles, of which the most important was Chinese official unwillingness, they persisted in their attempts to do trade with China, and in 1557, by an agreement with the local Chinese authorities, were permitted to erect permanent buildings at Macao, which in the space of a few years became—and for several decades remained—a

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city of great riches, for many years unique in being entirely unfortified, linked by close commercial ties with Canton.

The region in which these two places are situated lies just within the tropics, with hot and humid summers of heavy rainfall, winters cool, dry and pleasant, and a spring usually overcast with cloud amid which fall gentle showers. The coastal region is subject to typhoons occurring mainly in late summer, between July and October.

It is a land of rivers, with in those days few means of communication other than by boat, the riverine areas being flat, interrupted here and there by starkly rising isolated hills. The principal occupations of the Chinese inhabitants were farming and fishing, the largest crop being rice grown by wet cultivation. The trees native to the region are pine, camphor and Chinese banyan, and the area was famous for its fruit orchards of laichees, lung-ngan, loquat, pomelo, bananas, plums and pears, and for its winter oranges of many varieties including the tangerine, of which this is the original home. To these native fruits the Portuguese had introduced from South America a number of others, including papaya, guava, custard apples and the pineapple. They had also introduced the peanut, in the oil of which two-thirds of all Chinese food is cooked.

Among the delicacies of the river were prawns, crabs and oysters, and pond fishing was a specialized occupation. Along the Pearl River were numerous villages constructed on stilts over the water. Distinct from the land-based fishermen-farmers was a separate race of fishermen who lived entirely in their boats. These were outcasts, forbidden to reside ashore, to have their children educated or to wear shoes. Many among them were pirates, their favourite haunt being the scattered rocky islands off the mouth of the Pearl River.

But although a land of great plenty, the area was regarded by the Chinese Government as the outer fringe of civilization, a remote place more than a thousand miles away from the sophisticated splendours of Peking. Chinese civilization, many thousand years old, had grown up far to the north, in the basin of the Yellow River, whence it had gradually expanded among tribes and clans which adopted Chinese ways, names and language, and were soon indistinguishable from other Chinese.

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Since the year 221 B.C. China, hitherto more a cultural than a political entity, had been unified under a central imperial government, and it was at this time that Kwangtung province, in which our scene lies, came within the orbit of Chinese control, Canton becoming a garrison city connected with the north by a canal waterway, one of the great engineering feats of ancient times. Not till about a thousand years later did Kwangtung become a place of distinctively Chinese habitation, due to southward migration and pressure of population further north. At the time our story begins the region had been under full Chinese control for about six hundred years.

Of the two cities with which we are to be concerned Macao, though much the smaller, is in relation to the matters to be observed the more important, in that it was Portuguese tenure of Macao, often precarious, which enabled the West to maintain continuous relations with China from 1557 onwards. Portuguese endurance in Macao was the foot by means of which, through centuries of difficulty, the door of China was prevented from closing entirely. The opening it made was narrow. It was hard to squeeze through. But without it there would have been no entry whatever.

Let us therefore approach as every foreign traveller in early times had to—via Macao—being rowed ashore in ship's barge towards the *Praia Grande*, that elegant crescent of Latin architecture facing the waterfront, beyond which rise the low domes and towers of seminaries and churches, the whole creating that uniquely unexpected European view which is Macao's greeting to every visitor from the sea.

# I

## JOHN WEDDELL'S VOYAGE TO CHINA

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### I: THE CITY OF THE NAME OF GOD

ON 27TH JUNE 1637 four English ships under the command of Captain John Weddell anchored among the rocky grass-covered islands just south of Macao. As chief factor, or commercial officer, of the voyage came Peter Mundy, one of the most travelled Englishmen living, whose diary enables us to have an unusually clear impression of what took place on this, the first English trading voyage to China.

In response to a salute fired by Weddell's ships a boat was sent out from Macao warning the English not to approach further without the permission of the Portuguese Captain-General. On the second day Peter Mundy was sent in Weddell's barge to deliver a letter from King Charles I, together with one from Weddell. Accompanying Mundy ashore were John Mountney, accountant, and Thomas Robinson, secretary and interpreter, who spoke Portuguese, the *lingua franca* of Eastern trade. The Captain-General, Dom Domingos da Camara Noronha, received them briefly in the company of the members of Macao's local ruling body, the Senate. Robinson presented the letters. After being told that replies would be delivered to them on board next day, the Englishmen withdrew.

Before returning to their ships they were invited to lunch at the Jesuit seminary, headquarters of the far-flung Jesuit mission in the Far East. The invitation was a gesture of thanks to the



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English for having brought several Jesuits with them from Malacca. After lunch they were taken to see the architectural marvel of the city, the Jesuit church of São Paulo.

Today and for more than a hundred years what visitor to Macao has failed to be impressed by the remains of this once magnificent church? All that is now to be seen is a great carved stone façade, its windows like sightless eyes, standing stark against the sky at the head of a magnificent sweep of ascending steps. Of the church itself, destroyed by fire in 1835, nothing survives. Yet even thus, gaping and churchless, São Paulo remains one of the unforgettable landmarks of Christian Asia.

Peter Mundy saw it two years after the stone façade had been added, erected with the help of the Jesuits' Japanese students and converts. Externally majestic and austere, within the church was sumptuous. 'The roof is of the fairest Arche that yett I ever saw to my remembrance,' wrote Mundy, 'of excellent workmanship, Carved in wood, curiously gilt and painted with exquisite colours.' It was a baroque extravaganza executed by the people who above all others excel in the carving and painting of wood.

Of Macao itself Peter Mundy wrote that it was 'built on rising hills, some gardens and trees among their houses making a pretty prospect somewhat resembling Goa, although not so big; their houses double-tiled, and that plastered over again, for prevention of hurricanes or violent winds that happen some years, called by the Chinese typhoons, which is also the reason (as they say) they build no high towers nor steeples to their churches'.<sup>1</sup>

In the entire city, which by this time had been established for eighty years, there was only one woman from Portugal. The wives of the earliest Portuguese settlers had been Malay and Japanese, who brought with them many of their own customs. Macao women, their Muslim traditions not quite extinguished, still veiled themselves with light shawls in public. The richer women travelled in *norimons*, Japanese litters, though the sedan chair was just coming into vogue. In the street women wore Malay sarongs of splendid colours and designs, and high

<sup>1</sup> For convenience some of the quotations in this chapter are in modernized spelling.

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cork-soled shoes, but at home they no longer concealed themselves from strangers; shawl and sarong were discarded to be replaced by a Japanese kimono. In all, the influence of Japan was very noticeable, Macao having risen to prominence on its control of trade between Japan and China.

Despite Macao's prosperous appearance, however, the English quickly perceived that the Portuguese position there was not as sound as might have been supposed. While being allowed by the Chinese to stay in Macao, the Portuguese were subjected to numerous vexations. Their Japan fleet, which sailed annually for Nagasaki, was ready to depart, but the goods purchased by Macao merchants at the spring trade fair at Canton had not yet arrived, having been 'embargoed or detained for a great sum of money which the Chinese demand of the Portuguese for building a vessel bigger than they have leave or warrant for. On divers other occasions they devise ways and means to extort moneys from them, as for killing, wronging or abusing a Chinaman, there being a great many that live together in the town with them and near about them, having a Mandarin or Judge of their own to decide their differences'.

In other words, there was something odd about Portugal's tenure. Macao was not, like Goa and Malacca, an area in which Portuguese writ ran undisputed.

### II: A RECONNAISSANCE IN THE PEARL RIVER

The following day came the Captain-General's reply. Pleading lack of orders from higher authority (the Portuguese Viceroy at Goa), Domingos da Camara regretted that he was unable to give the English any assistance other than to provide for the fleet anything urgently needed. Weddell's ships were still not allowed into the harbour. Watchboats were sent out bringing them food twice a day but preventing anyone from approaching.

During these days of inaction, which the English used to careen their ships, a Chinese official with a suitable entourage came to make a report to Canton on the nature of their business. 'Hee was apparell'd in a gowne or coate of blacke Sarsanette or tiffany, and under thatt other garmentts with strange attire on his head. Hee had carried before him a broad board written

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with China Characters, itt seemes the badge of his Authority and Commission.' After a few more days a more important officer 'came in a bigge vessell with a kettle Drumme and a broad brasse pan, on both of which the[y] beatt, keeping tyme together. They had allsoe on their vessell certaine Flagges and streamers'.

When after a day or so Macao's goods came down from Canton the English saw that the Portuguese had no intention of dealing with them till after their own fleet had safely left for Japan. Portuguese pleasure boats sailed or rowed round them in a holiday atmosphere for all save the English; but none came too near, and as Peter Mundy remarked with a wink in his Protestant eye, 'China stuffes, not any to bee broughtt us on paine off excommunication'.

It will be seen that the Portuguese were installed at the mouth of the river somewhat in the capacity of a filter, without passing through which no outsider could make contact with the Chinese. It was in fact for precisely this reason that the Portuguese had been allowed to settle in Macao, originally to keep the lower parts of the Pearl River free of pirates, but also with the idea that seafaring foreigners would probably prove the most appropriate people to keep other seafaring foreigners away.

The English were not of course aware of this curious situation. As they saw it the Portuguese were trying to keep them out for reasons of self-interest. After a fortnight Weddell decided to try the chances of bypassing Macao and establishing direct connexion with Canton. Robinson and Mountney were sent in the fleet's pinnace and barge 'to seeke For speech and trade with the Chineses' up the Pearl River.

They sailed up the great estuary—between fifteen and twenty miles wide—to the narrow entry of the river proper called Hu Mên, or Tiger Gate—in European tradition the Bocca Tigris—and from there up-river, making themselves understood by dumb signs. Some way up they were met by a fleet of junks commanded by an officer of the approximate rank of Comodore, among whose crews were some Africans, runaway slaves from Macao, who could speak some Portuguese and who acted as interpreters.

The Comodore, after a hostile opening, became more friendly and circumspect when he discovered that the English

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had reached so far with no pilot. He agreed that provided they left the pinnace and went the rest of the way in a small junk, the officers might go further up towards Canton. It was not lost on the English that the reason for ordering that they tranship was not the shallowness of the river but the fear inspired by the pinnace, although the junks were armed equally and carried three times the number of men.

In the junk they came to the First Bar, about thirteen miles below Canton. Here they were informed by customs officials that no application to trade could be made unless routed through the proper channels—the mandarins in the Macao area—but that if they would peacefully re-enter their ships and depart every assistance would be given them in obtaining a trade licence. Optimistically Robinson and Mountney returned to Weddell with this information.

But Weddell, a weather-beaten sea dog as tough as they come, was not a man to be taken in by a civil service answer. To apply in Macao meant the application being interfered with by the Portuguese, who in a special mission from the Senate during the pinnace's absence had explained to him that the Chinese would allow no one else to trade in the river. Gentler methods, as Weddell saw it, had failed. What was required was sterner stuff.

On 29th July Captain Weddell sailed with all his ships up the Pearl River.

### III: IN THE BOCCA TIGRIS

In narrating what follows I would have liked to confine our sights to our own countrymen, in order to give as full an impression as possible of what they themselves experienced. This, however, would defeat our purpose, in that we would end by sailing away from China with them, as baffled and perplexed, as ignorant of the situation into which they had stepped, as they were themselves. Accordingly I propose that we should occasionally lift the veil surrounding them and look into the world which from them was hidden. Let us do so now.

By any standards, those of yesterday or today, China was admirably ruled. The largest country in the world, with the largest population, its government was superior to any that had

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hitherto been evolved in any part of the globe; and when one considers the immensity of the task of ruling China, then as now, the state of justice, peace and order which prevailed, without the country being in any sense a slave state, is little short of miraculous.

In the prime position of responsibility for all this were the mandarins,<sup>1</sup> the civil service, the heads of which were directly responsible to the Emperor. Appointed by competitive examination in the Chinese classics, the members of the civil service were a *corps d'élite* of intellect. The mandarinat was in fact the archetype of all other civil services, and particularly of our own, the gradual development of which owed more than is immediately visible to ideas becoming current in Europe at the end of the seventeenth century as a result of a growing knowledge of China and her institutions.

By this time, along the swift channels of information available to the Chinese civil service, word had come from Canton to all concerned that dangerous, unidentified foreigners had reached Macao and might attempt to enter the river. The mandarinat's foremost consideration, for reasons which will in due course become apparent, was that the greatest care must be taken to avoid any disturbance that might have to be reported to Peking. If the foreigners could be removed by empty blandishments this would be the most satisfactory outcome, causing the minimum disturbance. If force had to be used it should only be in a situation wherein success was certain. The barbarians were extremely able when it came to fighting, and force would only succeed if applied by subterfuge. A direct engagement should be avoided at all costs.

As for the Portuguese in Macao, their difficulty was that in Chinese eyes the English resembled the Dutch, of whom the Chinese had formed a very bad opinion. Red-haired, with penetrating blue eyes, the Dutch had from their first appearance on the China coast created a frightening impression, becoming immediately classed as red barbarians, a species new to Chinese

<sup>1</sup> Mandarin: a Chinese civil servant. Used originally by the Portuguese, this word appears to bear no reference to any Chinese appellation or title. It is said to be a corruption of the Malay word *Mentri* (meaning a minister or officer) as pronounced by a Chinese of former times: man-da-li.

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experience. When two years before Weddell's visit an English ship, the *London*, under charter to the Portuguese, had called at Macao, the English crew had been identified as red barbarians and the city severely fined by the mandarins for negligence in allowing them in. Weddell's up-river intrusion would mean another mass fine. Chinese and Portuguese were thus united in their desire to be rid of the English as soon and as quietly as possible. This the English did not understand. To the end they attributed their troubles to Portuguese scheming in protection of their monopoly position, which the English believed to be a hoax, but which was not. The Portuguese were indeed the only foreigners who were in practice allowed to trade with China from the sea.

Disregarding two Chinese warnings to stop, the English sailed on, passing two Chinese fleets with watchful care. From the second of these, consisting of forty well-armed junks of great size, an officer was sent to speak with them. Courteous and seemingly understanding, he promised Weddell that if he would wait, permission to go up to Canton would be speedily obtained. Sailing a short distance further, the English entered the Bocca Tigris and anchored beneath a disused fort at its mouth—known in European tradition as Anunghoi Fort—where they decided to await permission to proceed.

Many junks and smaller boats were about, but evidently on orders none would come near them; and when they went ashore to procure food they were menaced by soldiers at the fort. Hastily retiring to their ships, the English displayed 'bloody ensignes' instead of white, 'the King's collours' instead of the flag of St. George, and made other warlike preparations.

Which were understood. A messenger was sent down with an interpreter, begging Captain Weddell to wait six days, when permission would certainly be received to go up. At the same time the English noted with concern that the fort was being invested with cannon and men.

Next day, with a white flag before them, another party went ashore to purchase food. The white flag meant nothing (white is the colour associated in China with funerals) and their landing was resisted. Nevertheless they pushed ashore, bought what they wanted, and with a crowd of country people gaping and chatting around them inspected a village.

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They were offered some simple hospitality.

'The people there gave us a certaine Drinke called Chaa, which is only water with a kind of herbe boyled in itt. It must bee Drancke warme and is accompted wholesome.'

As Peter Mundy penned those words that night in his cabin he had little idea of the part that 'Chaa' was destined to play in the future relations between Europe and China, that the brew that had passed his lips would alter the social life of nations, providing the lure which was to bring foreigners ever more imperatively to pound upon China's doors.

It may seem strange that the Cantonese word *cha*, while passing into Indian languages, did not pass into English except as a slang word picked up two centuries later by British soldiers in India. The reason is that when tea-drinking was first introduced into Europe, in the second half of the seventeenth century, the French and the British were in touch with the great tea-producing province of Fukien, where the same Chinese word *cha* is pronounced *teh*. The French thus introduced *thé* into Europe, the English their own native version, *tea*, originally pronounced much the same as in French.<sup>1</sup>

### IV: PAULO NORETTE

The six days of waiting having passed, the Chinese politely proceeded to ask for another four. This was too much for John Weddell. The barge was sent to take soundings further up.

As she moved, the fort opened fire. Up went the bloody ensign again, the English ships returning the fire. One shot from the fort hit the flagship, doing slight damage, but apart from this the Chinese fire was ineffectual. The fort cannons were in fixed positions, so no proper aim could be taken, and due to faulty gunpowder several balls just dropped out of the mouths of the cannon and fell in the grass below the fort's wall.

Irritated by the treatment they had received, the English did not let the inferiority of their opponents restrain them, but continued firing until the Chinese, having fired each of their guns once, evacuated the fort without even recharging them. The English then landed, occupied the deserted structure,

<sup>1</sup> viz. Alexander Pope: *The Rape of the Lock*,

'Here thou, great ANNA! whom three Realms obey,  
Dost sometimes counsel take—and sometimes tea'.

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hoisted the King's colours, and before returning to their ships partly dismantled the place, taking some of the more serviceable guns.

Another facet which was to puzzle decade after decade of Europeans had appeared. Here was this vast nation, peaceful, prosperous and obviously extremely well governed. Was this the only kind of army they had to protect so great an empire? How was it possible? A few ceremonial guns, a scared bunch of ill-accoutred soldiers, a navy which was frightened of a small English pinnace. What did it mean? Beneath the whole of the pre-1842 period ran this unanswered riddle. Was China militarily weak or strong?

Weddell was still undecided about his next move when the situation unexpectedly changed for the better with the arrival of an envoy from Canton, a Chinese official speaking Portuguese. Brought up in Macao, he was one of that intriguing group of men who figure prominently in the early relations of Chinese and Europeans: the Chinese who, in Macao, Manila or one of the other European settlements, became a Christian of sorts, having been either adopted by a Christian family as a child or else converted as a boy, with a European godfather to make him his heir. Many such Chinese, dissatisfied with themselves or over-ambitious, later deserted their Christian surroundings to go back among their own people, where with duplicity for which they were uniquely adapted they became intermediaries in a dangerous but profitable intercourse between men of the two races.

No description of this one survives, yet we see him clearly. He is obviously Chinese, yet his youthful association with foreigners has changed something in his expression. There is a brightness, a sharpness in his eyes; he senses our humour and emotions; we feel he has broken from his ancestors' non-Christian ways and deserves our help and sympathy. He has great charm of manner, a little feminine perhaps, and in Western attire could easily be mistaken for a Eurasian. We cannot help being amused by his subtle understanding of his own people's weaknesses and shortcomings.

But he has given up his Western ways, grown his hair in Chinese fashion, and in official headgear and longcoat, with a



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wisp of beard and a fingernail or two carefully preserved, it needs only a flicker of the mind for the bright, intelligent look to be replaced by suave concealment, observing yet withdrawn, remote yet calculating. We realize then how tellingly he can inform his Chinese friends of our own weaknesses and shortcomings.

He had two names, of course. His Chinese name is not found in Western accounts; his European name is not found in Chinese accounts. It is an element of the situation.

To Weddell and his compatriots he introduced himself as Paulo Norette. He hated the Portuguese and (having discovered the English were Protestants) the Catholic priests. They had taught him all kinds of falsehood about Christianity, he said, thereafter treating him so wretchedly that he had run away in despair to Canton, although his poor wife and children were still in Macao. Now that he was a government official, on very close terms with the highest executives—the English had met the Commodore, had they not? as a matter of fact, he resided in the Commodore's house in Canton—he would be only too happy to make sure the English received a licence to trade and so ruin those vile Catholics who had brought such misery to himself and hundreds of his fellow-countrymen.

Everyone was delighted. 'Now there appeared some hopes of setting a trade in these parts', wrote Peter Mundy in his account of the day. Norette would go and get permission from higher officials a little way up-river for a delegation of the English to present a petition for a licence in Canton.

Next day he returned with permission for a delegation given. Mountney, Robinson and one other, taking several fine presents with them, embarked in Norette's junk and reached Canton in the evening of the following day. After having a petition drawn up for them in Chinese, in the afternoon they were conducted ashore to the Commodore's palace, a large establishment with interior courts guarded by soldiers. In an inner hall they knelt before the Commodore in the abject posture adopted by ordinary Chinese when approaching a high official, and presented their petition, it being taken from their hands by Paulo Norette, who with yet more ceremonies handed it to his superior. The merchants then returned to their junk and were

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brought down-river again. By travelling that night and all next day they reached Weddell at midnight.

### V: THE CHINESE SYSTEM OF OFFICIAL PERQUISITES

In introducing Norette I have taken the liberty of giving a broad hint about him, a hint which the English, new to the East, had no means of arriving at. Let us again draw back the curtain and look at what lay concealed behind it.

Who was Norette?

He claimed to be an official, and was certainly able to organize things in official quarters with remarkable address. Had the English known more of China they would have detected, even at his very first interview with Weddell, a flaw in his story.

His wife and children were at Macao.

Extracted and set apart from the other facts, this one alone showed plainly that whatever Norette was he was not an official. What official would be trusted who kept his wife and children in the settlement of the Western Ocean barbarians? Besides—he admitted it—he had formerly been an interpreter in Portuguese pay. His dislike of the Portuguese, his dissociation from the past, would not be sufficient for the immense traditions of China's bureaucracy while wife and children were still in Macao.

What was he then?

The Macao Senate later claimed that Norette was employed by them as an interpreter at the last trade fair in Canton, but that having swindled Macao merchants out of 80,000 taels of silver he was afraid to return there to his wife, and had accordingly pleaded with the Canton authorities to be allowed to stay where he was.

Supposing this to be the truth—and it is the most precise information we have about him—what was he doing posing as an official in the presence of so important a person as the Commodore, the Commander-in-Chief of the Pearl River defences?

Let us examine the timings. Robinson and Mountney reached Canton at about 7 p.m. on 17th August 1637. At 3 p.m. the

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following day they were received by the Commodore. In the entire history of China what foreigner, unless he was an intimate friend, can claim to have been received by a high official in less than twenty-four hours from his arrival? Such things happen only to ambassadors, and even then only rarely. An interview with a high officer is a matter of days, weeks, months of waiting, obtaining introductions, giving discreet presents or expensive dinners, writing obeisant letters. Unless there were some special motive the Commodore would never have received the English so soon.

The question reverses itself. What was the Commodore up to, having dealings with a man like Paulo Norette?

In pulling up this, we bare the roots. The Macao trade, China's only legitimate maritime foreign trade, was financially very rewarding. The chief beneficiary was the revenue, but in China there were no fixed salaries for civil servants, officials being entitled to draw their living costs, declaring to their superiors what they had drawn, from the revenues of their provinces or prefectures. Obviously, with minor adjustments in revenue returns, greater sums than those declared could be purloined. Altogether it is not surprising that most men who succeeded in passing the classical examinations for the civil service ended by making their families rich.

Every so often corruption such as this would be discovered by the Court and vigorously punished; but this was only when one of the Censors memorialized the Emperor or when corruption became so flagrant that it was evident even from Peking that returns were abnormally low. At every level of the hierarchy of government men were taking to themselves money which should or could have been going somewhere else, cheating the revenue and frequently each other as well. The extent of it was such that suppression was virtually impossible, added to which was the difficulty, as will be seen in due course, that in a sense even the Emperor himself was involved in it.

Naturally the officers dealing with Portuguese trade were in a particularly fortunate position; and everyone directly concerned, from the Governor of Kwangtung and Kwangsi down to the minor mandarins who preyed directly upon Macao, improved himself on it financially, though probably none more

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thoroughly than the Marine Superintendent of Canton. Head of a large department, responsible directly to the Governor, this mandarin controlled customs, tonnage dues and the overall supervision of maritime commerce. As the greatest beneficiary from it—he and his personal staff probably alone knew the real extent of it and the degree to which it could be milked—he stood to lose by anything damaging it, and to this extent could be called an ally of the Portuguese.

The English, however, sailing up the Pearl River, had by chance encountered in the Commodore a man who because of his military-naval status had no share in the foreign trade perquisites, which were reserved to the civil authorities. The Commodore, who had to pay for the upkeep of a large palace in Canton, maintain his ships and pay their crews, saw in the English an interesting opportunity. Learning that the newcomers wished to obtain a licence to trade—in other words they were not pirates, but wanted a legal footing similar to the Portuguese—a line of action quickly presented itself to him. As he had been the first to encounter the English, their petition should be presented to none other than himself, who would thereupon take it to the Marine Superintendent. This was irregular, but it could be done, and would provide the means whereby the Commodore could ease himself in on the foreign trade perquisites.

One drawback was that the only men who could talk to the foreigners were runaway African slaves, the use of whom as intermediaries might lead the English to suspect an irregularity. When he first interviewed Robinson and Mountney therefore the Commodore did not make any definite overtures, and rather than risk an engagement with them he reluctantly let them go up to the First Bar. There unfortunately the customs officials—the Marine Superintendent's men—told the English to go back and apply from Macao. Thinking he had lost his party, the Commodore returned to Canton.

But then the unexpected happened. Instead of doing what they were told the red foreigners had re-entered the river in greater numbers. As soon as their ships were sighted heading up-river there was consternation in Macao, and the news travelled rapidly to Canton. Under the Commodore's orders

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Anunghoi Fort was manned and an effort made to prevent the barbarians coming any nearer. The English accounts are full of assertions that the Portuguese were responsible for warning the Canton officials to keep them out; but such assertions betray a lack of understanding of the situation. Canton needed no Portuguese persuasion. The Marine Superintendent and all the vested interests inside the government stood to lose by any upset in the nicely adjusted squeeze arrangements.

Again chance played into the Commodore's hands. The officer in charge of his forty-junk fleet had the good sense to send a messenger over to the English ships asking them to go no further up. He also discovered that they were still only after a trade licence, which fact was reported to the Commodore, from whose point of view it clinched the decision to act.

It was here that Paulo Norette came in as the much-needed interpreter, evidently introduced by one of the Commodore's friends with merchant acquaintances hoping to benefit if the Commodore's venture proved successful. The formal presentation of the English petition at the Commodore's palace was that officer's method of conferring regularity on irregularity. It was also intended to give weight and significance to the occasion in the Englishmen's minds, establishing clearly that the Commodore was their patron and making it seem inconceivable to them that there was anything questionable in his proceeding.

Up to this point everything worked well. The English were entirely convinced. Peter Mundy referred to that well-mannered charlatan Norette as 'Our Mandarene', and to the end of their lives none of them knew what Norette's position was or whose game he was playing.

The Commodore now approached the Marine Superintendent with the Englishmen's petition. This was a pretty miserable document, drawn up in a hurry and not well composed. It might have been tolerantly received even so, had not Norette, in his eagerness to ingratiate himself with the Canton authorities, included in it several references to himself, including some self-complimentary remarks about his honesty in business. How the Commodore was so misguided as to allow this to pass we do not know. Possibly, trusting the plausible Norette, he did

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not trouble to read the petition before sending it on. He was in a hurry too. The English had already seized some guns, and they might do some more damage if their demands were not satisfied.

The Marine Superintendent spotted the peculiarity. One can almost hear him saying to his secretary, after the Commodore's man had gone:

'These red barbarians: are they not illiterate?'

'Yes, Your Honour.'

'Then who wrote this for them?'

'I will find out, Your Honour.'

Within an hour or so the Marine Superintendent knew the exact circumstances: a third-rate calligraphist engaged, the text dictated by a Macao interpreter who had petitioned to remain in Canton—yes, the one mentioned as being an honest go-between. . . .

The Superintendent weighed up the position. The petition had to be refused, adamantly. These red people and their Chinese hirelings would throw the whole trade into disorder. Caution was needed, though, in one respect. The Commodore had sent the petition, and by its rejection he must not be made to lose face. Loss of face would prompt him to revenge, which the Marine Superintendent, about whom the Commodore clearly knew something which the Governor should not be told, could not afford to risk.

With great tact the Marine Superintendent therefore drafted the rejection as coming jointly from himself and the Commodore. After recounting the facts concerning the English intrusion into the river, he gave his orders:

'And I command as far as I may, and for this purpose I despatch the Officer who bears this sentence, who will forthwith give this order to the ships of the red-haired barbarians, and upon receiving this our order they shall instantly weigh anchor and put out to the open sea. For you have shown great daring in attempting to trade by force with us, we having forbidden it; and in so doing you appear to me to be like puppies and goats who have no learning and no reason.'

At this point one can feel him hesitate. Should he mention the interpreter? Better not. He would concentrate on the three

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red-heads who had had the temerity to enter Canton. With the same perfect tact he continued:

'One or two of your men, like men without sense, have pressed this business upon me and the Commander-in-Chief that we should consider what you are doing; therefore I warn you that should you have the great boldness to harm so much as a blade of grass or a piece of wood, I promise you that my soldiers shall make an end of you, and not a shred of your sails shall remain.'

The completed document was sent round to the Commodore. No more than the briefest covering minute was necessary; the document itself told all—too much. As a last touch of finesse the Marine Superintendent suggested that it would be more suitable and convenient for the Commodore to arrange for its transmission to the barbarians. The Commodore could not refuse to do this without revealing himself, the Superintendent calculated.

The Commodore was not the first naval officer to learn that politics need handling by an expert.

#### VI: THREATS IN THE CHINESE SYSTEM OF GOVERNMENT

Another aspect of relations with China, in this case an aspect which was one day to be of the gravest importance, has become apparent. The Marine Superintendent's order, while impeccable as a document within the frame of Chinese government (in all that concerned a colleague, the Commodore), is from the foreign point of view brash and insulting. Above all, it uses threatening language.

As will already have become apparent, the constant aim of the mandarin state was to maintain peace and order with the least possible use of force. Threats and unrestrained insults in official pronouncements were integral to this system of government. They were meant to be taken not so much literally as they were to indicate the degree of importance attached to a problem and the extremes to which authority was prepared to go, probably by indirect methods quite unconnected with force, to deal with it. You had to read between the lines and determine what was minimally required of you, thereafter taking measures

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to avoid even this if you could. It was a defined system of great antiquity. Even more significant, it had behind it well over a thousand years of successful application.

Reducing the matter to its simplest form, a threat in a Chinese official pronouncement, grave though it might be, did not bear the same aspect of challenge as a threat does in Europe. It was an indication of severity, not a direct engagement of strength. As we proceed, we shall see in steadily darkening colours the effects of this basic difference of understanding between China and the West.

### VII: NORETTE'S DUPLICITY

Paulo Norette, the only suitable person available to translate the Marine Superintendent's order to the English, was at the same time the only person who knew the effects which threats and insults produce on men of Weddell's kind. Norette realized that his mission was dangerous, and, making great play of the danger, he allowed himself to be prevailed upon to make the trip alone. For 'Our Mandareene' was both resourceful and daring, and he knew he stood to gain greatly if, unbeknown to the Commodore, he could make some trade for his own merchant friends.

When he reached the English ships Norette was all smiles. Posting the notice up, as ordered, in Weddell's flagship, he proceeded to 'translate' it. Provided the English were willing to pay the normal duties, he told them, the authorities had given them permission to buy and sell whatever they liked, to establish a fortified settlement at the river mouth, and to transact all their affairs through himself, whom he imposingly described as the Assistant Sub-Prefect.

He asked that three men accompany him to Canton, bringing with them money and their goods for sale. Also, not forgetting the Commodore, who had done him a good turn, he made the English restore all the captured guns to the fort. This impressed them with his authority.

As always with Norette, everything was well organized. The three Englishmen, Robinson, Mountney and his younger brother, came alongside the wharves of Canton at night, landed



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wearing Chinese attire, and were taken by litter to a large house in the suburbs in which Cantonese merchants visited them and did some brisk business. Their host, one of Norette's merchant friends, would not allow them out of the house, and precautions were taken lest they be seen from the street. The doubts this gave them about Norette were allayed by the evidence of his ability to do what he said he would. After a few days Robinson and Norette came down to Weddell with the first consignment for export, two junks full of sugar. Carpenters also came down to crate it, now making the English fleet noticeably active.

When, as was inevitable, it was reported to the Marine Superintendent that his threats to the English had been ineffective and that the ships were still well within the Bocca Tigris, he did nothing directly, merely intimating to the Senate of Macao that unless they saw to it that the English departed they might expect the worst, a message the Senate well understood.

The Captain-General, thoroughly aroused, sent three junks 'well provided with Portuguese, mestiços and slaves armed . . . they alleging they came so for their defence, there being many outlaws and sea-robbers among all those islands and creeks'. Sailing into the Bocca they presented Captain Weddell a reasoned petition, pointing out the seriousness of his disregard of Chinese orders, and begging him in the name of friendship to spare the citizens of Macao the consequences and leave.

Weddell was particularly confident at this moment. The trade had started at last; the Assistant Sub-Prefect was their friend, and so too the Commadore. Escaped slaves, coming to him with tales of Portuguese machinations in Canton aimed at bringing about his expulsion, increased his feeling that the Portuguese had misused him. These sentiments dictated his reply to the Captain-General.

'Having received your offensive letters,' he wrote, '... we were much astonished to find that you consider us so despicable and of no importance, since you appear to think that your letters, full of groundless threats, will induce us to abandon an undertaking so profitable and so certain. . . . This land . . . is not yours, but the King of China's. Why then should we wait

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for licence from the King of Castile<sup>1</sup> or his petty Viceroys in these parts?

'We have no leisure at present, because of other occupations, to answer your vulgar letters more at length. . . . We are occupied in matters of greater importance.'

With this the Portuguese were dismissed.

#### VIII: CHINESE SECURITY FORCES IN ACTION

Norette was with Weddell when the Portuguese deputation reached him, and if the true situation still remained hidden from the English, it was as clear as a bell to Norette. A deputation of Portuguese being allowed up the Pearl River—they were normally only allowed to use the smaller delta approaches to Canton—meant Chinese acquiescence in the trip, which in turn meant that the great administrative wheels were turning, that the game was nearly up, and that if any more money was to be made it must be made quickly. Concealing his anxiety, he took charge of another sum of Weddell's investable capital and, encouraging him to send up the whole of the remainder with Robinson, left for Canton. Robinson followed next day.

Weddell's interview with the Portuguese took place on 6th September; on the 7th Norette left, Robinson on the 8th. Norette got through safely, but by the time Robinson neared the city three clear days had allowed time for observers to report the failure of the Portuguese mission and for offensive action to be put in hand. If the red-heads were illiterate, there was at least one language they would understand.

In the middle of the 9th–10th night, on the ebb tide, a fleet of dark junks was sighted by the pinnacle. Thinking they might carry cargo for them the watch let them pass, but as they approached the first of the three larger English vessels someone on guard fired a warning shot and at the same instant two of the junks burst into flames. One after another were ignited. In the brilliant light it could be seen they were chained together, drifting straight for the fleet, rockets and other explosives shooting out of them in all directions, half-naked Chinese men diving out of them into the water.

<sup>1</sup> Between 1580 and 1640 Spain and Portugal were under the same (Spanish) king.

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The warning shot was fired not a second too soon. The crews awoke, cut their cables, hoisted sail, and in their boats with great daring managed to sail near the firejunks and tow them away just sufficiently for their own ships to clear the main channel, allowing the flaming, hissing mass to drift slowly past, amid 'crackling of the burnt bamboos, whizzing of the rockets'.

The fleet was safe, but the English were shaken by the experience. As Peter Mundy noted, 'Now began we to mistrust the dealing of Norette and to fear the safety of our merchants at Canton.'

They had every reason to fear. The Marine Superintendent's patience was exhausted. The same evening Robinson, nearing Canton, was arrested and transferred to a government junk, his merchandise being seized and removed. From the crew of Robinson's junk the authorities finally managed to discover where the other traders were, and that Norette was involved.

This last discovery embarrassed the Marine Superintendent when he heard of it, suggesting as it did that the Commodore was also involved. As we have seen, he did not dare let his confrère lose face. The illegal trade had to be stopped however, and if the Commodore was in it the simplest course, rather than come into the open and risk his enmity, was to leave the English traders unharmed but organize something to let the Commodore know without words that his activities had been found out. The owner of the house in the suburbs was led out with chains round his neck to prison, his son also, and the rest of the people living in the house were thrown out. The house having been cleared of food and fuel, the English were left locked inside, with guards at the gate.

Needless to say, the Commodore was quickly apprised of this and that an illicit trade had been conducted by his own associates behind his back. Quite as angry as his confrère the Marine Superintendent, the Commodore recommended the sternest measures. The Superintendent agreed. Complacently he ordered that Norette be arrested and mercilessly beaten; and in the words of the voyage's chronicle the officers of the law thereupon 'soe bebosted that poore dogge, that they have scarce left him worth his skin'. For this time there was no fear for the Commodore's face. It was saved by Norette's behind.

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### IX: WEDDELL'S ATROCITIES

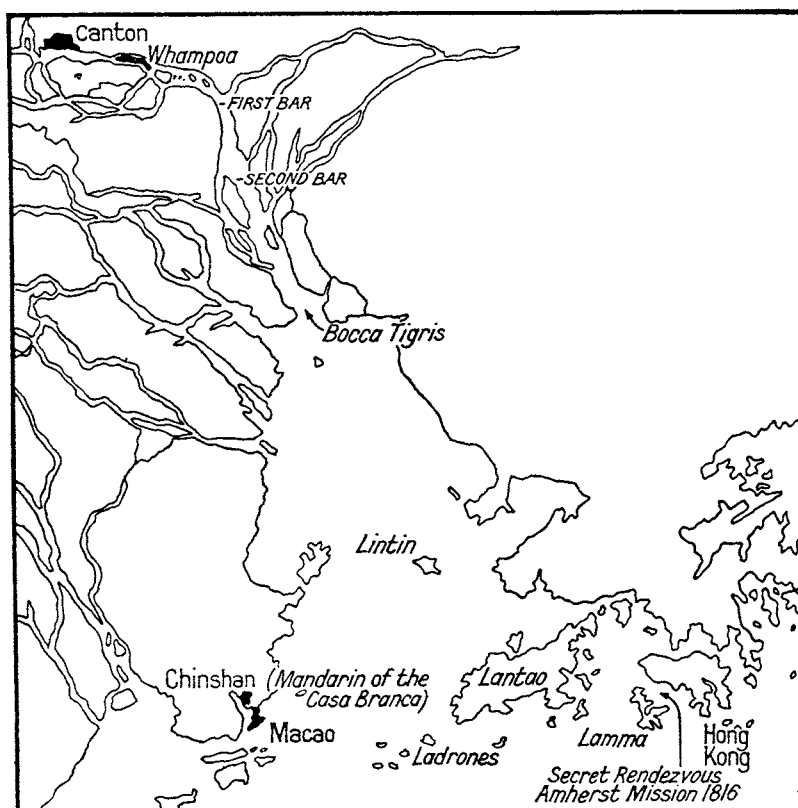
Meanwhile, in the Bocca Tigris, the merchants not returning from Canton, the 'best course was held to do all spoil we could unto the Chinese, that complaint might come to the higher powers, and that they might understand the reason of it as being for the detention of our merchants and company's estate in their hands'. For several days the English stayed in the area, seizing junks and raiding villages for livestock and provisions. One village they set fire to; in another they killed several Chinese. Finally they blew up Anunghoi Fort.

All this having failed to procure the release of their compatriots, they once more allowed themselves to be influenced by African slaves, who this time warned them that a vast fleet was being assembled against them by the Chinese, and that if they were to remain it were better near the ocean. Acting on this advice, they sailed down into the estuary as far as Lintin Island.

In doing so, however, Weddell had another idea in mind. The season was beginning to change. As some time on the autumn wind the Japan fleet would be returning to Macao. Anchoring within commanding distance of the route the fleet was most likely to take, Weddell once more addressed the Captain-General of Macao, blaming him for everything and demanding the freeing of the merchants, restoration of the cargo seized, and compensation for the voyage's losses. The letter ended with a good deal of high-flown stuff, including a hint that Macao's action might cause a rupture of the peace between Great Britain and Spain.

The outcome was typically Portuguese. Instead of sending a long reply, Domingos da Camara Noronha wrote only a brief note of acknowledgment, adding '... as all that your Worship states shows clearly that the information you have received against us is contrary to the truth, we have requested the Reverend Father Bartolomeu de Reboredo of the Society of Jesus, whom you brought from Malacca in your ships, and therefore your very good friend, to go and inform you in a friendly way of what really occurred, with which, if your Worship is satisfied, we shall much rejoice'.

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THE PEARL RIVER

Weddell was taken aback. Unable to bluster or rant at his learned former passenger, he was reduced to listening while Father de Reboredo dealt with Weddell's letter point by point, explaining the truth and ending by saying suavely that if the English merchants were to be released, only the influence of the Portuguese could effect this. Among foreigners the Chinese would listen to no others.

If Weddell was unconvinced by the father's explanations, none of which seemed to him to make much sense, he nevertheless

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appreciated that if he wished to see his men again alive he had better heed the warning. With self-control which in a man of his temper was an achievement he penned a humble answer to the Captain-General asking forgiveness, pleading the ignorance of a foreigner, and begging His Excellency to do him the favour of treating with the Chinese on the English behalf. He also asked that he be allowed to do some trade in Macao 'as compensation for the heavy costs of this voyage'.

Father de Reboredo returned to the city, and the following day Weddell was invited ashore to sign a trade agreement. The English captain's response was to refuse to leave his ships until two Portuguese of quality were first surrendered as hostages. By way of answer the Captain-General simply sent another envoy to repeat his invitation. When Weddell, with considerable misgiving, set out for the city, he found a civic reception organized for him. Guns fired salutes, the principal citizens met him on the quay, and a banquet was given at which the English dined off silver dishes and drank Portuguese wine from silver goblets to the accompaniment of 'indifferent good Musick of the voice, harpe and gitterne'. Within three days a Portuguese deputation left for Canton in an attempt to rescue the merchants, while Peter Mundy, established ashore in a fine rented house, carried out 'a limmitted trade'.

#### X: WEDDELL'S SUBSEQUENT HUMILITY AND DEPARTURE

In Canton, far from requiring the pleadings of any deputation sent to liberate them, the Englishmen, with the help of their friend the Commodore, had already been liberated and done some profitable trade. It appears as if, provided the English finished their business and left at once, the Marine Superintendent deemed it wise to turn a blind eye on the Commodore making some money just for once. He himself had other ideas, as became apparent the following year when he imposed on Macao the largest mass fine in the city's history.

The Portuguese rescue mission, who between fear of the Marine Superintendent and the expectations of their own Captain-General and Senate were in a cleft stick, were unable to 'protect' the English until the latter were under sail in the

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river, their junk laden and their trade complete. Keeping their own vessel close to them, the Portuguese waited till they were away from the city, when by yelling threats in Chinese to the English junk they scared the crew into lowering sail and allowing themselves to be towed downstream by the Portuguese craft.

Thus if the Portuguese mission was a failure it was made not to appear so. To the relief of John Weddell and in view of a large crowd of proud Portuguese spectators, the English entered Macao harbour in the wake of their liberators. Only when they were near enough to see three scowling English faces did Weddell and his men deduce that appearances did not tell the whole tale.

But even when Weddell heard of their success he was not disposed to alter his resolve, which was to complete what trade they could and depart. The document falsely interpreted by Norette had been correctly translated to him by the Jesuits. The uncompromising demand to leave the country, when associated with Norette's promises, the Commodore's assistance, and the querulous attitude of the Portuguese, made Weddell realize how little he understood of China.

Upon the orders of the mandarin he signed a formal submission stating that he and his men had disobeyed the laws of China, and that if they ever did so again they were prepared to submit themselves to whatever punishments the Chinese or the city of Macao might inflict. Considering the damage Weddell had done to Chinese lives and property this was very lenient treatment (for which the Portuguese later paid in terms of cash), but to Weddell it was a public humiliation, the more so as he was obliged to present the document with obeisances to the mandarin authorized to receive it, who entered Macao in a chair borne shoulder-high by two bearers, accompanied by the usual strident music and flags, and with a parasol carried over his head.

Like many men with highly combustible tempers, Weddell had become damp of spirit, like a fire on which water is thrown. Having expended his bombast he became sullen and unenterprising, anxious only to clear up the business and go.

But the tribulations of the voyage were not over. In November the Japan fleet returned in gloom and lamentation, bringing great numbers of Portuguese refugees fleeing from the Christian

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persecution which was then at its height in that country. Many of the refugees came to Weddell, begging him to carry them on westwards, their beseechings being so piteous that contrary to the Captain-General's wishes he gave berths to some of them. A day or so later Peter Mundy called at the Captain-General's residence from which, before Mundy was even up the front steps, Domingos da Camara burst forth in the vilest of tempers, raging at Mundy with foul language, asking him whether he thought he was in London or in the King of Spain's dominions. Too furious even to explain the reason for his anger, he told Mundy to leave Macao at once, and that if a single Englishman were found in the place in the morning he would be hanged. He then walked back into the residence, leaving Mundy still speechless on the steps.<sup>1</sup>

That night Mundy's trading house was surrounded by a crowd of the Captain-General's servants, armed, carrying flares, and evidently ordered to thrust the English out to the ships. Mundy and his colleagues kept their heads, telling their assailants they proposed to stay two more days, clear up all their obligations, and leave. With this the servants were persuaded to depart.

Two days later, on 27th December, exactly six months after their arrival, the English fleet sailed, having in Peter Mundy's words been expelled 'outt off the Citty and Country, even by Fire and sword as one May well say'.

The voyage was not a success—much of the capital was still uninvested when they left—and greater disasters lay ahead. With the decline in Weddell's initiative and self-confidence morale in the fleet sank into personal rivalries and bickering. By transshipping twice Peter Mundy managed to reach Dover. He was one of the few who did. At Achin, in northern Sumatra, the fleet separated, and thereafter all was lost. Robinson died on Madagascar; John Weddell and the Mountneys were last heard of at Cannanore in South India. Their ships never returned to England. It is presumed they were lost with all hands somewhere in the Arabian Sea.

<sup>1</sup> The Captain-General's motive here was to keep every able-bodied man in Macao. With the closing down of the Japan trade Macao would cease to be of use to the Chinese, and might shortly have to defend itself against them.



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### XI: CHINESE ASSESSMENT OF WEDDELL'S VOYAGE

Thus ended the first British trading voyage to China. Though commercially insignificant it is important due to the conclusions about the British which were drawn from it by Chinese officialdom, of which the most salient was that red barbarians were particularly dangerous, but that by threats they could be controlled. For this, in Chinese official documents, was the story—how a heavily armed English fleet had intruded into the Pearl River, how by stern threatening the English had been tamed, and how they submissively departed. The Chinese knew nothing of the fact that this submission was due to Weddell's change of mood. They only saw that their age-old methods of dealing with unruly barbarian tribes had succeeded and were justified. No government had at its disposal records more comprehensive than those of Imperial China. No country had more respect for precedent. It was the unchanging mandarin belief in the efficacy of threats, drawn from records and experiences such as this, that was ultimately to bring China to the humiliations of the nineteenth century.

In examining the Weddell voyage one sees a number of the elements which were to confuse matters in the future, how on the English side for every moderate, level-headed Mundy there was an irascible Weddell, a lack of uniformity which the Chinese were to find baffling; and how on the Chinese side a contradiction existed between the eagerness of local merchants to trade with foreigners and the official unwillingness of the mandarins to permit such trade—though once it started they were all too eager to milk it—a contradiction which the Westerners found equally baffling. Above all one sees the total void in understanding which lay between the Chinese and the foreigners, the mental no-man's-land which had somehow to be traversed if orderly international relations were to be set afoot. Basic to this was the fact that Europeans looked upon China as a foreign nation like any other, to be dealt with as other nations were dealt with, while to the Chinese their country was like none other, being unique and superior, the sole point and centre of human civilization, beyond the frontiers of which existed nothing that was either interesting or desirable. This mental

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no-man's-land would have been of less significance had the nations on either side of it known of its existence. The strangeness of the situation is that for a very long time neither side did, and by the time the Europeans did begin to realize how the Chinese saw themselves in relation to the rest of the world, and thus to glimpse an understanding of how the Chinese should be negotiated with, it was already too late to prevent China being prised open by force.

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