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Empire, finance and war

Edited by Robert Bickers and Jonathan J. Howlett

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Introduction

Britain and China

Robert Bickers and Jonathan J. Howlett

The history of the relationship between the United Kingdom and China has been intimate, brittle and, at times, bloody. But whereas it forms a strong strand in the founding myth of the People's Republic of China, and in its education of its young, it is a story largely forgotten in Britain. This is not necessarily unusual: many revolutionary nationalisms have prioritised remembering, as part of a state-building strategy, uncovering suppressed pasts, and commemorating the struggle against whatever form of *ancien* or colonial regime they replaced. Meanwhile, many states that have retreated from empire have found solace and energy in different forms of popular or official forgetting. However, the asymmetry in knowledge of, and understandings of, the history of the British relationship with China is striking. Most Britons, if asked, would probably acknowledge that there was some sort of a historic problem with opium, an 'opium war' of some sort, at some point, and that this was connected to the British possession until 1997 of Hong Kong. But otherwise China has little role in any British national imaginary, even of its imperial past. Most Chinese, however, would know about the British role in the forcible opening of Qing China to wider foreign trade, and the conflicts between the two states that ensued, in 1839–42, 1857–60 and in 1900. Across the actual landscape of Anglo-Chinese interaction are memorials and museums that detail Britain's contribution to China's century of 'National Humiliation', as it is now routinely articulated, at the hands of foreign imperialism.[1] That landscape still retains also some remnants of the buildings from which British power was deployed: consulates, municipal buildings, and so on, or against which it was used, such as the Yuanming yuan, the 'Old Summer palace' destroyed by British forces in 1860.[2] And in textbooks, university courses, and film and literature, the British story is generally close to the fore.

The consequences of such asymmetry are unclear, but agents of the Chinese state consistently deploy the detail of this history in their interaction with foreign partners, and on 29 November 2012, shortly after it took office at the 18th Party Congress, China's 'fifth-generation' leadership made a significant and symbolic visit to the National Museum of China, where this history is articulated across the permanent display galleries.[3] This would suggest that

British participants in the relationship would benefit from a better and clearer understanding of a history that is embedded at the heart of the performative politics of the People's Republic of China. On the whole, China's contemporary relationship with Japan is the bilateral link most strongly affected by the legacies of history, but there is latent potential for the recrudescence of the political use of Britain's historic record. After all, Chinese interlocutors used to talk about 'nothing else', as one former British diplomat with a China brief once remarked to one of the authors. Britain's relationship with China in the early 2010s has its own contemporary sources of frictions, but there are historic echoes to all of them, not least Hong Kong and Tibet.

China was also for some decades notable by its low profile in the academic literature on British imperial and colonial history. While there was always an active strand of work undertaken by diplomatic historians, which produced various useful volumes, the wider relationship between the British state and its agents, and the Qing state, its successors and its peoples, was relatively under-studied.[4] This partly stemmed from the generally minor role China seemed to play in British imperial history, but also resulted from practical questions, such as access to archives in China itself, and research and language skills. Historians of China outside the country shied away in the 1970s and afterwards from exploring questions of Sino-foreign interaction, which on some analyses, had too much dominated the field of modern Chinese history in earlier decades. Instead, they sought indigenous sources of change.[5] For their part, historians of empire and colonialism, unable to access Chinese language materials, and conscious of China's seemingly comparative unimportance in any understanding British political, strategic or economic considerations compared to other zones of imperial control, or influence, or political relationships, were largely content to work from an existing corpus of work, or make use of some notable new resources that became available in the 1970s, such as the correspondence of Sir Robert Hart with the London office of the Chinese Maritime Customs Service.[6] So China was largely ignored in the literature on British imperial history.

This situation had comprehensively changed by 2011, when a large number of scholars convened in Bristol for what was still the first conference in some years dedicated solely to discussion of the history of British–Chinese relations. The chapters collected in this volume form a representative sample of the range of new work that has been undertaken over the last ten to fifteen years, and is notable for being based in a variety of newly accessible sources, and for placing the British encounter with China in new contexts: the wider British world of empire and settlement, global migration history, the local histories of settler expansion and ambition, and Chinese state-building and its enemies. What emerges from the new scholarship is a connected history of the British Empire and Chinese peoples, and of Chinese states and those degrading their sovereignty. The broader context included a variety of work influenced by new trends in the social and cultural history of colonialism and imperialism, and a turn in the study of foreign relations more generally

towards exploring non-state actors and their influence. Moreover, the study of the history of China's foreign relations was reinvigorated, after some years of neglect, not least by William C. Kirby's contention that 'nothing mattered more', in republican Chinese history.[7] These various trends have seen studies of the influence and lives in China of foreign ideas, goods, residents, organisations and practices re-enter the scholarly mainstream from which they were all but driven, by narrow, or at least overly cautious, understandings of what made a 'China centred history'.

Significant improvements in access to archives have also shaped the contours of this new work. As recently as 1994 most of the archival sources that have driven much recent work were closed, or not widely known to have survived into the present. Large collections of materials relating to aspects of China's foreign relations (broadly conceived) were opened from that point onwards at Shanghai's Municipal Archives, and increasingly at those in other cities, at the First Historical Archives in Beijing, and at the Second Historical Archives of China in Nanjing. In the 2000s the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs started to open post-1949 materials. Some significant British state or private company records were belatedly repatriated from China, although other private archives remain there, or were transferred to the UK from Hong Kong (Hongkong and Shanghai Banking Corporation; HSBC), or into public archives for the first time (China Inland Mission).[8] Other materials held in the UK were for the first time properly catalogued (Jardine, Matheson & Co. records). The archives of the Chinese Legation in London were transferred to the Institute of Modern History Archives at Academia Sinica in the early 2010s. Archival access in China has certainly not been immune from changing political developments, and at the time of writing some material is now no longer open, but a far wider body of source materials than ever before is now available internationally, and digitisation of treaty port newspapers such as the *North China Herald* and the Hong Kong press, as well as the mass digitisation of books and journals, have greatly added to the resources now available, or more easily available, to scholars. Much remains closed, and much remains hidden within what is open. We can now explore a far wider range of topics, and at a greater depth than ever before, although as significant areas remain closed, scholars need to guard against the ways in which this might actually shape the history that is written. A history shorn of the politics and actions of the central state, which might emerge, is a politically dangerous history, and hardly an academically acceptable one.

This is not to say that we did not already have a large body of relevant work, but it is clear that it was partial, and shied away from political history in particular. Wang Gungwu's *Anglo-Chinese Encounters since 1800* (2003) provides a good survey of the types of work that had been undertaken.[9] But this barely touches on work published in the 1990s, and since then strong bodies of new research have revisited many of the key moments of Anglo-Chinese antagonism, economic relations, the history of Hong Kong, of the British role in the Chinese treaty ports, and in the Maritime Customs Service, and of

the permeation of British and wider Anglophone culture with Chinese influences.[10] The broader context has also included scholarship exploring more broadly the shape and legacies of colonialism in China, as well as a variety of case studies.[11] As a result we now know much more about Chinese immigration into the British world, and opposition to it, about formal diplomatic relations, and less formal political interactions, and about China's at times central role in British strategic thinking in the late Victorian and early Edwardian era.[12] On maps of the British Empire, it is Africa and South Asia that stand out visually, aside from the settler Dominions, as red-inked areas of control. This is also the case in popular imaginings of empire. The interconnections between China and imperial Britain were just as strong, however, and much of the work that has been done since the 1990s has been successfully retrieving this largely hidden history of Anglo-Chinese encounters.

It might be useful to think about the nature and depth of this connectedness in terms of a specific example, and the city of Bristol itself provides one that is telling, not because it is exceptional, which it is not, but because it is representatively ordinary. The history of British relations with China is revealed through a set of examples, which show that a close reading of a city's built environment, its business history, the lives of its residents, and its cultural and religious history, can all show a Chinese strand. China, broadly conceived, was embedded in the British experience.

Tracing China in Bristol

The British enterprise in China was in origin, and in the main, rooted in the tea trade, and this extended directly to Bristol. In the early years after the opening of the Chinese treaty ports through the 1842 Treaty of Nanjing, some tea clippers sailed directly from China to Bristol, building on an earlier occasional trade, and an abortive attempt to establish a 'Bristol Tea Company', 'Trading to and from China', as its prospectus had it, in 1835.[13] Scottish tea trader William Melrose, then based in Canton, estimated in 1849 that Bristol could drink a single ship's cargo of tea per annum, and the 'princely hong', Jardine, Matheson and Co., seemed to him to have cornered that trade.[14] Others competed for it: the Shanghai firm of Gilman, Bowman and Co., for example, despatched the *Menzies*, which left the city in early November 1852, with 512,000 lbs of tea and arrived in Bristol by 9 April 1853. Not all ships made it: the *John Bowline* set off from Fuzhou for Bristol in January 1855 with 440,000 lbs, but foundered on the Pratas shoals. The *New Margaret* sailed safely in December the same year, though, with 490,000 lbs for Bristol and the south-west's tea drinkers (as well as cases of lacquerware, porcelain, 'pictures', and other 'Chinese curiosities').[15] These direct connections do not seem to have outlasted the mid-1860s. Bristol's trade was mainly focused elsewhere, but the direct links with China are telling of the ways in which British traders tested markets. The wider story, the fact that Bristolians, and the British more widely, daily consumed tea grown and prepared in China, suggests also the

markedly physiological intimacy that underpinned Anglo-Chinese relations. The market for Chinese green tea declined rapidly in the later nineteenth century, and was largely supplanted by aggressively marketed Indian-grown black teas, but a new export market in the twentieth century delivered new Chinese products into British stomachs: dried and liquid eggs.[16] Firms exporting Chinese processed eggs provided a significant proportion of British imports of egg products, often for use in cheaper bakery products. So cheap, in fact, and so reliant on stabilising additives that were later banned, that public health concerns were raised about them, as they were raised about Chinese green tea (and these were publicised by its competitors).[17] Still, many Bristolians would have gone to work daily on a Chinese egg.

Conversely, increasing numbers of Chinese consumers in the twentieth century purchased products rooted originally in a strong Bristol connection: cigarettes. As the Chinese minister to Britain, Luo Fenglu, declared in January 1900, when visiting Bristol, the Chinese, 'the greatest smoking nation in the world', should 'limit their smoking to the productions of a factory like that of Messrs Wills'.[18] In time, China got something of what the diplomat wished for. The largest Bristol-based enterprise involved in the Chinese economy was Imperial Tobacco, a firm established in 1901 by a group of British companies led by Bristol-headquartered W. D. & H. O. Wills (whose Bedminister factory Luo inspected), as a defensive measure in the face of an aggressive move into British domestic and overseas markets by the American Tobacco Company (ATC). A truce saw the two combines establishing British American Tobacco (BAT) in late 1902. Imperial Tobacco had already invested in a plant in China, outmanoeuvring ATC to purchase a factory at Shanghai in the summer of 1902, and this was taken over by the new company, which then rapidly expanded and grew its business in China. By the 1930s, BAT was China's single biggest taxpayer.[19] Imperial Tobacco was from the start a minority shareholder in BAT, in relation to ATC, but when the American combine was broken up as a result of US anti-trust legislation, its influence grew and the two companies developed a close working relationship.[20]

Competition between Imperial Tobacco and ATC left its mark on Bristol's built environment, in the shape of three large bonded tobacco warehouses, constructed in a bid to seize some of the trade captured by the American firm. The British relationship with China also left its own direct legacies, principally Tyntesfield House (which is now owned by the National Trust) and its extensive estate just southwest of the city. This was bought by William Gibbs (1790–1875) in 1843, and substantially rebuilt in the 1860s. The Gibbs family had generated its fortune from importing guano from Chile and Peru as a fertiliser. From 1849 to 1862 the family owned firm held the monopoly for exports from Peru, and continued to dominate the trade thereafter. The guano was mostly 'mined' by indentured Chinese labourers, some 92,000 of whom were shipped from China between 1847 and 1874, an estimated 10 per cent dying en route.[21] The harshness of the South American labour regimes that ultimately underpinned the reshaping of part of Bristol's surrounding

landscape has long been noted, and it might be noted that the city's economy had historically been rooted in the trans-Atlantic slave trade. Trade in, and built on, unfree labour continued to be a factor in the city's economy.[22] The scandals that grew out of the massive emigration of free and unfree labour from China were responsible for drawing the Qing state into the developing world system of overseas diplomatic and consular representation.[23] The rapid expansion of migration itself was a direct result of the new treaty system engineered by the British, and led to the firm consolidation of the existing pattern of Chinese diaspora, and the creation of new sites of Chinese settlement across the Americas, and into the southern hemisphere. So there is a Chinese story behind Bristol's most prominent stately home, as there is in patterns of land ownership in parts of the Scottish highlands and islands.[24]

On the last day of his visit to Bristol in 1900 Minister Luo began by inspecting the Muller Orphanage in the north of the city, a large enterprise, founded in 1836 by a German immigrant named George Müller (1805–98), which by 1900 housed some 1,500 children. As Luo entered he found in the reception room a portrait of Müller himself, facing a Chinese inscription that read 'Ask, then certainly obtain', reportedly 'written by a missionary in the East'. He was then presented with a Chinese-language translation of the Bible.[25] The text on display was an articulation of the 'Non-solicitation' practice pioneered by Müller, which had a direct impact on the policy and practice of what became the single largest Protestant missionary society working in China, the China Inland Mission (CIM). Müller himself was a strong supporter of James Hudson Taylor, who established the CIM in 1866, when he brought to China a first large party of evangelists. The CIM was a 'faith mission', and relied on prayer to secure financial support, rather than the extensive and increasingly sophisticated fund-raising programmes developed by other Protestant societies. This principle was directly derived from Müller's practice with the orphanages. In fact, in its earliest years, which were sometimes financially lean, the CIM relied entirely on Müller's fund-raising to bring it resources.[26] Bristol contacts and ideas had a profound and direct impact on the shaping of the foreign Christian missionary enterprise in China.

Bristol's public life was at least as infused with the publicity activities of mission societies and their supporters as other British towns and cities, perhaps more so. The 'city was permeated with missionary zeal' announced the Mayor to the annual meeting of the London Missionary Society (LMS) support body, the Bristol Missionary Society in September 1899. In the twelve months leading up to Minister Luo's visit, the city had seen meetings of the following: the Bristol Auxiliary of the Religious Tract Society, including a talk from the Revd George Owen, twenty-two years a missionary in Peking; the Bristol Auxiliary of the Baptist Missionary Society; Church Missionary Society centenary meetings; an Annual Circuit Demonstration at the Methodist Zion Chapel in Kingswood addressed by Alice Swallow, who had worked with her husband in Ningbo since 1875; a talk with lantern slides by the Revd Frank Norris, later the Anglican Bishop of North China, about

the work of the North China Mission; and a farewell service for Miss Edith Bartlett, twenty-seven-year-old daughter of a local factory owner, who left to work for the LMS in north China. She would be back in the city earlier than expected, giving talks about her escape from the Boxer uprising in December 1900, but would later return to China. This was entirely an unexceptional year.[27] The city delivered funds, audiences for talks, and recruits. China could be heard about and seen on screens, and Chinese objects were used in displays and presentations. This strong missionary culture also shaped the city's strong engagement with, and significant contributions to, the British United Aid to China campaign, launched in 1942 to raise funds for wartime relief and educational initiatives.

Like Edith Bartlett, tens of thousands of Britons lived in or visited China between the 1830s and the early 1950s. Some 5,500 men served in the Chinese Maritime Customs at some point in the period 1854–1950; over 2,000 alone served as policemen in Shanghai between 1854 and 1943; the turnover in the foreign population in Hong Kong was estimated to be almost complete every five years as late as 1921, when the number of British residents stood at nearly 8,000. The figures captured in any one census across British communities in China are an unreliable guide to the total number of Britons who had direct experience of visiting China.[28] Those born or educated in Bristol contributed to this process, and the city also served as a place to which treaty port residents retired or sent their children to be educated. The 1911 census records twenty-one Bristol residents as having been born in China: in Hong Kong, Shanghai, Chefoo (Yantai), Ningbo, and Hankou. Two, only, were Chinese; for unlike Liverpool, Cardiff or London, the focus of the port's shipping links precluded the growth of any larger Chinese population. 'Fee Lee' and a younger man, possibly his son, ran a laundry in a northern suburb. Aside from the Lees, the China-born who were living in Bristol in 1911 came from families involved in the missionary enterprise, the London Missionary Society, the North China and Shantung Mission, and the Baptist Missionary Society, policing in Hong Kong, and the Chinese Maritime Customs. There was the son of a former church organist and music teacher at Shanghai; the daughter of a master mariner; and Kenneth Morison Bourne, the son of the assistant judge at the British Supreme Court at Shanghai. After studying at Clifton College in Bristol, Bourne would go on to join and later lead the Shanghai Municipal Police.[29]

The city's schools despatched many boys into the military and overseas services. Alfred Hippisley, who joined the Maritime Customs in 1867, was educated at Bristol Grammar School. At one point considered as a successor to Sir Robert Hart, his influence on the development of US Secretary of State John Hay's 'Open door' notes in late 1899 was crucial.[30] At least fourteen boys educated at Clifton College between its establishment in 1862 and 1889 were known to have gone to China: seven in business, two for missionary work (including a later director of the CIM), three with the Army, and two with the Royal Navy.[31] At least one of these already had a strong

China connection: Charles Holliday's father had been trading in China since 1835, and the family would maintain a trading presence in Shanghai until well into the twentieth century.[32] A less privileged education would have been experienced by John Sullivan, who joined the Shanghai Municipal Police (SMP) in 1907 as a Constable. A docker's son, he spent twenty years working in Shanghai. The same would go for the fourteen serving Bristol policemen recruited en masse by the Hong Kong Police in 1882, to the consternation of the city's Watch Committee.[33] Bristol University would provide a later chief of the MI6 bureau in Shanghai, Harry Steptoe, and a graduate (and, later, a lecturer) Francis Clifford Jones, who secured a PhD from Harvard, spent some time working in Shanghai, and later published a report for the Royal Institute of International Affairs on *Shanghai and Tientsin: with Special Reference to Foreign Interests* (1940). As he did so Shanghai's British Consul General in 1940 was Anthony Hastings George, son of a Bristol brewing magnate.

Such data is impressionistic, and many British towns and regions could generate similar lists, some of which were representative of specific local connections or migration and employment cultures. Liverpool had strong shipping connections, through Holt's Blue Funnel Line, and saw the growth of a community of immigrant Chinese seafarers. Ulster family and social connections opened up channels for families to secure nominations to the Chinese Maritime Customs from Sir Robert Hart.[34] Marine, engineering, and medical cultures sent many Scots to China, as elsewhere. For its part, Bristol's vibrant non-conformist religious traditions would have served to deliver more than its share of the British missionary presence.[35] Church walls across the British Isles hold memorials to officers killed in the China wars. Most Royal Naval personnel spent some time on the China Station. (Where is the absent father of John Walker, narrator of Arthur Ransome's bestselling children's book *Swallows and Amazons* (1930)? Commander Walker is, of course, out in China.) The point to be drawn is that the story of the British impact on China, and its reverse, is also a story of individual careers and choices, and it is a local British history, as well as a national history.

It is also a history of things. The Bristol Museum and Art Gallery holds an internationally important collection of Chinese glass, acquired in 1950, and developed by Henry Robert Burrows Abbey (1872–1949). Objects as well as people circulated and, like people, did not always do so freely. There was no shortage of opportunities for Britons in China, or using agents there, to purchase Chinese decorative or fine art items. However, British collections of Chinese fine art, ceramics, books and other items are routinely compromised by items within their holdings that were originally looted, notably during the 1860 Anglo-French assault on north China and the sacking and destruction of the Yuanming yuan, and during the 1900 Boxer War.[36] Most made their way into British collections indirectly as they emerged from private hands and started to circulate through auction sales. It is unlikely that the Burrows Abbey Collection is free of such taint, and the same would apply to the museum's Ferdinand Schiller Collection of Chinese jades, and ceramics.[37] The

politics of loot have become more prominent in the early twenty-first century, in the wake of several assertive moves by Chinese state and non-state actors to 'recover' significant items. While the actual origins of some of the Bristol holdings might be obscured by the trajectories through public and private sales, the label on the large temple bell that sits in the museum's central atrium broadcasts its origins as plunder quite overtly. It was brought on board the Royal Navy's HMS *Encounter* when the ship's company was 'landed for recreation' on 28 July 1862, near Cixi in Zhejiang province. Dated to 1738, the bell was 'brought from the ruins of a Buddhist Temple at Tse-kee in China which had been burnt by the Taipings', and was donated by *Encounter*'s Captain, Roderick Dew, to his service patron Admiral Lord Fitzhardinge. As well as reminding us of the circulation of loot, the bell might also remind us of the history of armed intervention by British 'men on the spot' in China: Dew had, without any authorisation or justification, launched an attack on Taiping-held Ningbo, just ten miles from Cixi, in May 1862.[38]

This survey demonstrates no particularly important role for the city of Bristol and its residents in the story of Anglo-Chinese interactions. The fact that it was permeated with China connections of various kinds, however, makes it an exemplar of the routine intertwining of British and Chinese experiences, the legacies of which can be identified in any British city or town. Recent scholarship has also done much to shape our understandings of how far in other ways Chinese themes or objects permeated British life: the fashion for bobbed hair in the early 1920s, the striking impact of Sax Rohmer's 'Fu Manchu' fictions, or Thomas Burke's Chinatown tales on popular culture, the imaginative grip of Maoism, and the rise of the Chinese restaurant and take-away. The people of Bristol ate and drank Chinese products, wore Chinese silks or Chinese-influenced fashions, and read, watched, and listened to cultural products that communicated China in various ways and for various purposes. They knew people who had been to China, or they turned out for a lecture at the Zion Hall to hear one speak. They pitched their pennies and shillings into collections for Chinese orphans, the London Missionary Society, and for refugee relief during the war against Japan. They invested in Chinese railway bonds (but not in the Bristol Tea Company). They looked at Chinese objects in the occasional missionary exhibitions the societies held, and in the City Museum. China had a role in their lives and consciousness, and in their families and local economies. There is still much to learn about the local history of Britain's relations with China, but the process starts by accepting that there is one. It is also important to note that it is not simply an elite history, or one restricted to small sectoral interests.[39] Popular culture and the experience of non-elite Britons were just as influenced and shaped by this wide range of connections and interconnections with China as were the elites whose voices and experiences are still more often heard.

The local histories of China's foreign relations in China itself, and across the diasporic worlds of the Chinese, are now better understood than they were, and have received a great deal of attention recently from scholars in

China, and overseas. There is also still much to learn there, but whereas before the 1990s research on the foreign presence in China was presented through a framework entirely shaped by ideological considerations, newer scholarship has come increasingly to normalise foreign actors and interests within the tremendous new body of local history generated since then. Moreover, there has been a systematic drive to research foreign communities and interests directly, partly shaped by a move to re-present China's modern history to serve contemporary policy: the landscape of imperialism has in many areas been reconfigured to a very great extent as a 'cosmopolitan' one, presaging China's twenty-first century globalisation. Tianjin's 'Italian scenic district' is one case in point: the former concession has been restored as a tourist site, and with a view to enhancing Sino-Italian trade relations. (In a surreal twist a replica of a Bristol church was completed in 2006 in 'Thames Town', an ersatz, replica English village constructed in Songjiang.)[40] This new focus within Chinese scholarship on the history of foreign communities there certainly also serves the interests of the tourist and heritage industries, but in many cases is, nonetheless, undertaken by local and urban historians seeking to understand the growth, development, and experiences of their localities.[41] This work sits alongside the patriotic education campaign, and such manifestations of that as the 'Road to Rejuvenation' exhibition at the National Museum of China. Ultimately the new scholarship is also framed in the same way, but this is far less done far explicitly than it was in even the recent past.

Empire, finance and war

The chapters in this volume offer a range of new insights into some core areas in which we are gaining these new archival-driven understandings of the British relationship with China: the roots of the treaty system, and its dismantling over a century later, British interventions in civil war, in Chinese national state finances and in the country's economic development. Two chapters address and contextualise the British role in the migration of Chinese to work or live overseas. Most of the chapters aim to decentralise and destabilise any easy notion of a simple bilateral relationship. The 'British Empire' was a coalition of interests, and a network of centres of power, which included Whitehall, Dominions' governments, the British Indian state, Crown colony governments, as well as the semi-autonomous statelets at Shanghai and elsewhere, run by Britons and their allies, who conformed with varying degrees of obedience over time to the directives of British state agents. Whitehall itself hardly spoke always with one voice, and while the British diplomatic mission in Peking (and later in Nanjing) formally exercised and represented the British state in China, other departments of state or agencies had their own representatives on the ground.

The first two chapters in this volume reappraise Sino-British interactions in moments of conflict in the nineteenth century. John M. Carroll's chapter on pre-Opium War Canton moves past simplistic characterisations of British