

# Enemy at the gate Chinese style

## British occupation of Macao, 1808

### *Dramatis personae*

#### On the British side:

- John William Roberts, President of the Select Committee, English East India Company factory in Guangzhou, whom the Chinese called the *taipan* (literally “number one manager”)
- Rear-Admiral William O’Brien Drury, then in command of the Royal Navy in the Indian Ocean
- Padre Roderigo da Madre de Dios, a Portuguese priest living in Macao, who had been won over to act as interpreter for Drury

#### On the Chinese side:

- Emperor Jiaqing
- Wu Xiongguang, *Zongdu* (literally “overall in charge”, usually translated as “Viceroy”) of Guangdong and Guangxi
- Bailing, Wu Xiongguang’s successor after Wu’s dismissal

Before I begin the story I must confess that “enemy at the gate” is a term I use to attract present-day readers. It is not an accurate description of how the Chinese felt when the event took place. Broadly speaking, the notion of “enemy at the gate” only dawned on the Chinese people, both government and populace, in 1884, when they saw Fuzhou Shipyard attacked by the French. Before 1884, Western aggression was a problem for the provincial officials to solve. Not even the two Opium Wars were taken seriously enough by the various provincial officials. Had Commissioner Lin Zexu treated Captain Charles Elliot as an “enemy at the gate” in 1839 the course of the First Opium War might have panned out differently.

Now to the story, which happened in Guangdong in 1808. Britain was at war with Napoleonic France. Portugal was in theory Britain’s ally, but the Portuguese in Macao had never been on friendly terms with the staff of the English East India Company (EIC) in Guangzhou (old-style romanisation “Canton”). In their rivalry for the Chinese government’s favourable treatment the Portuguese in Macao had one advantage over the English, namely they had compatriots working in the Qing court in Beijing, thus they could speak ill of the English to the emperor whenever they had the chance to do so.

The EIC staff in Guangzhou, on the other hand, had always envied the Portuguese for their possession of Macao. The EIC ships usually arrived in Guangdong waters between June and August. The supercargoes (men who did buying and selling) left their ships and moved into the factory. The word “factory” is a 17th-century legacy, which merely means “premises”, and has nothing to do with “manufacture”. English and Indian goods were unpacked in the factory and then consigned to the Chinese merchants (called hong-merchants), and Chinese tea and other commodities began to arrive. By December all Chinese goods would have been transferred to the ships moored at

Huangpu (old-style romanisation “Whampoa”). Once all EIC ships had set sail the supercargoes were required by Chinese law to leave Guangzhou, theoretically to go home, but in actuality they just went to Macao, which is situated at the entrance of the Pearl River, about 300 *li* (or 150 kilometres) from Guangzhou. In Macao they rented accommodation from the Portuguese.



Fig. 1 Present-day map showing Macao at the entrance of the Pearl River, 150 km from Guangzhou City. Hong Kong was not yet ceded to the British in 1808. © Google Maps

In 1808 the EIC’s volume of trade in China had increased fifteen times as compared to its humble beginning one century earlier. There was only one EIC ship in Guangdong in 1708, whereas in 1808 there were fifteen. One can imagine how the EIC Guangzhou staff wished they could have a little enclave on Chinese soil for their own use, so that such annual migration could be avoided. Lord George Macartney actually asked Emperor Qianlong for such a favour in 1793, but was refused. The war with France gave them an excellent excuse to try to take Macao by force.

The man sitting on the Chinese throne at that time was Emperor Jiaqing. He was not a capable ruler, and soon insurrections broke out in the western provinces

Guizhou and Sichuan, as well as in the central provinces Shaanxi and Hubei. Guangdong province itself was plagued by pirates. In 1800 the Guangdong Zongdu (literally “overall in charge”, usually translated as “Viceroy”) reported to the Emperor that a pirate fleet could be as large as consisting of 60-70 junks, whereas the entire Guangdong naval force only had a total of 80 junks at its disposal. Thus the Zongdu asked for permission to build 70 new junks, the cost of which was estimated at 216,000 taels (one tael = 6 shillings 8 pence).

All expenditure in a province was strictly regulated by the Ministry of Revenue in Beijing. When a provincial official wanted to incur any out-of-the-ordinary expense he must specify in his request where would the money come from. In the Guangdong case the Zongdu had asked to use the surplus of the Guangdong Maritime Customs. But the Emperor did not want to spend that much money on war junks, so he allowed only 80,000 taels, an amount sufficient to build 28 new junks.

That was the plight of Guangdong province under Emperor Jiaqing. The province earned nearly one million taels each year in customs duties, that income deriving entirely from the toil of the mercantile sector. Yet 80 percent of that money went to the central government in Beijing. The local government was not allowed to spend its own hard-earned money to protect its inhabitants from the pirates.

Since the Guangdong Zongdu had no success in obtaining permission to build more war junks in 1800 his successors made no more attempts to strengthen the naval force. As a result the pirates became stronger and more audacious. In March 1808 the recently-arrived Zongdu Wu Xionggang made a renewed effort to build war junks, and he was wise enough to say that the money would come from the salt merchants and the hong-merchants. His request was approved. But before construction work could begin the Zongdu had to deal with the British soldiers who had landed in Macao.

British warships had been lurking outside the Pearl River for years. The Guangdong authorities were too busy fighting the pirates and other criminals, and had not the energy to tell them to go away, choosing to believe that they were there to convoy



Fig. 2 Model of the warship *Impregnable*, 100 guns. The warships commanded by Admiral Drury would be similar to this. © National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, ID: SLR0610

the merchant ships, which had indeed been the case until 1808. The landing of British troops in Macao must have taken the Zhongdu by surprise.

The person who commanded the operation was Rear-Admiral William O'Brien Drury, who was then in charge of the British Royal Navy in the Indian Ocean. The person who repeatedly reassured Drury that no resistance would be forthcoming from the Guangdong officials was John William Roberts, the President of the Select Committee of the EIC in Guangzhou, whom the Chinese called the *taipan* (literally "number one manager"). Roberts later admitted that "... We determined on the troops being landed, and were sanguine in our expectations that after a time the Chinese would become reconciled to the measure".

Accordingly, 300 men were landed in Macao on September 21st. Drury then presented the case to the Zongdu as a *fait accompli*, with the following letter:

France has taken possession of the West Ocean Kingdom [meaning Portugal], causing their king and his family to flee to Brazil in America. Our [meaning English] king has given him help ... France is a greedy and venomous country, not satisfied with the many territories they had already seized they continued waging war in a great many places ... England has been an ally of the West Ocean Kingdom for many years, therefore the English king has sent many warships to protect the Indian ports and Macao ... The West Ocean people [meaning the Portuguese] in Macao are feeble, so we have sent some soldiers to help them. We have no intention of taking away their trade. We shall obey the laws of the Celestial Empire and we dare not give trouble. Also we have heard that recently the pirates are rampant, so we offer our warships for the use of the Celestial Empire.

The letter came with a Chinese translation. Although the Portuguese in Macao were mostly hostile to the British in Guangzhou there was one exception. A Portuguese priest, Padre Roderigo, had been won over to work for the British.

But Roberts was mistaken in thinking that the Zhongdu would "become reconciled to the measure after a time". No matter how timid or cowardly the Guangdong officials might have appeared to Roberts the Zongdu was bound by his duties to report the incident to the Emperor. Upon receipt of the Zongdu's memorial on November 14th Emperor Jiaqing reprimanded the Guangdong official for "weak behaviour", and told him to immediately chase the English soldiers away.

The distance between Guangzhou and Beijing was about 7,500 *li* (or 3,750 kilometres), and a despatch from Guangzhou via the standard postal-relay system took about 20 days to reach Beijing. Emperor Jiaqing was an impatient man. He sent his decree by 500-*li* express, which shortened the transit time to 14 days. By the time the Zongdu read the Emperor's decree - on November 28th - the number of British soldiers in Macao had increased to more than 700.

The Zongdu Wu Xiongguang seemed to be a man of sound judgment. Any less intelligent Chinese official would have hastily taken military actions in obedience to the Emperor's order. It is not clear if Wu had ever seen an English warship - he was

based in Guangzhou, and Macao was 150 kilometres away. But he knew that the Chinese naval force was in a woeful state. He tried to tell the Emperor in a roundabout way that many war junks had been damaged during engagements with the pirates, and that the commander of the naval force had injured his leg. Attempts to eject the English troops by force, whether by land or by sea, might not produce the desired result. In order that the Emperor could understand the geographical particulars of Macao he sent him a map.



Fig. 3 Chinese map drawn in 1808, showing Macao (the right half) and the narrow strip of land connecting it to the Xiangshan District (the left half). Xiangshan has changed its name to "Zhongshan" after 1912, and is shown as Zhongshan in the Google map above. © National Museum of China

Instead of facing the English navy Wu Xiongguang put pressure on the EIC, telling the EIC chief that no English merchant ships would be allowed to unload their cargoes unless all English soldiers quitted Macao. The captains of the merchant ships, who had adopted a “bystander” attitude up to that moment, began to feel uneasy. On December 3rd they wrote to Roberts, President of the Select Committee:

... As the Chinese government have unexpectedly evinced every disposition to continue their first system of stopping the trade and systematically opposing every measure heretofore adopted and now following them up by warlike preparations which may finally lead to hostilities, place us in a most critical situation and involve us in a serious war and totally exclude all further amicable negotiations, we therefore beg leave now to say that if any pacific overture could be offered to the Chinese government consistent with the British character it might lead to a speedy and amicable adjustment of the present difficulties.

Roberts did not want to give up that easily, but now he was without an ally. Drury, on the other hand, could see that the tactic of intimidation had not succeeded, and he was in no position to make war with China. Some discussions must have taken place between Roberts and Drury after December 3rd, details of which are not written down in the EIC records. The English troops started quitting Macao on December 15th, and on the 21st Wu Xiongguang was able to report to the Emperor that all English soldiers were gone.

The Drury incident was the first case where China came face to face with Western aggression. Wu Xiongguang had dealt with the threat admirably well, and Drury had to withdraw. Wu had successfully fended off the enemy at the gate, but unfortunately he had also incurred the displeasure of his own master. Emperor Jiaqing wanted Wu to use military force, but Wu had acted differently.

Jiaqing's misfortune was that he was the successor to a strong monarch. Deep down in his heart he believed the state officials never held him in as much awe as they did to his father Qianlong. As a result he demanded all state officials to follow his orders to the letter, and would consider it an affront to his authority when someone deviated even slightly from the instructions he was given. Such a temperament Jiaqing revealed in one of his decrees to Wu Xiongguang. While reprimanding the Zongdu for his numerous errors the Emperor said:

... If this had happened in Qianlong times would you have dared to behave like this?

What Jiaqing meant was that Wu had always obeyed Qianlong, but now he dared disobey his present master.

Jiaqing also felt that the English did not show him as much deference as they showed his father. In 1793 they came to China as "tribute envoys", but now they came in warships to "protect" Macao, implying that the Celestial Empire could not defend her own territory. Wu Xiongguang claimed that "the problem has been solved without recourse to military actions", but it was military actions that the Emperor wanted. Jiaqing wanted to see the English troops beaten by the Chinese troops, so that he could claim a Chinese victory over the English. When the enemy retreated not out of awe, but out of a concern for his fellow countrymen's commercial interest, Jiaqing saw no glory in that outcome.

Wu Xiongguang was dismissed and banished to Yili. Practically all the Guangdong officials, both civil and military, were punished one way or another. But Wu's banishment had a far-reaching effect on how the provinces were governed in the 19th century. The provincial officials, who knew very little about the art of government to begin with, simply followed the Emperor's instructions without using their brains. Or they resorted to flattery, telling the Emperor only the things he wanted to hear, and hiding all the bad news. Seeing that Wu Xiongguang had fallen from grace his successor Bailing immediately scrapped Wu's plan to build a more robust type of war junks. One of the reasons Bailing gave for scrapping Wu's plan was truly laughable. The type of junks proposed by Wu was built of a heavier wood, Bailing said. The oarsmen were not accustomed to heavy junks and might not be

able to perform effectually. But Emperor Jiaqing did not see the stupidity of Bailing's line of reasoning, and for the next three decades no Guangdong officials made any more attempt to improve the war junks.

Ten years later, in 1818, Emperor Jiaqing finally realised that the Chinese military was no match for the English. Early that year the Guangdong Zongdu Ruan Yuan wrote him a memorial saying that the English were a greedy people. If the Guangdong government treated them nicely it would only incite their contempt. On Ruan's memorial the Emperor annotated: "You should exercise caution. Our troops are not very strong".

By 1818 a great many state officials, not just those in Guangdong, saw the English as a threat, but had not the means to expel them. The censors in Beijing denounced the Guangdong officials as incompetent or corrupt, allowing the English to run wild. The Guangdong officials had relied on the customs duties collected from the English for too long, and even if they were willing to relinquish that revenue they knew they could not expel the English by force. So they buried their heads in the sand, secretly praying that no disasters would happen during their tenure. Ruan Yuan was one of the lucky Zongdus. During his tenure of eight and a half years, from 1818 to 1826, the English made no big trouble in Guangdong. His successor Li Hongbin was less fortunate. How he dealt with the enemy at the gate will be our next story.