

# Enemy at the gate Chinese style

## A foreign woman in Guangzhou, 1830

### *Dramatis personae*

#### On the British side:

- William Baynes, Acting President of the Select Committee, English East India Company factory in Guangzhou, whom the Chinese called the *taipan* (literally “number one manager”)
- Goqua, a hong-merchant, and his uncle Xie Wu who helped EIC employees in various ways

#### On the Chinese side:

- Emperor Daoguang
- Li Hongbin, Zongdu (literally “overall in charge”, usually translated as “Viceroy”) of Guangdong and Guangxi
- Qingbao, General of Guangzhou (Head of the military in Guangdong)
- Zhongxiang, Hoppo (Superintendent) of Guangdong Maritime Customs

Daoguang inherited the Chinese throne in September 1820. Ruan Yuan, who had served as Zongdu of Guangdong and Guangxi under the late emperor Jiaqing, remained in his post until 1826. The foreign trade was thriving. The revenue of the Guangdong Maritime Customs for the fiscal year ending November 1821 was 1.4 million taels (= approximately £470,000). But life in the three places where foreigners resided, namely Guangzhou (old-style romanisation “Canton”), Huangpu (old-style romanisation “Whampoa”) and Macao, was not a harmonious one. The cause of discontent was opium.

The employees of the English East India Company (EIC) were disgruntled because they were not allowed to trade in opium. In 1820 the Company’s monopoly in China had only another 14 years to run. For 200 years the supercargoes (employees who did buying and selling) had tried very hard to induce the Chinese people to buy English or Indian products, so that the Company did not have to pay for the Chinese products with silver dollars. But their efforts had had only limited success. Now, finally, there was a commodity that the Chinese, rich and poor alike, were willing to buy, yet the Company would not sell it because it was illegal. Private traders operating under licence from the Company, on the other hand, were given a free hand to trade in that prohibited commodity.

The Guangdong Zongdu was angry with the foreigners because they flouted the Chinese law. In 1821 three country ships (ships originating from India, not England) bringing opium into Guangzhou were caught. Although the Zongdu knew the difference between a country ship and a Company ship, he wanted all foreign ships entering Huangpu to sign a bond declaring there was no opium on board. The President of the Select Committee, for a number of reasons, refused to comply.

The Hoppo of the Guangdong Maritime Customs was not happy because firstly opium being a contraband did not bring in customs duties, and secondly every time a censor in Beijing reported the woes of the country to the emperor, such as the inflow of opium and the outflow of Chinese silver, the Hoppo would receive a good reprimand from the emperor.

The only government people who benefitted from the opium trade were the military men who patrolled the Guangdong waters to catch smugglers or criminals, as both foreign ships and native junks with opium on board would bribe them to turn a blind eye. But the patrolmen were petty officers low on the governmental hierarchy. The Zongdu Ruan Yuan happened to abhor opium-smoking. Since he arrested members of the military just as relentlessly as he arrested foreigners, the head of the military, the Provincial Military Commander, dared not shield his subordinates.

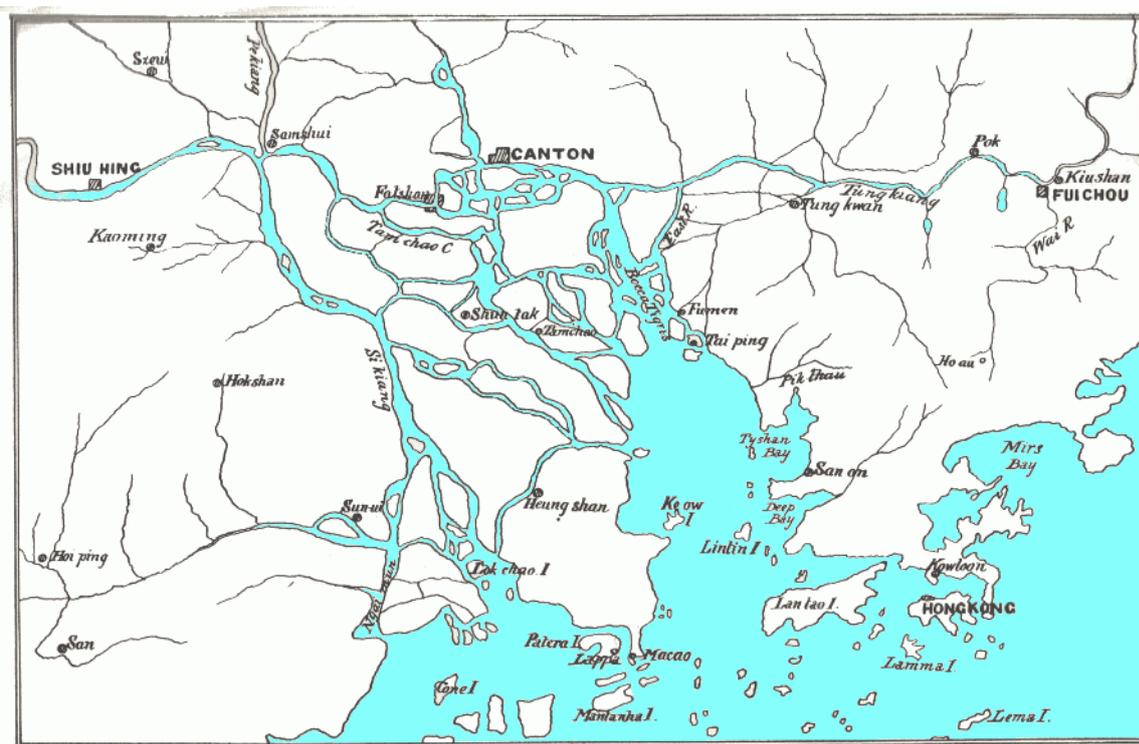


Fig. 1 Map showing Lingding and other islands at the mouth of the Pearl River. From *The Chronicles of the East India Company Trading to China 1635-1834*, vol. 1, by H.B. Morse, published in 1926

Lastly, the large number of foreign ships lingering near Lingding and its neighbouring islands all year round annoyed the local residents, who saw the foreigners as intruders into their territory. The uneducated class of Guangdong had a reputation of being rough, quarrelsome and unruly, and in December 1821 a fight broke out between the villagers of Lingding and the seamen belonging to the English warship *Topaze*. Two Chinese were killed, and fourteen English were wounded. Captain Richardson of the warship claimed that the seamen were “suddenly attacked ... unwarrantable attack ... unjustifiable attack”. Conversely the Zongdu Ruan Yuan stated that the English seamen picked the sweet potatoes growing in the fields, and they also damaged the villager’s wine jars. In any case Ruan Yuan was not interested in finding out who started the fight. All he cared about was to arrest the murderers. Subsequently the *Topaze* sailed away, and Ruan Yuan continued to harass the EIC *taipan* for the next four years as to how the murderers were punished in their home country.

The people who suffered the most must be the hong-merchants, because they had to face the wrath of both the Chinese officials and the English supercargoes. The hong-merchants were nominated by the Guangdong government to do business with foreigners, hence the English never liked them, considering them as the pawns in a monopoly. Alexander Hamilton, an English trader who came to Guangzhou in 1703, called the hong-merchants “villains”. In the 19th century English and American writers often depicted them as immensely wealthy, living in fabulous villas and giving lavish dinner parties to the foreigners. But there are good reasons to believe that some of those accounts were based on hearsay or fantasy rather than on facts. Accounts given by contemporary Chinese writers tell a rather different story.



Fig. 2 Drawing of the hong-merchant Mowqua, by George Chinnery, circa 1830. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London, E.1300-1928

Even without referring to Chinese texts one only needs to look at the number of bankruptcies to realise that the profession of a hong-merchant was by no means a lucrative one, at least not in the 1820s and 1830s. In 1823 Conseequa died, leaving behind him debts to the EIC as well as unpaid customs duties to the government. Conseequa did business with the Americans as well as with the English, but since the archives of the American trading houses are scattered and difficult to trace the extent of Conseequa's dealings with the Americans is not clear. The rule of the day was for Conseequa's property to be sold, the proceeds therefrom first to pay the government, and next to pay the foreign creditors. If the proceeds were insufficient to cover all the foreign debts, which was often the case, the Co-hong, an association of all the hong-merchants (sometimes incorrectly referred to as a "guild" by English writers), had to take up the liability.

The next hong-merchant to fail was Exchin, in 1825, and for his crime of having borrowed money from foreigners he was banished to Yili, a town in remote northwest China. Poonequa died in 1826, and according to the EIC records he owed the Company 65,373 taels. But he did not, it would seem, owe the government any money. Two years later, in 1828, Manhob went bankrupt, and suffered the same fate of being banished to Yili.

With four hong-merchants either dead or banished there were only seven men left in the Co-hong to trade with foreigners. Then in 1829 there were rumours that Chunqua was facing imminent bankruptcy. The EIC seized the opportunity to petition the Zongdu, asking him to allow foreign ships to trade without a "security" hong-merchant. The "security" system was a long-standing one. It held the relevant hong-merchant responsible if the foreign ship he "secured" broke the law. Ruan Yuan had left Guangdong in 1826. His successor, Li Hongbin, dared not make such a radical change. All he could do was to lower some of the port charges. Thereupon the EIC Select Committee could not come to an agreement whether to accept or reject the Zongdu's offer. The President, Mr Plowden, believed that the Zongdu had done the best within his power. But the other three members of the Committee, Baynes, Millett and Bannerman, wanted to insist on their original objective, thus Plowden, even though he was President, was out-voted.

The three men suspended the trade by ordering all Company ships to wait near Lingding without coming up to Huangpu. Seeing that he could not stop his junior colleagues Plowden boarded a ship for London in January 1830, his plan being to relate the entire event to the Court of Directors in London.

As soon as Plowden was gone Baynes became Acting President, and the first thing he did was to bring his wife to the English factory in Guangzhou, which was in breach of Chinese law. As if to show solidarity with Baynes another employee of the EIC, Mr Astell, openly rode in a sedan chair - another breach of Chinese law. The Zongdu could order the Chinese chair-bearers not to serve Mr Astell in the future, but he could not send a squad of soldiers to drag the foreign woman out of the English factory. He sent several orders to Baynes telling him that his wife must leave, but Baynes simply ignored him. Worse still, to show his defiance he had some cannons and guns transported from the ships in Huangpu to the Guangzhou

factory. This last act alarmed not only the Zongdu but also the General, the head of the military. The two men were compelled to report the incident to the emperor.

Judging from the way the memorial to the emperor was written it is clear that neither the Zongdu nor the General wanted to use force, but they had to pretend, at least to the emperor, that they would not allow Chinese law to be broken. They were saved, ironically, by the EIC Court of Directors in Leadenhall Street. Charles Marjoribanks and John Francis Davis were sent to Guangzhou to take charge, and the three bellicose supercargoes Baynes, Millett and Bannerman were removed from the Select Committee in November. As a result the Guangdong officials were able to report to the emperor in December that things were back to normal.

The Zongdu Li Hongbin knew that Baynes had been sent home, but he did not know why, nor did he bother to find out. He was too busy defending himself, as several censors in Beijing accused him of letting foreigners buy up Chinese silver by selling opium. It was how state officials spent their time and energy in the decades leading up to the First Opium War - the court officials attacking provincial officials in order to impress the emperor. Had the state officials diverted their energy to doing other things, such as learning about the foreigners, or studying the conditions of the people, especially that of the hong-merchants, the Opium War probably would not have happened.