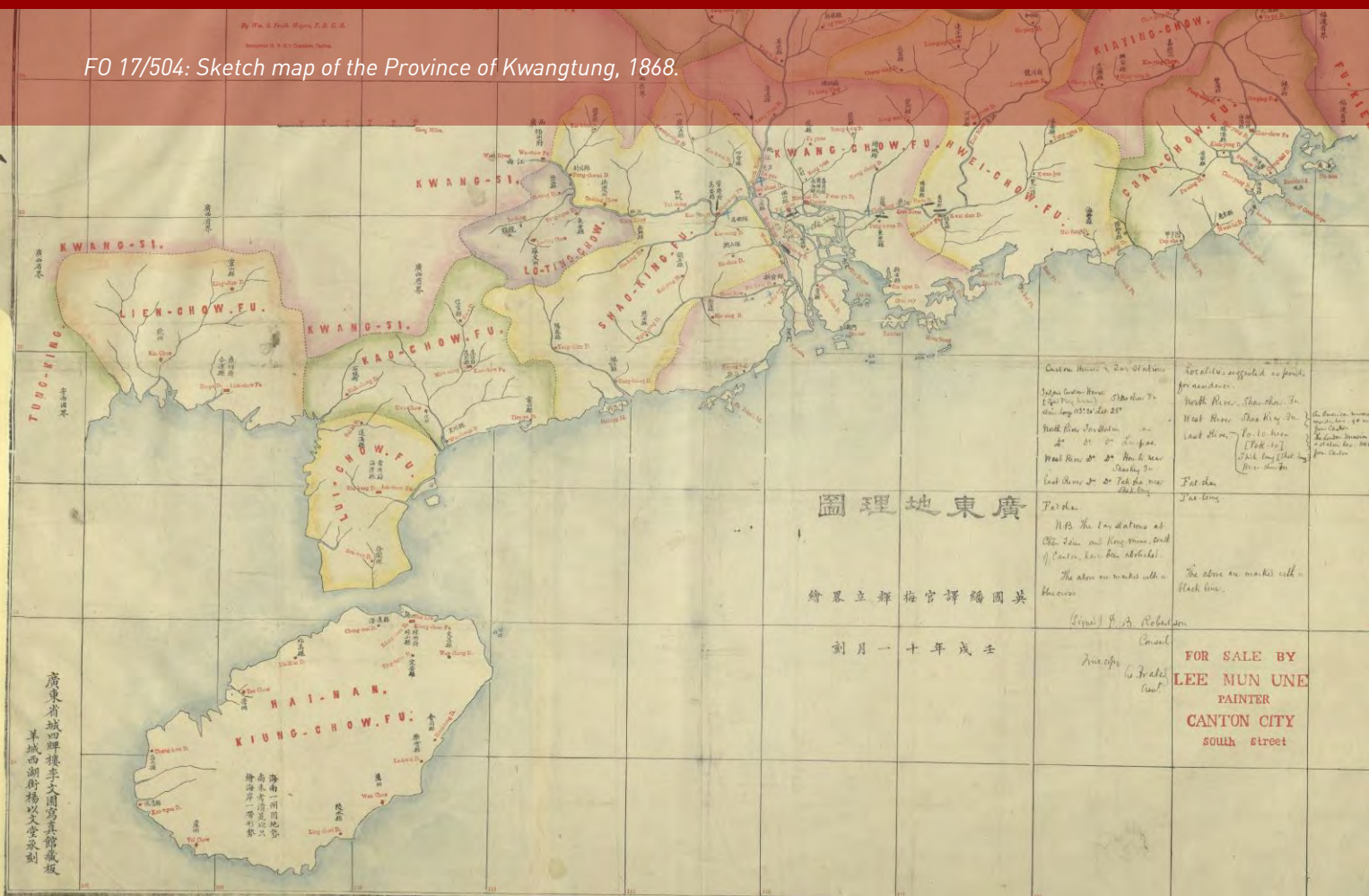


Introduction to FO 17, the British Foreign Office Archival Collection on China, 1815-1905

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FO 17/504: Sketch map of the Province of Kwangtung, 1868.



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The papers in the British Foreign Office archival collection FO 17, which relate to China from 1815 to 1905, cover the era when China's modern foreign relations were born. The period is dense with significant events that are well known in a basic form to any student of Chinese history, but are ripe for closer examination and provide a fertile field for revisionist scholarship. These sources can illuminate our understanding of the Opium Wars and the true nature of gunboat diplomacy. They can provide finely-grained details on the negotiation of the unequal treaties. They can give us intimate, close-up views of lesser-known diplomatic chapters like the Amherst Mission of 1816 and insight into Britain's understanding of and response to the bloodiest civil war in China's, if not the world's, history—the massive Taiping Rebellion of the mid-19th century. The archive also covers the Sino-Japanese War of 1894–1895, the Boxer Rebellion of 1900, and the beginnings of revolutionary activity against the dynasty in the early 20th century.

Indeed, there is no single collection of English-language primary sources on Sino-British relations as vast and detailed as this one. While a brief overview cannot fully encapsulate its broad scope, I would like to take this opportunity to orient the reader as to the nature of the archive, highlight a few of the files from the early part of the collection, and give a taste of what lies within its full span of more than a million pages.

The crucial year in the development of this archive is 1834, when Britain's newly-minted Chief Superintendent of Trade, Lord Napier, arrived in Macao to take up his position as Britain's first permanent official in China. For

nearly two centuries prior to his arrival, British contact with China had taken place almost entirely through the medium of the East India Company, which had enjoyed a monopoly on all British trade with China and therefore acted as Britain's *de facto* diplomatic presence at Canton, the lone port where the Qing dynasty allowed the British to trade.

It was only with the dissolution of the East India Company's monopoly in 1833—a political change driven by free-trade advocates in Great Britain who sought to open up their end of the China trade—that the British government finally sent its own representative official to China, the Superintendent of Trade. With Napier's arrival in 1834 and the establishment of an official British government presence in China, the primary flow of information from Canton back to Britain ceased to travel through the East India Company and began to course instead through the Foreign Office, producing the records that constitute this database.

Thus, there are only a few files in the archive that predate the termination of the East India Company's monopoly—three, to be exact. The first two, FO 17/1 and FO 17/2, consist of a “memoir” summarizing the East India Company's records at Canton from 1818 to 1833, which had been prepared for Napier's use, to give him background on the history of Sino-European relations prior to his arrival. In addition, there is a single file, FO 17/3, containing such records as survive from the largely forgotten Amherst Mission of 1816–1817 (more on that below). From there on out, the archive consists of the communications of Britain's increasingly numerous agents on the ground in China, beginning with Napier and his successors and multiplying into ministers and governors and consuls, as the forced opening of new treaty ports and the seizure of Hong Kong dramatically

expanded the British presence in China through the nineteenth century. The trickle of sources from the short, unhappy tenure of Lord Napier in 1834 eventually gives way by the later part of the century to an absolute flood of diplomatic and administrative reports, secret instructions, treaty negotiations, analyses of China's domestic situation, and a wealth of other material waiting to be explored.

Lest one should get overwhelmed by the sheer volume of these sources, it is worth noting that any given file in this collection will yield items of significance and interest. For example, the abovementioned FO 17/3, on the Amherst Mission, is a remarkable collection in and of itself. This diplomatic mission was Britain's second attempt to send an ambassador to Beijing, and it failed as completely as its much more famous predecessor, the Macartney Mission of 1792–1794 (the records for which are largely contained in the East India Company's archives at the British Library, as well as the [Earl George Macartney Collection](#) digitized by Gale from the holdings of Cornell University's Charles W. Wason Collection on East Asia).

Macartney, as anyone who takes an introductory course on Chinese history will likely learn, proudly refused to perform the “kowtow” ceremony (a ritual performance of nine deep, kneeling bows) in his audience with the Qianlong emperor. As a result, he was sent away without any trading concessions or any improvements to the East India Company's limited trading situation in Canton. As Westerners understood it for generations afterwards (and in fact, still understand it in many cases), Macartney upheld Britain's national dignity by refusing to humiliate himself in a ceremony

that involved groveling repeatedly at the feet of the Qing emperor. As Macartney told the story, he merely went down once, on one knee, the same as he would have done before the king of England.

The reports from Lord Amherst's mission more than twenty years later, however, shed a different light on Macartney's famed refusal to kowtow. Amherst himself had intended to uphold Macartney's precedent by refusing to perform the ceremony, and likewise he saw his mission founder—quite literally, for after he failed to meet with the Jiaqing emperor, his ship sank on the way home and most of his papers and belongings were lost. On the way back after being rescued from his shipwreck, however, he wrote new reports that give a window into the failed negotiations over his audience with Jiaqing. Among those reports is one written from Batavia, where Amherst intimated that Macartney's refusal of the kowtow may not have been everything it was made out to be. “I have since been given to understand,” Amherst reported, “that on an occasion subsequent to his first audience, Lord Macartney multiplied his bow nine times in conformity to the usual number of prostrations made by the Chinese.”¹ In a later report he noted that, as Macartney had worn such long and flowing robes, it would have been difficult from any distance to tell the difference between his kneeling on one knee or two.² In other words, to the eyes of anyone viewing Macartney's ceremony, it would have appeared that he did, in fact, perform the kowtow just as expected—nine deep, kneeling bows in succession. So much for Macartney's claims of principled refusal; his mission had failed for reasons far beyond the old question of kneeling and national honor.

¹ Amherst to Canning, February 12, 1817, FO 17/3/59.

² Amherst to Canning, February 20, 1817, FO 17/3/83.

The sources in FO 17 become especially rich as we approach the Opium War of 1839–1842, and there is a great deal to be discovered here that can deepen our understanding of how the conflict was conceived and rationalized on the British side. The collection gives insight into a most central figure, Lord Palmerston—the foreign secretary who held the reins of the war and was its leading proponent in Great Britain—shedding light on the political pressures he felt from different quarters at home, which helped shape his decision to go to war.

For example, in these records we can trace how Palmerston first learned about the crisis in Canton and the then-superintendent's unexpected response to it. Faced with a crackdown on the illegal opium trade at Canton in 1839, Napier's successor Charles Elliot had convinced the British merchants to surrender their opium stocks by promising that their losses would be made good by the British government. Once the news of this arrangement had made its way home, the lobbying began. Even before Palmerston received Elliot's official report on the downward spiral of relations at Canton (which is contained in FO 17/31), London-based representatives of the opium-related firms in Canton and India were already approaching him with demands that the government keep Elliot's promise and pay them what it owed for their opium. A major factor in Palmerston's decision to advocate a war against China would be that the British government simply didn't have the funds with which to pay the opium traders what Elliot, in the name of the crown, had promised them.

Likewise, within this same swirl of events leading up to the war, FO 17/35 contains numerous petitions from merchants' organizations in major British industrial cities like Manchester and Bristol. While conspicuously distancing themselves from the moral depravity of the

opium dealers, these organizations demanded that the foreign secretary do something to restore their legitimate trade in cotton textiles and other British manufactures, which had been unsellable in China due to the shutdown of trade occasioned by the opium crisis. Through documents such as these we can see the broader domestic pressures that came to bear against Palmerston to "fix" the situation at Canton, beyond anything that the opium merchants themselves could have devised, and in spite of the generally scandalous nature of the drug trade itself.

Looking further back, among the papers in FO 17/12 we can find correspondence from several years prior to the actual outbreak of the war—lengthy letters written to Palmerston by private British subjects involved in the China trade, trying to justify such a war in advance, even to the point of proposing exactly how it should be fought. The file contains a series of letters from Lord Napier's widow, Lady Napier, who pestered Lord Palmerston in 1835 with requests that her husband's death in the course of his failed superintendency in China be properly commemorated (and, if possible, avenged). Similarly, extensive letters in that file from China traders Hugh Hamilton Lindsay and James Matheson, also in 1835, make an early case for a war clearly intended to serve their own, private ends rather than any genuine national interest. Though Palmerston ignored them at the time (leading Hamilton and Matheson to publish their letters separately, as pamphlets), once the crackdown came in 1839, their proposals were taken more seriously.

While most of the sources in this Foreign Office collection represent strictly British perspectives on China—the views of outsiders within the country—the archive has a lot more to offer. As the British presence in the country increased, and in particular as consular

officers gained the ability to translate efficiently between Chinese and English, their reports began to include a great range of Qing government documents—edicts, proclamations, and the like, transmitted back to the Foreign Office in English and in some cases preserved in the original Chinese. One of the first such collections represents the work of a Prussian missionary named Karl Gutzlaff, famous as the first Protestant missionary to learn Chinese fluently enough to pass as a native speaker. Dressed as a Fujianese, and claiming to have been adopted by a family in Fujian, Gutzlaff traveled up and down the coast of China in secret, distributing Bibles in Chinese (and for at least some of the time, interpreting for British opium traders so that he could ride on their smuggling ships). One entire file of the archive, FO 17/24, consists of reports Gutzlaff prepared for the British government on the inner workings of Chinese society and government, which mark a prelude to the enormous amount of intelligence-gathering that would go on later in the century. For anyone interested in finding out what the British government actually knew about China prior to the Opium War, Gutzlaff's reports are a fine place to start.

And onward we go into the nineteenth century. Among these pages we find records of the establishment of treaty ports and consular stations after the Opium War. We find huge amounts of material relating to the Arrow War of 1856–1860 (also known as the Second Opium War), at the end of which Lord Elgin led a British army in burning down the Qing emperor's summer palace in Beijing. In other files we can trace the conflicted British responses to the mammoth civil war known as the Taiping Rebellion—including the ultimate decision in the early 1860s to break with ten years of neutrality and take the side of the Qing dynasty against the Taiping rebels. Within the great swath of materials

relating to the British intervention there are two entire files (FO 17/492 and FO 17/493) covering the specific fiasco of the “Anglo-Chinese Fleet,” in which a British interlocutor commissioned a state-of-the-art war fleet from British naval suppliers for the use of the Qing government against the Taiping rebels—a fleet that, in the end, the government turned out not even to want.

Indeed, the subjects covered by this archive encompass every major event in nineteenth-century Chinese history that directly involved the British, and many others that indirectly involved them as well. There are more than twenty files on Chinese emigration abroad and the notorious “coolie trade,” as well as many on the rise of anti-foreign sentiments in China in the 1890s, in the runup to the Boxer Rebellion. There are collections of sources on piracy, on early Chinese diplomatic missions, on the establishment of telegraphs and other modern technologies. The digitization, for the first time, of this vast and diverse archive of English-language primary source material should be just as useful and beneficial for undergraduate students preparing research papers as for professional historians who no longer have to visit the UK National Archives in person to consult the collection. There is much left to be discovered here.

Citation

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