

SIR JOHN BOWRING AND THE CANTON CITY QUESTION

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SHORTLY after the *Arrow* incident,¹ the British Plenipotentiary in the Far East, Sir John Bowring, instructed the acting Consul at Canton, Harry Parkes, to use the opportunity to include the city question of Canton in his talks. By introducing this entirely unrelated and complex element into the dispute, Bowring extended an already difficult problem into the realms of insolvency.² Here, it is necessary first of all to explain what the Canton city question was, and in order to do so it will be useful to give a brief introduction to China's relationship with the western world up to the time of the *Arrow* incident.

By the nineteenth century Europe had long been an area consisting of nations of more or less equal stature. In the Far East, the Chinese Empire had continued to grow, despite the change of dynasties, until it far surpassed its neighbours in power and civilization. The result was that international law was evolved in the West whereas family law was extended by the Chinese to govern the conduct of their foreign relations. In so doing, the Chinese regarded themselves as the main lineage in the family of nations, and their emperor as the head of this family. For various reasons China's neighbours in general accepted this world order and paid periodic tributes to the emperor in return for lavish gifts and the right of their envoys to trade during their stay in China.³ When East and West met, however, a clash between the

¹ For an independent study of the incident, see my forthcoming article entitled "The *Arrow* Incident: A Re-appraisal", in *Modern Asian Studies* (Cambridge University Press), July 1974.

² It is interesting to note that Parkes's biographer was at pains to disclaim responsibility on Parkes's behalf for the introduction of such an insoluble element (Stanley Lane-Poole, *Life of Sir Harry Parkes* [London, 1894], i. 247).

³ This is, of course, an oversimplified description of a highly complex concept and system. The views of experts on the subject are discussed in J. K. Fairbank, ed. *The Chinese World Order* (Cambridge, Mass., 1968).

two cultures was inevitable. Differences in customs, attitudes, habits, economic interests and the like led to constant friction. These differences came to a head in 1840 over the question of opium, which the British merchants were exporting in large quantities from India to China.¹ The Opium War ended in the signing of the Treaty of Nanking two years later² which, among other things, opened four more ports to foreign trade—Canton had for a long time been the only port opened for such a purpose. These new ports were Shanghai, Ningpo, Foochow and Amoy.

Since Canton had a long history of trading with foreigners, it also had a considerable record of incidents arising from the clash between the two peoples. Ill-feeling had been further exacerbated by the outbreak of the Opium War. The Cantonese took pride in the fact that they had put up a heroic and effective resistance to this act of foreign aggression. They certainly did not regard themselves as having been defeated by the British, but held that the war had been lost in the Yangtze area. Therefore, although peace was declared, the Cantonese continued to be swayed by their memories of the past. The fresh source of trouble was the British demand to enter the walled city of Canton. In the four newly-opened ports, foreigners might enter the walled cities without difficulty. When they wanted to do the same at Canton, they met with the stiffest resistance. The citizens were determined that foreigners should remain in the commercial centre, in the south-western portion of Canton, where they had always been allowed to stay since the port was opened. It should be pointed out that although the Treaty of Nanking undoubtedly gave westerners the right of residence in the five treaty ports, it did not in any way specify that they could enter or live in the walled regions, which were the old parts of the cities, as distinct from the new commercial areas. Nor did the treaties China subsequently signed with America and France contain such a

¹ The standard works on Anglo-Chinese relations in this period are H. B. Morse, *The International Relations of the Chinese Empire*, 3 vols. (London, 1910-18) and W. C. Costin, *Great Britain and China, 1833-1860* (Oxford, 1937). See also D. E. Owen, *British Opium Policy in China and India* (New Haven, Conn., 1934).

² See Chang Hsin-pao, *Commissioner Lin and the Opium War* (Cambridge, Mass., 1964).

provision. The fact that, either through ignorance of the precise provisions of the treaties or as a gesture of goodwill, the inhabitants of the other four treaty ports allowed foreigners to go into their walled cities was of course no ground for the latter to make such a demand on the Cantonese. However, this was exactly what the British did, and their action antagonized the local inhabitants still more.¹

After the Opium War was over, British troops continued to occupy the Chusan Islands as a guarantee that the Treaty of Nanking would be carried out. The Chinese faithfully observed the stipulations, but as late as the end of 1845 British soldiers were still stationed on these islands on the grounds that foreigners were not yet allowed into the city of Canton. The Governor of Kwangtung (of which Canton was the provincial capital), in reply to Sir John Davis's request that he should open the gates, gently reminded him that the request was quite unjustified under the provisions of the treaty and that there was no reason why Chusan should not be returned immediately.² As this letter is a good exposition of some aspects of the clash of the two cultures, it might be useful to give its main points. Firstly, the Governor maintained that the Cantonese people seldom left their homes and therefore had no way of knowing what the situation was in the other treaty ports. They were, however, well aware of the fact that for centuries no alien had ever entered their city and were therefore firmly convinced that this was as it should be. Not surprisingly, on hearing that the British intended to enter their city, the masses had been startled. There were waves of protest about the impending intrusion, and rumours of all kinds spread like wild-fire. Secondly, British atrocities during

¹ For a detailed study on this point see Huang Yen-yü, "Viceroy Yeh Ming-ch'en and the Canton Episode, 1856-1861", *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, vi (1941), 94.

² Davis was the successor to Sir Henry Pottinger as the British Plenipotentiary in the Far East. I am most grateful to Rev. A. F. Lutley for a copy of this letter by Governor Huang En-t'ung, and a copy of the translation by Gutzlaff. Mr. Lutley is a very learned scholar, with considerable experience in translation. He has pointed out to me the numerous mistakes in Gutzlaff's version and very generously provided me with a copy of his own translation. I should like, too, to thank Miss Lind, the descendant of Sir John, for permission to use this and other Davis papers.

the Opium War had never been forgotten and were the cause of much suspicion and ill-will. Hence, when the British desire to enter the city was announced, the Cantonese thought that there must be some evil purpose in it. The more impatient the British became, the more suspicious were the Cantonese, until the latter rose *en masse* to reject the whole idea. Even the educated *élite*, who were better informed and had no doubt heard of the state of affairs in the other ports, were uncertain about the real intentions of the British. Besides, they considered it unwise to let the English into the city because other foreigners, good or bad, were bound to follow, and there would be no peace in the streets and alleys. Furthermore, they were considerably disturbed by the news that the English, once inside the city of Foochow, had begun to reside on Black Rock Hill. If westerners were to be admitted into the city of Canton on the pretext that they were in the other ports, what had happened at Foochow might similarly be used as a precedent. The building of houses on high ground and the erection of flagstaves would spoil the geomancy (*feng-shui*) of the town. The fact that aliens could, from their tall mansions, pry into people's homes was particularly objectionable. The letter ended with a pertinent query why the English persisted in demanding admission into the walled city, which had no connection whatever with their explicit desire to trade with China.¹

This communication does not seem to have produced any effect on Sir John Davis, who urged that the occupation of Chusan should be continued as a means of compelling the Chinese to accord the right of entry into the city of Canton. However, he was subsequently informed by Lord Aberdeen that "a scrupulous observance of good faith and treaty obligations was of more importance than any tactical advantage".² Chusan was evacuated on 25 July 1846. Naturally Davis felt very frustrated. He was moreover much irritated by the apparent complacency of the Cantonese, to whom the city question was rapidly becoming a highly emotional issue. His patience began to wear thin, and on 2 April 1847 he impetuously led the British fleet up the river to Canton, disabling all the Chinese forts on his way. This display

¹ Davis Papers, Huang En-t'ung to Davis, 31 December 1845.

² Morse, *op. cit.* i. 315.

of force was described by a British merchant as prompt and energetic and well calculated to inspire terror into the minds of the Chinese authorities.¹ The Imperial Commissioner for Foreign Affairs, Ch'i-ying, was intimidated. But the Cantonese were infuriated. Riots spread and inflammatory placards were posted everywhere. Confrontations between the British soldiers and the mob revealed a highly explosive situation.² Ch'i-ying pleaded for more time to let matters cool, and he promised the British that they would be allowed into the city two years hence, on 6 April 1849. By this date, Davis had been replaced by Sir George Bonham, and Ch'i-ying by Hsü Kuang-chin.

The new Commissioner was a great friend of the Governor of Kwangtung, Yeh Ming-ch'en.³ Both had served under Ch'i-ying and had observed how his conciliatory policy had brought humiliation at the hands of the British as well as wrath from the Cantonese. They decided therefore upon a new principle, *vox populi vox Dei*, justifying their action by asserting the wishes of the people. Hsü undertook to convince Bonham of the inexpediency of entering the city, and Yeh mobilized the militia as well as the regulars in case the British insisted upon a military solution.⁴ Actually Bonham needed little persuasion from Hsü. He was personally inclined to dismiss as much exaggerated the importance which had been attached to the question, and had written to Lord Palmerston about it. Although the Foreign Secretary had been influenced by Davis for a long time, he changed his mind and decided to drop the issue.⁵ Consequently Bonham found himself in a false position when he began to negotiate with the Commissioner for a fulfilment of the engagement of 1847. The result is well-known. Desultory discussions ended with a communication from Bonham to Hsü, in which he

¹ Jardine and Matheson Archive, B2/16 D. Jardine—D. Matheson, p. 1395, 3 April 1847.

² *Ibid.* p. 1394, 4 April 1847. The post of Imperial Commissioner for Foreign Affairs was concurrently held by the Governor-General of Kwangtung and Kwangsi, who was stationed at Canton.

³ See J. Y. Wong, "The Political Career of Yeh Ming-ch'en, 1807-59", unpublished D. Phil. thesis (University of Oxford, 1971), pp. 93-103.

⁴ *Ibid.* pp. 389-93.

⁵ Hansard, *Parliamentary Debates*, Series 3, 144, 1173.

said, "The question at issue rests where it was and must remain in abeyance. The discussion of it cannot, at present, be further pursued between Your Excellency and myself."¹ Bonham also directed in a government notification that "no British subject shall for the present attempt to enter the city".² Thus, the British claim was held in "abeyance", to be urged or not, according as policy might dictate, at some future period. It should be noted that the communication and the notification were brought about as much by a change of British attitude as by the determined and united opposition of the Cantonese. Unfortunately the Chinese had no way of knowing what was happening on the British side, and were led to believe that it was the policy of *vox populi* which had defeated British designs. Worse still, a mis-translation caused the Chinese version of Bonham's documents to mean that the British had abandoned for good their claim to enter the city.³ The whole empire was jubilant, the Cantonese went wild with delight. Hsü and Yeh were compared to past national heroes who had thwarted foreign aggression.

The foregoing pages have outlined the origin and development of the Canton city question until 1849. The episodes of 1847 and 1849 have been particularly well covered by scholars. Very little attention, however, has been paid to the rest of the story. There were no dramatic events, such as another display of gunboats to force open the gates of Canton, to attract the interest of historians. Still less is it known how Anglo-Chinese relations during the 1850s were bedevilled by the obsession of one man, Sir John Bowring, with entering the city, which hopelessly complicated the *Arrow* affair of 1856, and which contributed directly to the outbreak of the second Anglo-Chinese war.

Early in 1849 the then Dr. John Bowring went to the Far East as British Consul at Canton. This is a significant fact so far overlooked by sinologists. Consequently little attempt has been made to relate this appointment to his later activities as British

¹ J. Nolde, "The False Edict", *Journal of Asian Studies*, xx (2), 299-315, quoting F.O. 17, 154, Desp. 45. Incl. Bonham—Hsü, 18 April 1847.

² Huang Yen-yü, op. cit. vi, 50, quoting *Chinese Repository*, xviii. 24.

³ Ibid.

Plenipotentiary. Nor has there been much analysis of the influence of his background, temperament and first experience of China on his actions when he was in a position to exercise plenipotentiary powers. G. F. Bartle, who has made a detailed and perceptive study of his career until he sailed to the East,¹ describes him as a vain and conceited man.² The change of environment and employment seems not to have reformed him. His very first letter from Hong Kong indicates his reluctance to face the fact that he was going to occupy a relatively low position in the diplomatic service.³ It should be remembered, too, that although he gratefully accepted the appointment—there are even indications of his having manoeuvred diligently for the post⁴—he did so after he had failed dismally in his business investments and political life.⁵ Therefore any frustration he experienced in China was likely to be unduly magnified in his mind. It so happened that he arrived at Canton when the entry crisis of 1849 was at its climax. He left Hong Kong vainly hoping to report in his first official letter to Bonham “happy consequences from the power of intercourse with the mandarins”,⁶ expecting to be received by the Imperial Commissioner himself. However, since Bowring had declared that he represented Bonham in the negotiations, Hsü decided to dispatch a deputy as well. This led Bowring to complain that Hsü chose to regard him as Bonham’s envoy and therefore wanted him to go out of the Consulate to be received by inferior mandarins instead of Hsü coming to the Consulate to see him.⁷ Bowring turned down Hsü’s overture and consequently denied himself the opportunity of displaying his “power of intercourse with the mandarins”. He defended his action to Lord Palmerston on the grounds that “the public service will not suffer by delay, on the contrary believing that by my

¹ See G. F. Bartle, “The Political Career of Sir John Bowring (1793–1872) between 1820 and 1849”, unpublished M.A. thesis, University of London, 1959.

² G. F. Bartle, “Sir John Bowring and the Chinese and Siamese Commercial Treaties”, *BULLETIN*, xlv (1961–2), 287.

³ See Broadlands MSS. GC/BO/83, Bowring-Palmerston, 27 March 1849 (quoted here by permission of the Trustees of the Broadlands Archives).

⁴ See Bartle’s thesis, *op. cit.* pp. 412–13.

⁵ *Ibid.* pp. 402–16.

⁶ Broadlands MSS. GC/BO/83, Bowring-Palmerston, 27 March 1849.

⁷ *Ibid.* GC/BO/84, 12 May 1849.

submitting to Seu's [Hsü's] suggestions both my sphere of usefulness would be contracted and my lowered position such as I would not satisfactorily occupy—nor such, I venture to hope, as you would wish me to retain".¹ Not surprisingly, the Chinese continued to ignore the new Consul. Bowring rapidly lost patience. He soon began complaining about "the humiliating helplessness in which a consul is placed".² Within two months he was giving expression to his "sore sorrow" at finding himself engaged in a controversy about his own dignity.³ Then he took action. He warned the Chinese repeatedly of the "perils of the retrograde policy" which they were pursuing.⁴ Within three months, he was pleading with Palmerston to let him visit the other ports in China, or at least to give him leave of absence because "some change is found absolutely necessary for the preservation of health".⁵

In his loneliness and isolation, Bowring felt himself all the more humiliated when the Cantonese began celebrating their success in having repulsed foreign intrusion into their city. Both Hsü and Yeh were elevated to the ranks of the nobility, and the emperor ordered that the imperial edict to this effect should be widely proclaimed.⁶ In obedience, Hsü and Yeh printed the edict and distributed it throughout Canton and its vicinity.⁷ The exaltation of the Chinese officials was in sharp contrast to Bowring's own fate of virtual exile from Europe. The jubilation of the Chinese made him acutely conscious of his own misfortune and misery. Eight years later, he was still looking back with great indignation on this episode of his life:

... the emperor wrote that he had "wept tears of joy" at the success of the Imperial Commissioner in "quietly keeping the English barbarians out of the city". All the Mandarins of the city then went in grand procession to the temple of Pooloo, about 35 miles from Canton, presided over by the god who is supposed to control western nations. Several hundred promotions took place. Six tri-

¹ Ibid. Before romanization was standardized, Hsü was spelt Seu.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid. GC/BO/85, 23 May 1849.

⁴ Ibid. GC/BO/86, 11 June 1849.

⁵ Ibid. GC/BO/86, 19 June 1849.

⁶ *Ch'ing-shih lieh-chuan* (Shanghai, 1928) xl. 44-50 and xlviii. 10-15.

⁷ Broadlands MSS. GC/BO/86, Bowring-Palmerston, 11 June 1849, Incl. copy of a printed imperial edict, dated 7 May 1849.

umphal arches were raised by imperial decree in honour of the wisdom and the valour by which the schemes of the barbarians had been frustrated.¹

He also told his son in 1856, shortly after the outbreak of hostilities because of the *Arrow* incident, "I wish Lord Palmerston had time to look over my private correspondence of that period [1849]. It will throw much light upon our present position."² During those intervening eight years, Bowring continued to make it his first duty to force open the gates of Canton, constantly blaming Bonham for not having conducted the negotiations judiciously.³

Here, two important questions emerge. Was Bowring aware of the fact that the Canton city dispute was the focal point of a serious clash between the two cultures, and did he, as British representative at Canton, take the trouble to find out the real situation before he relentlessly pressed home his demand? The answer is that he did make some effort and he managed to understand some of the difficulties involved, but unfortunately such correct views as he succeeded in forming were overshadowed by other issues.

Ever since his arrival at Canton Bowring had made it his habit to wander about the streets. "There are miles and miles of streets out of the city walls" he wrote, "through which I walk daily."⁴ Within two months, he boasted that he had ventured to do what no Englishman or American had done for many months, which was to go round the city of Canton.⁵ Nor did he hesitate to move about the suburbs, and once hired a boat and went as far as Huang-chu-ch'i, where six Englishmen had been killed in an armed confrontation with the villagers in December 1847.⁶ Whenever he could, he mixed freely with the inhabitants. He concluded that there was a big gulf between the two nations.⁷ To

¹ MSS. Clar. Dep. C57 China, Bowring-Clarendon, 14 November 1856 (quoted here by kind permission of Lord Clarendon).

² Ryl. Eng. MS. 1228/162, Bowring-Edgar Bowring, 12 November 1856.

³ Ibid. 30 October 1856, 29 November 1856 and 10 January 1857.

⁴ Broadlands MSS. GC/BO/85, Bowring-Palmerston, 23 May 1849.

⁵ Ibid. GC/BO/84, 12 May 1849.

⁶ For details of the incident, see Wong, *op. cit.* pp. 386-9 and F. Wakeman, *Strangers at the Gate* (California, 1966), pp. 86-87.

⁷ Broadlands MSS. GC/BO/84 Bowring-Palmerston, 12 May 1849.

begin with, he conceded that, for the protection of British persons and property and for the peace of Canton itself, the admission of strangers into the city had to be guarded and controlled by stringent rules:

The busy tide of population is so constantly rolling, and the confusion in the narrow streets and market place so great that under all circumstances many precautions would be necessary to prevent collision.¹

This remark reminds one of Governor Huang's view, mentioned above, that should the gates be opened indiscriminately to foreigners, there would be no peace in the streets and alleys. Bowring explained: The crowds were incredibly great. Everything was done in the streets; reading, writing, carving, cooking, eating, drinking, smoking, singing, gambling, fortune-telling. Great self-control was necessary especially amidst the multitude of noisy coolies who ran about with their bamboo-supported burdens, calling on everybody to get out of their way, which one must do, to avoid being covered with filth or colliding with buckets, baskets, jars, water, chests, chairs and a thousand other dancing things borne along in full swing.² Bowring should have added that at this time self-possession and forbearance hardly existed among British sailors who, when ashore, were more often drunk than not, nor among dare-devils from the wild west of America who extended their adventures to the Far East.

Bowring remarked that the Cantonese were ignorant. "They know little", he said.³ This again recalls Governor Huang's comment, that the Cantonese seldom left their homes and had little idea of what was happening in the other treaty ports. Bowring also admitted that foreigners appeared very strange to the Cantonese. During his daily excursions in the streets, he found "extreme curiosity everywhere".⁴ He further observed that the peasants and country people showed much greater alarm when they saw him than did the inhabitants of Canton—the women and children almost invariably ran away and hid themselves. Bowring himself was struck with the fact that the missionaries went about everywhere outside the city without peril and

¹ Ibid.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid. GC/BO/87, 7 July 1849.

⁴ Ibid. GC/BO/84, 12 May 1849.

without apprehension. The explanation lies in the fact that these missionaries, almost without exception, spoke Chinese, dressed as Chinese and behaved like Chinese. Some even passed for Chinese. It is not suggested here that a British diplomat should have done the same, but he should at least have recognized fear of strangers as a factor to be taken into consideration when he pressed a demand to which the Cantonese were unanimously and violently opposed. Unfortunately, although Bowring recognized that the state of the public mind was unmistakably "hostile" to foreigners, he regarded this hostility as a result of long training by the mandarins.¹ This is absurd. Bowring was by training a linguist, not an experienced diplomat or a historian. Had he been otherwise, he might have taken a sufficient interest in China's past to enable him to draw more accurate conclusions. Only three years before, on 13 January 1846, Ch'i-ying had announced that foreigners would be allowed into the city. The very next day, placards mushroomed through the streets, calling for the massacre of all aliens the moment they passed the gates. The officer whom Ch'i-ying sent to negotiate with the British about the matter narrowly escaped assault by the mob, his suite was put to rout and his office was ransacked. The Imperial Commissioner lost his nerve and had to retract.² Going further back, there was the Opium War, and its concomitant atrocities, which had made a deep impression upon the Chinese.³ In the more remote past the Portuguese and Spaniards had made the name of any westerner mud⁴ by their reckless burning, killing and plunder along the coast of China. It was not idle imagination, therefore, that depicted Europeans as blood-thirsty devils to scare children. Bowring himself saw children scamper away screaming at the sight of a foreigner.⁵ But throughout his lengthy correspondence, official and private, there is no mention at all of China's

¹ Ibid. In another letter he repeated the same point, "But it is the interested influence of the corrupt mandarins that leads the people astray" (ibid. GC/BO/87, 10 July 1849).

² See Wakeman, *op. cit.* pp. 76-78.

³ See, e.g. Ch'en Hsi-ch'i, *Kuang-tung San-yuan-li jen-min te k'ang-Ying tou-cheng* (Canton, 1956).

⁴ This description is inspired by M. Collis, *Foreign Mud* (London, 1946).

⁵ Broadlands MSS. GC/BO/84, Bowring-Palmerston, 12 May 1849.

past relations with the West. Bowring seems to have made no genuine attempt to find out the real cause of Cantonese hostility, but instinctively and superficially attributed it to the mandarins having fostered such an attitude. His propensity to regard the Chinese officials as the villains of the piece was perhaps influenced to some extent by personal factors. As has been mentioned, he felt his dignity impaired by his non-reception by the Imperial Commissioner. "Seu indeed holds us very cheap", he complained. It is probable, too, that he had felt humiliated by the excessive jubilation of the Cantonese authorities and people, the showering of imperial favours and grand processions, the erection of monuments and so on.¹ Consequently he did nothing to allay the near-hysterical fear of the masses, but persisted in putting pressure on the mandarins to open the gates.

A question that must be asked is whether the Cantonese appeared so ill-disposed as to discourage Bowring from any attempt to come to an understanding with them. The answer is plain. Jostling among the incredibly great crowds in the streets, Bowring concluded that his forbearance and self-control, his attention to children, his avoidance of anything looking like a menace or an insult, had invariably created a friendly and often a cordial feeling. He remarked that the Chinese were characteristically gentle and polite. As he walked round the city, he professed himself gratified with all he saw. Men, women and children crowded round him and his companions, showing "great courtesy on the part of the well-bred—and even the countless multitudes of the labouring population made way for us".² During the Dragon Boat festival, he and two English ladies went to see the boat race. "When they observed that our boat stopped to look at the procession, two of the boats turned back and passed and repassed several times to give the ladies an opportunity of a thorough examination."³ Even more important was Bowring's realization that the words *fan-kuei*, normally translated as "barbarian or foreign devil",

do not necessarily convey an offensive meaning, as I have frequently heard them

¹ For details, see Canton Archive, 112 and 325 series, *passim*.

² Broadlands MSS. GC/BO/84, Bowring-Palmerston, 12 May 1849.

³ *Ibid.*

said by beggars in their humblest supplications, and in cases where the party so called was an object of respect and gratitude for essential services rendered.¹

It is possible that Bowring made these objective observations under the influence of the well-informed interpreter T. T. Meadows, for whom he had a high regard. If this were the case, the influence proved short-lived. Meadows was soon replaced by the aggressive young Parkes, and Bowring, against his better judgement, reverted to the biased version. "Western barbarians", he told his son, was "the title with which we are generally honoured".²

With equal justification it might be asked why the British representative alone was expected to allay the fears of the Cantonese, and why the Chinese authorities could not do the same. The answer is simply that westerners in the past had greatly tarnished their own reputation, and it would have been far more effective for westerners to dispel the suspicions by making good the damage done. Furthermore, Ch'i-ying did try very hard to placate the Cantonese by proclaiming that Chinese and aliens belonged to the same family and should therefore foster brotherly love between themselves. However, such high-sounding words could hardly be expected to erase long memories of conflict and suffering. On the contrary, Ch'i-ying aroused great suspicion and consequently became "an object of intense hatred" even among those who were "not ill-disposed towards foreigners". He was regarded as the "*beau ideal* of a bad mandarin who had deceived, betrayed and sacrificed his country and the emperor".³ The Cantonese distrust of foreign intentions was such that even Yeh, who had supported the Cantonese cause unswervingly for over ten years, was nevertheless suspected of collaboration with the British when he suffered reverses during the *Arrow War*, in 1857.⁴

Bowring had therefore a difficult task on his hands. Unfortunately he grossly underestimated the difficulties as well as the importance of his mission, and made no attempt to befriend the

¹ Ibid. GC/BO/87, 7 July 1849.

² Ryl. Eng. MS. 1228/162, Bowring—Edgar Bowring, 31 October 1856.

³ Broadlands MSS. GC/BO/87, Bowring-Palmerston, 7 July 1849.

⁴ Hsia Hsieh, *Chung-hsi chi-shih* (1865), 13.7b.

people with whom he had gone to live. He did try to learn some Chinese however. "I am doing what I can to learn the language", he told Lord Palmerston.¹ But his achievement was negligible. Despite his reputed talents as a linguist, the only evidence of his having studied any Chinese at all is an odd character here or there in his letters to his colleagues.² After almost a decade in China, in 1858, he went to see a Mandarin and the interview gave rise to the report that "Sir John, . . . after his fashion, blundered out a few words which he thought were Chinese, but had eventually to fall back on the interpreter".³ G. F. Bartle remarked that "few British representatives in the East, indeed, have equalled him in his desire to understand the customs and languages of the people amongst whom he had gone to live".⁴ This may be true. The *desire* is evidently there. Hardly anyone could have surpassed Sir John in writing the most long-winded letters about local conditions as well as personal feelings. However, this mass of correspondence shows no real understanding of the state of Canton, let alone of China. Worse still, he misinterpreted many crucial issues. The following is one example. He wrote :

The Tartar mandarins, the most intelligent, inquiring and improving, represent a small minority of the people—and men like Seu, mandarins of the Chinese race, are not unwilling to strengthen themselves among the majority by giving effect to their prejudices and exhibiting themselves as representatives of Chinese nationality, hating and resenting barbarians.⁵

Such a remark would reduce any modern sinologist to a state of hilarity. But so far as Bowring was concerned, this view reinforced his conviction that the Chinese officials were the only stumbling block to his entering the city. Thinking along these lines, he began to draw wider deductions from the city question.

¹ Broadlands MSS. GC/BO/87, Bowring-Palmerston, 10 July 1849.

² See, e.g. his letters to Parkes among the Parkes Papers.

³ Ryl. Eng. MS. 1230/147, *The Hong Kong Register*, 16 February 1858.

⁴ Here one recalls the published translations of Chinese novels and poems by Sir John Davis, Bowring's predecessor. I am grateful to Dr. D. McMullen of St. John's College, Cambridge, who showed me a complete set of Sir John Davis's works. These were given to him by Miss Lind.

⁵ Broadlands MSS. GC/BO/83, Bowring-Palmerston, 27 March 1849. The word "Tartar" here is obviously used by Bowring to mean the Manchu.

To begin with, he believed, correctly, that this issue represented a new Chinese foreign policy. Hence he was terrified that Hsü's attitude should "supersede the more enlightened views of the Tartar Keying [Ch'i-ying]".¹ He was greatly worried, too, that Hsü might use his popularity over the entry crisis to try his hand at the suppression of the import of opium and the prohibition of its smoking. "Seu has received imperial orders to stop the opium trade" he wrote, "and here he has a subject to grapple with far greater than the 'barbarian question'."² In Bowring's mind Hsü had become a "reckless, resolute fellow", whose policy, if not checked, would "lead to some catastrophes".³ Although Hsü eventually decided to let sleeping dogs lie,⁴ he had already cast a shadow in Bowring's mind. A fresh and important element was thus introduced into the British diplomat's approach to the question of the city, that of China's opium policy. His concern was twofold. Officially, he knew only too well that "three or four million of Indian revenue" depended on the trade.⁵ Privately, he had close connections with the greatest dealers in opium, the firm of Jardine Matheson & Co. His eldest son was a partner in this firm. Bowring himself had personal obligations to it because it had advanced loans to him after he had been reduced to a state of destitution owing to his business failures in 1848.⁶ When he later became Governor of Hong Kong, he was at one stage publicly charged with being "bent on prostituting his public duty to his private feelings".⁷ He was accused in effect of lending his powers as a Governor to advance the interests of Jardine Matheson and Co.⁸ Although he was eventually cleared of the charge and won a libel action, one wonders why such a rumour should have arisen at all. In the same vein, one is reminded of Bowring's part in the Greek Loan scandal of 1826.⁹

To sum up, a very simple question had become more and more

¹ Ibid. GC/BO/84, 12 May 1849.

² Ibid. GC/BO/85, 23 May 1849.

³ Ibid. GC/BO/84, 12 May 1849.

⁴ Ibid. GC/BO/85, 23 May 1849.

⁵ MSS. Clar. Dep. C37 China, Bowring-Clarendon, 4 October 1855.

⁶ See Bartle's article on commercial treaties op. cit. p. 306.

⁷ Ryl. Eng. MS. 1230/64, *The Daily Press*, 2 January 1858.

⁸ Ryl. Eng. MS. 1230/177, *The Hong Kong Register*, 27 April 1858.

⁹ See Bartle's thesis, op. cit. pp. 80 ff.

enmeshed with other issues, some personal, some diplomatic, some real and some imaginary, largely because Bowring misconceived the matter from the beginning. It was a simple affair because, as Bowring himself admitted, if the question were to be estimated solely by the value of the right to pass the gates of Canton, the right, in itself, was valueless. "But", he immediately went on, "Seu's object is of higher aim and involves the gravest consequences. He wants to defeat, to triumph over the foreigners."¹ This was Bowring's first mistake. He misinterpreted the situation. It is true that Hsü's and Yeh's approach to the city question represented a change of foreign policy, from one of conciliation to one of strict observance of treaty provisions.² But this was only an outcome of the principle of *vox populi vox Dei*. They were far less concerned, if at all, with triumphing over foreigners than with surviving a political storm. They were caught between high-handed foreign pressure and violent domestic opposition to the opening of the gates of Canton. The crisis of 1849 happened when there were already signs of domestic unrest—unconnected with the city question—in northern Kwangtung.³ The emperor was concerned that a confrontation with foreigners might encourage the discontented elements to rebel openly. He therefore secretly instructed the Commissioner to satisfy the curiosity of the British by opening the gates just once.⁴ Hsü and Yeh of course saw the emperor's point of view, but they were on the spot and knew very well that were they to follow his instructions, they would immediately have a rebellion on their hands, and the situation would be even more difficult to control. Vivid memories of Ch'i-ying's utter humiliation as a result of his conciliatory policy made them realize that they would suffer the same fate if they yielded to Bonham's demand. On the other hand, if they respected the wishes of the people, they would have their support and might stand a chance in resisting foreign pressure. Their eventual decision to take the risk, contrary to orders from Peking, was evidence of the gravity of the situation, and how

¹ Broadlands MSS. GC/BO/83, Bowring-Palmerston, 27 March 1849.

² See my thesis, op. cit. pp. 384 ff.

³ Ibid. pp. 226 ff.

⁴ Canton Archive, 325.4.4 Imperial edict, 17 March 1849.

seriously they regarded the Canton mob. This was *politikreal* which was apparently beyond Bowring's ability to comprehend. Not surprisingly, he looked upon the Chinese authorities as the true source of the difficulties, mandarins who used the hostility of the masses as a mere pretext to keep foreigners out of the city.

At least Bowring recognized that there was undoubted hostility among the Cantonese towards the admission of aliens into their city. This was a correct observation of a true problem. However, he attributed this hostility to a long training by the officials, reasoning that if the officials were reformed, the hostility would disappear. This was his second mistake, and it had far-reaching consequences. Following his reasoning, he made no effort to understand the Cantonese position and hence reduce their fear, but persisted in attacking the mandarins for the next ten years. This meant that he was fighting the wrong enemy all the time, and therefore fighting fruitlessly.

An important question which deserves careful consideration is whether Anglo-Chinese relations had in any way suffered because of the change of Chinese foreign policy from one of conciliation to one based on *vox populi*. The history of Canton in the 1840s was marked by numerous incidents, ranging from the stoning of touring foreigners to notorious bloodshed, as exemplified in the Huang-chu-ch'i incident. Under Hsü and then Yeh, there were surprisingly few conflicts, certainly none so serious as to have been recorded in writing, official or private. One possible explanation is that in the days of Ch'i-ying, popular agitation was directed as much against foreign pressure as against their supine mandarins. After the showdown in 1849, people realized that the government was on their side and they left the conduct of foreign relations in its hands. Instead of taking advantage of this relatively quiet period in the diplomatic scene to come to a better understanding with the Chinese and to try to see their point of view, Bowring blindly continued to accuse the mandarins of obstinacy and obstruction.

Thus, no sooner had he been named Acting Superintendent of Trade during Bonham's absence in 1853 than he ventured to anticipate the pleasure of communicating in his very first dispatch that the *vexata quaestio* had been happily and peaceably decided,

and that he had been received within the walls by the high authorities of China. It should be noted that this was Bowring's response to the Foreign Secretary's specific instruction (which accompanied his temporary appointment) "not to push argument on doubtful points", nor to resort to "measures of force without previous reference home".¹ In clear contravention of orders, Bowring went ahead and applied for admission into the city. On his request being turned down, he suggested the use of force. "I venture to avail myself of the interim most respectfully, but most urgently, to suggest to Her Majesty's Government that I may be permitted to take the necessary measures for the settlement of this long protracted matter."² This caused the strictest injunction to be issued from the Foreign Office that on no account should he stir the vexed question of Canton. Bowring was held back, at least for the time being. The next year he succeeded Bonham, and hurried to declare to Yeh, the new Imperial Commissioner, that his reception at the latter's official residence was a *sine qua non*. "Should the Commissioner consent to this", he maintained, "we shall have gained a very important point; should he refuse, we shall have another substantial grievance, which will justify my proceeding to the capital."³ The result was that he had to sail north. He was, however, referred to Yeh as the only channel of diplomatic intercourse. Back in Hong Kong, he sent Medhurst to Canton to hold preliminary negotiations for revising the Treaty of Nanking. His instructions to Medhurst were preceded by one condition: to request an interview with Yeh within the city walls of Canton. The meeting never took place. On the grounds that Yeh had refused to see him, he went north again, this time as far as the mouth of the Peiho (White River, which is the entrance to Peking). Again he was disappointed. He returned to Hong Kong and went up to Canton with a fleet, blatantly trying to force Yeh's hand. Unlike Ch'i-ying, Yeh was not in the least moved. Crestfallen, Bowring returned to the colony to lick his wounds.⁴

Then the so-called *Arrow* incident occurred. It should be

¹ Hansard, 1177.

² *Ibid.* 1178.

³ *Ibid.* 1779.

⁴ For a detailed study of this episode, see my thesis, *op. cit.* pp. 397-405.

pointed out that this was the first diplomatic incident at Canton since 1849. Bowring readily seized the occasion for taking action. "Out of these troubled waters", he told his son, "I expect to extract some healing food."¹ The same day that he wrote to his son, he instructed Parkes, Acting Consul at Canton, to this effect :

You may say that I deem the matter so grave that I might probably be willing to visit the Imperial Commissioner *at his yamun in the city*.

He went on.

Cannot we use the opportunity and carry the city question? If so, I will come up with the whole fleet. I think we have now a stepping-stone from which with good management we may move on to important sequences.²

In almost every subsequent communication, he did not fail to exhort Parkes to associate the city question with the *Arrow* affair.³ He was eager too to use the incident to settle a personal account :

I think this occasion should be taken to destroy one or more of the granite monuments, which record the success of Seu's policy in keeping us out of the city. A more emphatic lesson than this could hardly be given.⁴

Considering the state of mind he was in, it was perhaps to be expected that he would once more violate the instruction from the Foreign Office not to contemplate the use of force without previous reference to the home government. The co-operation of the navy was requested, and when this was readily granted Bowring was absolutely delighted. "The Admiral has left me in excellent dispositions, and we must write a bright page in our history."⁵ First, an imperial war junk was seized. Then the forts from the anchorage at Whampoa up to Canton were silenced. When the Commissioner still refused to open the gates, the city was shelled, breaches made in the walls, an entry effected, and Yeh's office hastily ransacked. Step by step the British proceeded to extremities, until they pushed the relationship of the two nations into a state of undeclared war.⁶

¹ Ryl. Eng. MS. 1228/161, Bowring-Edgar Bowring, 16 October 1856.

² Parkes Papers, Cambridge, Bowring-Parkes, 16 October 1856.

³ See Parkes Papers, Bowring-Parkes, *passim*.

⁴ *Ibid.* 21 October 1856.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ This is an oversimplified picture of a highly complex episode. For details see my thesis *op. cit.* pp. 408-20.

All this time Bowring was waiting impatiently in Hong Kong, vainly hoping that one day an invitation would come from Yeh to a reception inside the city. After each coercive operation, he did not fail to reiterate this point. Thus after the seizure of the war junk, he wanted Parkes to hint to Yeh that his reception within the city would help to ease the tension.¹ Following the attack on the Chinese forts, he repeated the same theme every day. On 21 October 1856 he wrote, "I hope you will not lose sight of the city question. You will not demand it of course—but you will have an opportunity of saying what may help its settlement. I am quite ready to go into the city, and if Yeh will give me an official reception, it will be my care to protect myself."² The next day he said, "I wish we could carry the city question—that would be the crowning affair as regards *local* matters".³ On 23 October he again instructed Parkes, "I hope however you will be able to turn our position to the best account and if you can arrange for my *official* reception I will come up".⁴ On 24 October he wrote, "I hope Mr. Woodgate will get off two official letters whose main object is to recommend that the present opportunity—we may never have one so auspicious—be used for settling the city question, at all events as far as *our* reception at the Imperial Commissioner's yamun is concerned. . . . Of course I will come up as soon as you have arranged an official reception."⁵ Then he wondered whether he had pressed his point too far. He hesitated, and wrote a second letter on the same day, "I shall of course be anxious to ascertain how far the Admiral and you concur in the opinion that the city question may now becomingly be pressed".⁶ On receiving no answer the next day, he became still more hesitant and began to describe his motive in high-sounding terms. "In reference to the reception in the city I think it may very properly be pointed out to the people that if we had access none of the mischiefs which have befallen them would have happened."⁷ He even tried to make it appear as if the *vexata*

¹ Parkes Papers, Bowring-Parkes, 16 October 1856.

² Ibid. 21 October 1856.

³ Ibid. 22 October 1856.

⁴ Ibid. 23 October 1856.

⁵ Ibid. 24 October 1856. Woodgate was Bowring's secretary.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid. 25 October 1856.

quaestio was a matter of honour not only to himself but to Seymour as well. "There is no reason whatever that the Admiral should not see *Yeh* and a meeting might be very useful."¹ Both Seymour and Parkes assured him that they concurred with his views, which he exclaimed was a comfort, and dispelled any doubt or reservation he might still have about disclosing his true intentions. "The city question is and will be the prominent one in the public eye—and if between us all we can manage it—great glory, and great good will be the result."²

In Bowring's mind, the dispute over the *Arrow* had sunk into the background, if not into oblivion. It provided him with the excuse he needed for coercive measures to satisfy his overweening desire to enter the city. He found it increasingly difficult to remain in Hong Kong. "Though I believe my proper place is here until the Admiral has done his work I often wish I am in the Consulate."³ He was concerned that he might be deprived of the privilege of being the first British official to set foot in the city. "If things go on well", he warily wrote on 29 October, "of course some arrangement will be made for my having an official interview with *Yeh* (within the city)."⁴ What he dreaded, however, happened the very next day. Seymour made a breach in the walls and went into the city with Parkes. Naturally Bowring dared not complain to either of them. Instead, he complained of the British General. "The *General* is a nuisance", he grumbled to Parkes, "a hero of the *braggadocchio* school. I should not wonder if he proclaimed that he made the breach and headed for the forlorn hope."⁵ Meanwhile, he complacently boasted to his son :

The *vexata quaestio* left unsolved by all my predecessors I have satisfactorily settled, and with a very small loss our naval forces have entered the city of Canton.⁶

Bowring was in fact totally misrepresenting the situation. It is supremely perplexing that he could have described the entering of the city through a hole in the wall followed by a hasty retreat as a settlement of the question, and, moreover, a satisfactory settlement. It shows how unreasonably obsessed he had become with

¹ *Ibid.*

² *Ibid.* 26 October 1856.

³ *Ibid.* 27 October 1856.

⁴ *Ibid.* 29 October 1856.

⁵ *Ibid.* 31 October 1856.

⁶ Ryl. Eng. MS. 1228/162, Bowring-Edgar Bowring, 31 October 1856.

the quarrel over the city. The following extract from a speech in the House of Lords is perhaps not an undue exaggeration :

... it appears to me that on this subject of admission into Canton he is possessed with a perfect monomania. I believe he dreams of the entrance into Canton. I believe he thinks of it the first thing in the morning, the last thing at night, and in the middle of the night if he happen to awake. I do not believe he would consider any sacrifice too great, any interruption to commerce to be deplored, any bloodshed almost to be regretted, when put in the scale with the immense advantage to be derived from the fact that Sir John Bowring had obtained an official reception in the *yamun* in Canton.¹

Without the Canton city question, one wonders whether the British Plenipotentiary would have lightly gone to war with China over the *Arrow* incident, as it is clear that he used the incident as an excuse to gratify by force a long-standing personal obsession.²

Seymour's fighting his way into the city, of course, fell far short of Bowring's dreams of an official reception. Thus the dispute did not end with the breaching of the walls. It is doubtful whether Bowring actually intended to have a general war with China on the subject. He denied it, claiming that he merely wanted to press home his demands by the threat of force.³ If this were the case, and there is little evidence to prove the contrary, he was playing with fire because he did not know his enemy until it was too late. Yeh was a man of considerable talents and imagination. He was also an extraordinarily resourceful strate-

¹ Hansard, 1177. It is remarkable that Lord Derby was able to come to such a conclusion by reading only Bowring's official dispatches, which are not quite as illuminating as his private letters.

² Bowring's obsession with the Canton city question is only one of the many causes of the *Arrow* War. With entirely new sources, official and private, recently made available, notably the Canton Archive in the Public Record Office, London, the Bowring Papers in the John Rylands University Library of Manchester, the Parkes Papers at Cambridge, the Clarendon Papers at Oxford and the Palmerston Papers at the Historical Manuscripts Commission (temporarily), it has been possible to fill in an important gap in this period of the history of Anglo-Chinese relations. This is a project on which the author has been working for five years and he hopes to have his book on the subject, entitled *The Origins of the Arrow War*, published before long. Here, he wishes to extend his most grateful thanks to the authorities at the above institutions, Mr. Timings and Mr. Roper, Dr. Taylor and Miss Matheson, Mr. Owen and Mr. Gautrey, and Miss Ranger, for their more than generous assistance, especially in helping to decipher the extraordinarily difficult handwriting of Sir John Bowring.

³ See, e.g. Ryl. Eng. MS. 1228/161 ff., passim.

gist. He put down the most violent rebellion Kwangtung had ever seen. His military victories helped to shape the history of his time.¹ It may be useful to point out that Parkes's reports to Bowring on the *Arrow* incident and its aftermath are mingled with intelligence about how perilous the military situation was in Kwangtung, Kwangsi and Kiangsi.² That Yeh was at this time desperately trying to maintain order in Kwangtung, to prevent the Kwangsi rebels from invading the province along the West River, and to defend northern Kwangtung against the Taipings in Kiangsi, was true enough. Why Parkes chose at this juncture to give this information, much of which was a repetition of previous reports, is a question of interpretation. It is not unlikely that Bowring was influenced by the intelligence. He obviously thought that Yeh would almost certainly be unwilling to add foreign hostilities to domestic troubles, and would readily submit to *force majeure*. This was Bowring's third mistake, and shows that he had learnt very little, if anything, from his previous errors. As mentioned, he had gone up to Canton with the fleet in December 1854 blatantly trying to force Yeh's hands. This action was taken at the height of a devastating local rebellion. "I hope", he told Lord Clarendon, "that the extreme perplexities of the Chinese authorities, with the country all around them in confusion and conflagration, and the city menaced daily by the rebel forces, would have induced the mandarins to grant me an official and amicable interview, in order to discuss matters which interest them so deeply."³ However, he was bitterly disappointed. "I am sorry to say", he went on, "even the straits to which they are reduced have so little abated their obstinate pride and unteachable ignorance, that they still turn a deaf ear to my well-meant proposals which have been made to them in two verbal messages and in the formal communication dated 20 instant."⁴

Bowring's repeated proposals included measures to protect the foreign communities at Canton. These measures were not as

¹ See my thesis, *op. cit.* pp. 226 ff.

² F.O. 17.251, Bowring-Clarendon, Desp. 334. Incl. Parkes-Bowring, 13 October 1856.

³ F.O. 17.218, Bowring-Clarendon, Desp. 237, 25 December 1854.

⁴ *Ibid.*

insignificant as they might appear at first sight. At this stage of the insurrection, the rebel fleets constituted the greatest menace to that city. To protect the foreign communities, which were settled along the waterfront in the southwestern part of Canton, Bowring would obviously have to place several gunboats in the Canton river and presumably a few more along the Pearl River to keep open the communications between Hong Kong and Canton, by which rice and other provisions were imported to save the Cantonese from starvation. In this way Bowring could have contributed substantially towards the intensification of Yeh's war efforts. The political implications were even more important. The rebels would no doubt interpret the step taken by the British Plenipotentiary as co-operation with their government to suppress the uprising, which had seriously disrupted foreign trade. Their morale would suffer, perhaps irrevocably. However, Yeh was not prepared to sacrifice his principle of *vox populi vox Dei* in return for these benefits. In making this decision, he was not acting as an ignorant and obstinate mandarin, as Bowring depicted him. On the contrary, he showed himself to be an outstanding statesman who was capable of sound judgement. Of course he knew that the implicit assistance of British forces might deal a severe blow to the rebels. But he also realized that, by opening the gates of Canton to foreigners, he would lose the loyalty of the gentry and of the ordinary people, whose support had been indispensable in the suppression of the rebellion. He might even turn them against him, and his government would collapse overnight. Whereas Bowring thought that the bargain was undoubtedly to the advantage of the Chinese authorities, Yeh was able to perceive that it could cut both ways. From his abusive language it is clear that the impetuous Bowring was much inferior to Yeh in his ability to make correct observations and in good judgement. Fortunately, he had at least refrained from the use of arms to open the gates of Canton on this occasion. After the *Arrow* incident, however, he could no longer stop at a mere display of force. He obviously thought that if the sight of battleships did not move the Imperial Commissioner, the report of guns would.

Much to Bowring's disappointment, Yeh was not in the least

stampeded.¹ Instead, quietly but resolutely he began to organize a campaign of resistance.² Thus although Admiral Seymour had laid the city at the mercy of his cannon, he did not receive a favourable response from Yeh when he demanded that the Viceroy should meet him within the city.³ The Admiral intensified the bombardment. Yeh knew that he could not fight his enemy face to face, because of inferior firing-power. He therefore ingeniously employed guerrilla tactics, harassing the British gunboats day and night with attacks from primitive hand-grenades, underwater explosives and fire-rafts. He also ordered his troops to take advantage of their intimate knowledge of the geographical conditions of the area to conduct a highly mobile warfare, and his fleet of war junks to hide in creeks too shallow for steamers to enter, using every opportunity, such as darkness and heavy fog, to attack the enemy. The forts which the British troops had occupied were slowly encircled and reduced to a state of siege. Captain Bate, for example, wrote from one of the forts, "We are now so completely isolated that letters from our friends and shots and rockets from the Chinese are the only springs of pleasure and excitement that we have".⁴ Seymour became increasingly alarmed at the danger of being cut off from Hong Kong. What brute force could not achieve, diplomacy might. Therefore he gladly complied with Bowring's request to send a steamer to fetch him to Canton.⁵ Unfortunately, the British Plenipotentiary again failed to show tact or wisdom. His communication to Yeh was a mixture of threats and appeals for a settlement on the basis of world order and harmony. G. F. Bartle comments that such words as world order and world harmony came "strangely from

¹ See, e.g. Hsia Hsieh, *op. cit.* 13.7a; Hsieh Fu-ch'eng, "Shu Han-yang Yeh-hsiang Kuang-chou chih-pien", *Yung-an hsü-pien* (1897); Hua T'ing-chieh, "Ch'u-fan shih-mo", *Chin-tai-shih tzu-liao* (Peking, 1956), p. 2; Ch'i-hsien-ho shang tiao-sou, pseud. *Ying-chi-li Kuang-tung ju-ch'eng shih-mo* (1929), 7b. All Chinese sources agree that Yeh was unusually calm during the war, but it should be noted that his behaviour was greeted not with praise but with ridicule. For details, see my thesis, *op. cit.*

² *Ibid.* 411-32.

³ Ryl. Eng. MS. 1228/162, Bowring-Edgar Bowring, 31 October 1856.

⁴ Parkes Papers, Bate-Mrs. Parkes, 23 February 1857.

⁵ Parkes Papers, Bowring-Parkes, 14 November 1856.

one who had already authorized the bombardment of the city ”.¹ Not surprisingly, Bowring could “ produce *no* impression on the obstinacy of the Imperial Commissioner ”. He went on, “ But the insult is I cannot get entrance and he continues to re-iterate that Bonham withdrew our claims for ever, . . . convincing us that nothing but his utter humiliation will enable us successfully to negotiate ”.² Hence he handed back to the military the task of pressing for a reception within the city. However, Yeh did not show himself to be “ *pressable* ”, and Bowring was at a complete loss what to do with “ such unmanageable material ”.³

Bowring was in a dilemma. He had put himself in far too forward a position to retreat with ease. It is not true that Yeh had not given him sufficient room to withdraw gracefully ; but he arrogantly dismissed all Yeh’s overtures until it was too late for him to retreat without loss of face. Two days after the seizure of the imperial war junk, on 16 October 1856, Yeh sent Howqua to approach Parkes unofficially for a settlement of the *Arrow* dispute. Bowring merely used the occasion to insist on what was to Yeh an impossible condition, namely, an official reception of the British Plenipotentiary within the yamen of the Chinese Imperial Commissioner in the city.⁴ After two more days, Yeh sent another envoy, this time a foreign merchant called Sturgis directly to Bowring in Hong Kong. Again, the Superintendent of trade only took the opportunity to hint to “ Mr. Sturgis that our fleet was strong ”.⁵ This was Bowring’s fourth, and most serious, mistake. Subsequently, as has been mentioned, the British fleet went up to Canton on 20 October to shell the city. This cornered Yeh, who had therefore to show his people that, unlike Ch’i-ying, he was not a spineless diplomat. He returned blow for blow, and suddenly Bowring awoke to the fact that he had made war on China. Thus, when the matter was referred to London, the task of Palmerston’s Cabinet was not one of deciding whether Great

¹ G. F. Bartle, “ Sir John Bowring and the *Arrow* War in China ”, BULLETIN, xliii (1960-1), 303.

² Ryl. Eng. MS. 1228/163, Bowring-Edgar Bowring, 21 November 1856.

³ Ryl. Eng. MS. 1228/165, 29 November 1856.

⁴ Parkes Papers, Bowring-Parkes, 16 October 1856.

⁵ Ibid. 18 October 1856.

Britain should fight China, but whether she should support an undeclared war already started, without authority, by her representative in the Far East. As might have been expected, Bowring's conduct, as well as that of Parkes, was the cause of some of the most fierce debates in Parliamentary history, and the government was actually defeated when the matter was put to the vote. This will be the subject of a separate study. It suffices here to say that although Palmerston won the subsequent general election, he stripped Bowring of his Plenipotentiary powers and forbade him to leave Hong Kong or even to communicate with the Chinese authorities.¹ Instead, he sent Lord Elgin as Plenipotentiary Extraordinary to settle the dispute.

In conclusion, a passage in the *Bolton Chronicle* about Bowring's initial diplomatic appointment to the Far East in 1848 provides some food for thought :

Our relations with China have long been in a critical condition and require perhaps more than any other place the presence of a man of recognized position, sound judgment, great discretion and untiring ever watchful activity. Now where are the evidences of the possession of any of these qualifications by Dr. Bowring?²

¹ Ryl. Eng. MS. 1228/186, Bowring-Edgar Bowring, 11 June 1857.

² *Bolton Chronicle*, 23 December 1848, cited in Bartle's thesis op. cit. pp. 413-14.