The British Occupation of Macau and Mid-Qing Period Diplomatic Policy

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On 21 September 1808, British troops deployed from India landed on Macau despite the opposition of the Macau and Canton governments. This article analyses how the Qing dynasty dealt with the incident as an expression of its diplomatic policy at the time.

Although the Governor-General of Liangguang, Wu Xiongguang, and the Canton government was kept abreast of the situation around Macau in real time through the information provided by the Senado of Macau and the Xiangshan county government, he did not report this information to Beijing, because of the understanding among provincial governors, the Grand Council and Emperor Jiageng that provincial officials were expected to manage certain problems in their jurisdictions without having to report on them in detail. Accordingly, it was recognised that the most important aspect of governing the Guangdong coast was maintaining security and collecting maritime customs tariffs. This is why at the beginning of the Macau incident, the Chinese authorities avoided exaggerating the situation, although they were well aware of the demands of the British. It was only after the Grand Council perceived an "arrogant" tone in a letter sent to Wu from the British admiral, William O’Brien Drury that the Emperor became furious and ordered the Governor-General to block the British troops. Furthermore, the Emperor dismissed Wu because of his passive attitude towards the British. After the troops left the Island, however, the Emperor, after reconfirming the importance of securing the coast and insuring customs revenue, permitted the continuation of Sino-British trade.

This fluctuating attitude in Chinese diplomatic policy stems from a necessity to represent the Qing dynasty as a strong empire, despite the need for customs revenue. During the first decade of the nineteenth century, the Qing Dynasty was perceived as the most powerful country in the world in the minds of its people; and China was, in fact, unrivalled in East Asia after the fall of Dzungars in 1757. Therefore, the Qing Dynasty had to promote itself as the world’s most powerful country and a “heavenly dynasty” (天朝) for public opinion sake. In other words, the Dynasty displayed two diplomatic attitudes:

one attaching importance to national security and customs revenue; the other displaying Qing China as the most powerful dynasty under heaven for the people. This duality is also apparent in the documentation, in which confidential memorials and vermilion rescripts (敕谕) were employed by high ranking officials and the Emperor to pursue the former, while palace memorials and court letters were used to pursue the latter.