

On John Francis Davis and “Reticent” Policy

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On the eve of the Opium War, J. F. Davis, His Majesty’s Chief Superintendent of British Trade in China, put forward “Reticent” policy to ease the Sino-British relations after “Napier’s Fizzle”. The “Reticent” policy is an informal foreign policy towards China, the main purpose of which is to safeguard Britain’s economic interests in China. However, due to the compromise of this policy, it aroused the dissatisfaction and resistance of British businessmen in China, so it was not implemented for a long time. After the “Reticent” policy failed, the British government turned to the “gunboat” policy.

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About the “Reticent” policy on the eve of the Opium War, the domestic and foreign academic circles have been involved in many related studies, but few have discussed J. F. Davis, the proponent of this policy. J. F. Davis (1795-1890), a British sinologist, was the last President of the Select Committee of the British East India Company Canton Factory, Her Majesty’s Plenipotentiary in China after the Opium War, Chief Superintendent of the Trade of Her Majesty’s Subjects in China, the Second Governor and Commander-in-Chief of Hong Kong. J. F. Davis is an important figure in the history of British relations with China. In fact, long before he became the British plenipotentiary in China, he had already participated in diplomacy with China. In 1816, he served as an interpreter and accompanied the Amherst Embassy on its northern journey to seek an audience with Emperor Jiaqing. In 1834, as the Chief Superintendent of British Trade in China, J. F. Davis put forward the famous policy of “Reticent”.

Background of the “Reticent” Policy: “Napier’s Fizzle”

Since the establishment of formal commercial relations between China and Britain, the British East India Company has maintained a monopoly on trade with China. Under the impact of the wave of free trade, the British Parliament passed a new act in August 1833, which decided to abolish the East India Company’s monopoly on trade with China from April 22, 1834. On December 9, the King of England issued a royal decree, stipulating that all the powers and jurisdiction exercised by the Select Committee of the East India Company Canton Factory over trade and merchants before April 21, 1834 would be temporarily exercised by the Superintendent of Commerce to be appointed (Irish University Press, 1971, pp. 15-16).

On 10 December, the Privy Council issued a royal decree appointing Napier as the Chief Superintendent of British Trade in China, and W. H. C. Plowden and J. F. Davis, former Presidents of the Select Committee of the

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East India Company Canton Factory, as Second and Third Superintendent. Since W. H. C. Plowden had left China before his appointment, J. F. Davis was promoted to Second Superintendent, and G. B. Robinson, a former Select Committee member who had also served the East India Company for many years, was appointed Third Superintendent.

According to the royal decree signed by the King of England on December 31, the basic function of the Superintendent of British Trade in China was to do its utmost to protect and promote the interests of British subjects in China, to negotiate peacefully with Chinese officials, and not to ask for the protection of the British Army and navy except as a last resort (Morse, 2000, pp. 137-138). This is an important change in the relationship between the two countries. The Superintendents of British Trade in China will replace the Select Committee of the Canton Factory in dealing directly with China, and the official relationship will replace the unofficial relationship. As a result, commercial interests are no longer the only factor Britain needs to consider, and it is more important to seek a reciprocal relationship with the Chinese authorities. However, the British Government was uncertain about the prospects for the development of Sino-British relations, and the Foreign Secretary Palmerston, in his instruction to Napier on January 25, 1834, particularly emphasized the limitation of the negotiation authority of the Superintendents of British Trade in China:

You should refrain from any new dealings or negotiations with the Chinese authorities, except in very urgent and unforeseen circumstances. However, if it seems to you that there is any chance of such negotiations, you shall immediately report the situation to His Majesty's Government and ask for instructions; until these instructions have been received, however, you shall take no action other than those which have a general tendency to convince the Chinese authorities that the King of England sincerely wishes to cultivate the most friendly relations with the Emperor of China, and to take any measures with the Emperor of China which may promote the happiness and prosperity of their own subjects. (Hu, 1993, p. 2)

As early as 1831, when the Guangdong authorities learned through the hong merchants that the status of the East India Company in China might change, the then Governor Li Hongbin wrote to the then President of the Select Committee to return home: If the company was dissolved, the British Government should still send a head to Guangzhou to manage the foreign trade and shipping affairs of the country (Morse, 1966, pp. 246-247). It follows from this that the Chinese expected a commercial steward of the same nature as the Select Committee of Canton Factory, but the British Government appointed a government diplomat to China and did not inform the Qing Government of the appointment of Napier in advance, and Napier himself did not bring any identification documents to the Chinese authorities. Not only that, Palmerston also instructed Napier to “write to the Governor stating that you have arrived in Canton” (Hu, 1993, p. 2). It can be said that Britain's unilateral change not only broke the previous balance between the traders and the Select Committee, but also laid the groundwork for the deterioration of Sino-British relations.

On July 15, 1834, Napier and his party arrived in Macao; J. F. Davis joined the delegation. Napier changed the previous practice of the Canton Factory, refused the request of the hong merchants to transfer the letter, not only entered Guangzhou on July 25, but also directly sent a parallel document to the Governor of Guangdong Lu Kun, asking for a meeting with the other side. According to the usual practice, foreigners are only allowed to live in Macao when they come to Guangdong. If a foreigner had something to ask the government of Guangdong for a solution, he would always post a report to the Governor of Guangdong, and the hong merchants would report it to the governor on his behalf. Therefore, in the view of the Chinese side, this act by Napier was disrespectful and offensive. Lu Kun refused to accept the document and ordered Napier to return to Macao immediately. Napier

refused, so Lu Kun interrupted the Sino-British trade. In view of Napier’s outrageous attitude and risky behavior, Lu Kun ordered the closure of the trading house and cut off supplies, and the Sino-British conflict escalated until it led to a military conflict. The situation was out of control, and Napier was forced to leave Guangzhou for Macao on September 21. Six days later, Sino-British trade resumed as normal, in what became known as the “Napier’s Fizzle”.

Unlike Napier, J. F. Davis, as Second Superintendent, had extensive experience dealing with the Canton authorities, so he advocated a peacekeeping approach from the beginning and opposed Napier’s hardline stance. However, Napier left J. F. Davis in Macao when he left for Canton, and without consulting him, attempted to contact Governor Lu Kun directly. Regarding the rejection of the instrument, J. F. Davis observed that it did seem to be an act of sovereignty to which all states would adhere. He advised Napier to appeal to the Beijing court for fair and lenient treatment by the Guangzhou authorities and to explain the benefits of direct communication with Beijing. But Napier told him he was not to have any correspondence or contact with Beijing unless authorised by Her Majesty’s Government (Davis, 1857, pp. 114-117). More importantly, Napier argued that the East India Company had been too soft on the Chinese in the past, resulting in “nothing but shame and humiliation”. Instead of following the advice of J. F. Davis, he joined forces with radical free traders, and even urged the government to issue further instructions “to act with firmness and force... Make the governor punished” (Hu, 1993, pp. 17-19).

The reasons for Napier’s failure were not only his personal stubbornness, but also the ambiguity and even self-contradiction of the instructions given to him. There are a lot of studies on this by domestic and foreign scholars, which will not be described here. However, it is certain that as the Chief Superintendent of British Trade in China, Napier not only failed to get the recognition of the Guangdong authorities in China, but was expelled and died of illness in Macao on October 11, which can be said to be a tragedy of his life. At the national level, “Napier’s Fizzle” further exacerbated Sino-British tensions. Prior to this, China had only maintained trade relations with western countries such as the United Kingdom, and foreigners coming to China were businessmen and could only deal with traders directly, and Napier’s insistence on reciprocal exchanges with the Chinese government made the latter deeply ashamed:

The first defense between China and foreign countries is the system. There is no way to find out whether the barbarian has an official position or not. Even if he is actually an official of the country, he cannot be parallel to the letters of the officials of the Celestial Empire. It is related to the state system, so he is not involved in a little accommodation, which leads to contempt. (Qi, Lin, & Shou, 1957, p. 119)

So it encountered the Chinese resolute resistance. G. T. Staunton commented: A change of this magnitude should be put into practice with great care. Unfortunately for Napier, his numerous conflicts with the Qing court eventually led to his death from diseases that could have been prevented (Staunton, 1856, p. 57). According to J. F. Davis, Napier’s misfortune was that from the beginning he was placed in a position where he could not immediately perform his duties fully. “There is no doubt that if Napier had been allowed greater discretion and temporarily suspended its functions, the subsequent unfortunate incident might have been avoided” (Davis, 1857, pp. 115, 117), he added. It has to be said that J. F. Davis has maintained a clear understanding in “Napier’s Fizzle” after years of working experience in Canton Factory.

“Napier’s Fizzle” represents another setback for Britain’s attempts to establish formal official relations with China. J. F. Davis judged the situation in Guangzhou on the basis of years of experience in China: Her Majesty’s Government has not yet gained sufficient weight with the authorities or merchants in China to replace the

commercial influence of the East India Company Canton Factory (Davis, 1857, p. 128). After “Napier’s Fizzle”, the question of how to deal with the Guangdong authorities became a priority for Napier’s successor.

J. F. Davis Proposed “Reticent” Policy

After Napier’s death, J. F. Davis succeeded him as the Chief Superintendent of British Trade in China, Robinson was promoted to the Second Superintendent, and J. H. Astell, Former Secretary of the Canton Factory, became the Third Superintendent. Guangdong authorities have repeatedly said they need a “businessmen” rather than a British official (Morse, 2000, p. 167), meaning that the status of the superintendent is still not recognized by the Chinese. For J. F. Davis and his colleagues, “there was obviously nothing left to do but await the final decisions and arrangements of His Majesty’s Government” (Hu, 1993, p. 68).

While waiting for the British Government to adjust its short-term policy toward China, faced with the favorable situation of reopening Sino-British trade, J. F. Davis pursued a so-called the “Reticent” policy, that is, in the absence of any friendly gestures from the Chinese side, “Absolute silence and quiescence would seem to be the most appropriate approach until further instructions are received from the country”. He told Palmerston that nothing was at stake in this course of action, that the shipping business continued, and, more importantly, that it might make local authorities in Guangdong “uncertain and anxious about the future”, and “we can take advantage of it”. At the same time, in order to avoid provoking the Qing Government, J. F. Davis asked British subjects in China to perform their duties “so as to avoid or prevent giving the Chinese a plausible opportunity to complain” (Hu, 1993, pp. 44, 54-55).

It is not difficult to see that the purpose of the “Reticent” policy is to ease the tension between China and Britain caused by “Napier’s Fizzle”, so as to safeguard Britain’s economic interests in China. After the resumption of trade in Canton, J. F. Davis gave a very optimistic assessment of the situation, believing that the Guangdong authorities were eager to continue trade. As a result, he not only abandoned his intention to move to Guangzhou and remain in Macao, but also began to consider postponing his departure from China for another year (Hu, 1993, pp. 47-48).

On October 28, 1834, J. F. Davis reported to Palmerston that nothing had so far occurred to impede the normal and peaceful progress of British trade between Canton and Lingding. He advised the British Government to lodge a complaint with Beijing, explaining that such an approach is not only permitted in China, but has a historical precedent of success. More importantly, there was another advantage to this approach: Simply sending a letter rather than having to send an envoy through the “inconvenient and costly” way could avoid the problems of protocol that followed (Davis, 1857, p. 120). J. F. Davis reiterated in his report that they would

remain absolutely silent while trade proceeded normally and pending further instructions from the British Government, except in the event which is likely to be decided very soon, when the Chinese Government automatically makes these overtures of goodwill, which may permit the resumption of negotiations. (Hu, 1993, pp. 45-46)

In early November, the British merchants in Canton received advice from the governor that they should nominate “a trading master” who would be accountable to the local authorities in Canton for the conduct of his countrymen. The English merchants replied on the 10th that no one should have this power without the permission of the King; As a result of the King’s appointment, officials have been sent to Guangzhou. On the 11th, informed of this information, J. F. Davis wrote again to Palmerston, stating that he would take advantage of every favorable

opportunity to start negotiations with the local authorities in Guangdong, but he also stressed that any solution should be the result of mutual needs of both sides, and the current situation was obviously inappropriate to take the initiative. (Hu, 1993, pp. 52-56). In addition, He argued that “our commercial and political contacts with China have been restored, and British representatives need to have control over British subjects, supported by the navy” (Davis, 1857, p. 124).

J. F. Davis’ decision to pursue “Reticent” policy was not without evidence; as an employee of the East India Company for many years, and as the last President of the Selected Committee of Canton Factory, he was inevitably influenced by the company’s experience in dealing with Sino-British trade. For the East India Company, commercial interests came first, so the company’s approach to China was relatively conservative. As to why he chose the “Reticent” policy, J. F. Davis explained in detail in his last letter to Palmerston before leaving office:

I knew that, after Napier’s death, I could take two diametric courses of action in place of the one which, in my best judgment, and with the full consent of the whole committee, I had carried out... First, I can test the effect of one measure... I mean withdraw those ships from the Pearl River and cease trade on our part. I do not deny that this may cause the local government a great deal of temporary embarrassment, but this measure was unsuccessful between 1829 and 1830... The results of such a detention of private vessels would be disastrous and would be a serious blow to future trade with this country. On the other hand, I could do the exact opposite, which is to immediately obey the orders of the local government and go to Guangzhou to put myself under the management of the hong merchants... But in the present circumstances, undue and premature capitulation on our part would prove to be an unhelpful measure, if not a harmful one... We had reason to hope that total silence and the absence of any further attempts to negotiate with the Guangzhou authorities during the referral to its government might have a favourable effect. (Hu, 1993, pp. 65-67)

This letter from J. F. Davis indicates that the “Reticent” policy is only expedient until further instructions are given by the British Government. Nevertheless, the policy has been strongly opposed by British businessmen in China who are not willing to sit back and wait. On December 9, 1834, a group of 64 members, led by opium traders William Jardine and James Matheson, wrote a letter to the King of England in the name of the Sino-British Business Association, fiercely attacking the “Reticent” policy. Of all the lines to be followed in negotiations with the Chinese Government or any of its officials, “the least safe”, they noted, “is to yield silently to insults, or to show unresisting patience with contemptuous or unfair treatment which might imperil honor or doubt the power of our country... If we do not firmly resist these propositions in the negotiations, we cannot expect anything substantially beneficial to come out of them”. They proposed that a “plenipotentiary envoy of appropriate rank, prudence, and diplomatic experience”, accompanied by a sufficient naval force, be authorized to go directly north to negotiate with the Qing Government to obtain compensation for Napier’s insults. Moreover, they pointed the finger directly at J. F. Davis, arguing that the task should not be given to “anyone who has had the misfortune to endure indignities or injuries at the hands of the Chinese authorities, whether in an official or private capacity” (Hu, 1993, pp. 57-61).

In fact, as early as J. F. Davis was appointed, the free traders ridiculed him, saying that “a man who grew up in the late school of Monopoly could never be a representative and manager of free traders” (Welsh, 1993, p. 74). Napier was a senior official appointed by the King of England, while J. F. Davis was from the Select Committee of the East India Company Canton Factory, which was not a reassuring thing for the merchants who had just been released from the jurisdiction of the Select Committee, “In our opinion, he will betray British commercial interests in China” (Napier, 1995, p. 211). They further believe that if the policy of “Reticent” is adopted, all past humiliations will be left in the record books as a precedent for future adjustments in relations

between Chinese and outsiders. The “Reticent” policy is harmful on business, political, social, and moral grounds; if it is allowed to continue, it will prevent all business relations from improving (Guangdong Provincial Research Institute of Culture and History, 1983, pp. 38-39).

J. F. Davis’ Resignation and the End of “Reticent” Policy

The “Reticent” policy was intended to protect the legitimate trade of Guangzhou, but to J. F. Davis’ surprise, while this policy ensured the normal conduct of trade between China and Britain, it left the Superintendent of British Trade in China virtually powerless to exercise their nominal jurisdiction over British merchants in China. Due to the non-recognition of the Guangdong authorities, the superintendents could not enter Guangzhou and could not negotiate with the Guangdong authorities, and they were basically in a dispensable position. At the same time, illicit trade such as opium smuggling has grown to an unprecedented scale. J. F. Davis once said:

During the period when the East India Company administered Canton trade, the total volume of British smuggling was not only much less, but they had the power and means to keep it effectively confined to Lingding and the coastal areas. So no matter how bad the traffic is, no matter how corrupt the customs officials are, at least there is some decency. (Davis, 1857, p. 125)

However, in the first year after the withdrawal of the East India Company, Chinese opium imports soared to 20,000 cases (Morse, 2000, p. 239), about equal to the previous three years combined (Yan, 2012, p. 20).

After “Napier’s Fizzle”, the British Cabinet was unable to form any clear policy on China. When Palmerston left office in November 1834, the new Foreign Secretary, Arthur Wellesley, approved of Davis’s “Reticent” policy, but Davis was not aware of it from China. For J. F. Davis, the awkwardness between the disapproval of the Cantonese authorities and the dissatisfaction and resistance of the British merchants led to his growing frustration with Chinese affairs. He believed that the government should take a firm and consistent stance towards China to ease the embarrassment caused by “Napier’s Fizzle” and gradually put Britain’s trade with China on a more secure footing. He had asked London for instructions, but received no.

In January 1835, after only a hundred days in office, J. F. Davis resigned as the Chief Superintendent of British Trade in China. On 19 January, he handed over Napier’s commission, office seal, and all official documents to Robinson and sailed back to England. When J. F. Davis left, he ordered his colleagues continuing the “Reticent” policy, which was indeed consistently pursued by his successor, Robinson. Sino-British trade was not affected by Davis’ departure, and a year later Robinson even declared that “during the sixteen years I have been working in China, I have never seen a more peaceful, normal, or, as I believe, more prosperous season than now” (Hu, 1993, p. 98). However, Robinson’s situation was not much different from that of J. F. Davis, and he was eventually replaced by Charles Elliot, who gained the recognition of British businessmen in China.

On 7 June 1836, Palmerston informed Robinson that, as the British Government was preparing to reduce its presence in China in order to save money, “His Majesty’s Government has decided to abolish the post and salary of the Chief Superintendent... Your duties will cease from the date of receipt of this letter” (Hu, 1993, p. 100). On December 14, Robinson handed over the archives and seals to Charles Elliot, and the “Reticent” policy ended with Robinson’s departure. Since then, the responsibility of the Superintendents of British Trade in China has been transferred to Charles Elliot, and the British government’s policy toward China has become increasingly tough, until it finally turned to the “gunboat policy”.

Conclusion

To sum up, during the whole process of “Napier’s Fizzle”, the Guangdong authorities had been trying to control the situation and quell the conflict, but they had always insisted on the old system, that is, the Guangzhou trading system could not be challenged. Therefore, when the British Government was temporarily unable to change the status quo of Sino-British relations and adopted the “Reticent” policy, the Guangdong authorities only devoted themselves to preventing the Superintendents of British Trade in China from entering Guangzhou or making unnecessary contacts with them, but they had no awareness of the changes of British businessmen in China, and had no foresight that the British Government would soon provoke a war with China in order to maintain the opium trade. As a result, it was completely passive after the outbreak of the war in 1840.

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