

# “We are as babies under nurses”: Thomas Manning (1772–1840) and Sino-British Relations in the Early Nineteenth Century\*

*Lawrence Wang-chi Wong*  
*The Chinese University of Hong Kong*

## *Abstract*

Described by Charles Lamb as “a man in a thousand,” Thomas Manning developed a very strong interest in China at a time when there were less than a handful of British who had studied Chinese. Through different means and channels, he learned the Chinese language, and then went to Canton (Guangzhou), Hué in Annam (Vietnam), and Calcutta to look for an opportunity to enter inland China. Between 1807 and 1816, he occasionally translated for the East India Company in Canton. In 1811, he successfully reached Lhasa, Tibet, being the first British ever to reach this sacred place. A keen advocate for an embassy to Peking, he went as far as writing to King George III to urge him to send one. He claimed that he should be enlisted because his proficiency in Chinese had surpassed that of all Europeans. He was appointed one of the four translators when the Amherst Mission was finally sent in 1816. After the mission, he brought two Chinese to London, with a plan to teach some British to learn Chinese there before they went to China. Despite his legendary life, Manning has not been much studied by historians of Sino-British relations. Based on newly available materials, the present paper examines the life of this “eccentric” genius, redrawing his unique and uneven path as a Sinologist in the first half of the nineteenth century.

## *Keywords*

Thomas Manning, Canton System, Sino-British relations, Sinologists,  
Amherst Mission