

**Thomas Manning (1772-1840):
the Eccentric Translator of the Amherst Mission**

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Born in Norfolk, Thomas Manning was trained as a mathematician at the Cambridge University. Described by Charles Lamb as “a man in a thousand,” he developed a very strong interest in China at a time when there were less than a handful 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 get to this mysterious and sacred place and visit Dalai Lama at the Potala Palace. A keen advocate for an embassy to Peking, he went as far as writing to King George III to urge him to do so. He even claimed that he should be enlisted because his proficiency in Chinese had surpassed any European. When the Amherst Mission was finally sent in 1816, Manning was one of the four translators, together with the better known ones like Robert Morrison and Francis Davis. But he was disliked by Lord Amherst and hence made very little contribution to the Mission. Despite his legendary life, Manning has not caught much attention of the historians of Sino-British relations. The present paper examines the life of this “eccentric” genius, redrawing his unique and uneven path as a Sinologist from Cambridge to Peking.