

Records of the Maritime Customs Service of China 1854 – 1949

Part One: Inspector General's Circulars

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This part of the collection draws on the rich archives of the Maritime Customs Service of China (中国海关) and collects its Circulars (通令) from 1854, when the Maritime Customs Service was established, until the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949. Circulars were issued by the Service's head, the Inspector General (总税务司).

They were confidential documents to which only senior Customs officials such as Customs Commissioners (税务司) had access. Like Imperial Edicts, they were law until explicitly superseded by a new Circular. They were the key texts of the Customs Service.

The activities of the Customs Service were wide ranging. It assessed duties on

Chinese trade, established and maintained China's lighthouses, mapped China's coast and major rivers, and ran a Preventive Service that combated smuggling. It policed rivers, harbours and railroad lines. It published not just monthly, quarterly and annual *Returns of Trade*, but also a regular series of *Aids to Navigation* and less regular reports on meteorological conditions and medical phenomena. The Service further involved itself in China's diplomacy, organised its representation at nearly 30 world fairs and exhibitions, and ran various educational establishments.

Circulars tell us how the Customs Service organised itself, discharged its routines and responded to events. More than 7,000 Circulars were issued in the course of the Customs Service's pre-1949 existence.

Given the centrality of Circulars in the Customs Service and the Service's importance to China as it struggled with foreign invasion, civil warfare, modernisation, globalisation and revolution, the online publication of this set of Circulars is critical to the effective exploration of the 55,000 files of the Maritime Customs Service Archives held in Nanjing at the Second Historical Archives of China. This is an invaluable new resource for the study of China, and the publication of the Circulars will help historians make effective use of it.

As a foreign-staffed service, the Imperial Chinese Maritime Customs originated in the establishment at Shanghai on 12 July 1854 of a Board of Inspectors to oversee the re-establishment of trade after months of disruption caused by the Taiping rebellion. Other aims were to break up existing patterns of taxation in which personal connections had been important and to prevent countries without treaty relations with China, and hence no obligation to pay duty, from driving the British, French and Americans from the China trade. In 1858, the Tianjin treaties extended the Shanghai system to all treaty ports. Horatio Nelson Lay was the first Inspector General (IG), but it was his

successor, Robert Hart, appointed in 1863, who oversaw the development of the service until the first decade of the twentieth century. He was followed by Francis Aglen (1911-29), Frederick Maze (1929-43) and Lester Knox Little (1943-50). Acting and Officiating IGs had full authority to issue Circulars.¹

The bedrock of the Customs Service consisted of regular flows of information in tables, forms, reports and letters from Customs Stations to the Inspectorate in Peking, and of instructions from Peking to the ports. The intricate repertoire of different communications – among them Despatches (训令/申呈/详报), Semi-Official Letters (半官性函件) and Memoranda (节略) – was surmounted by the IG Circular, first issued by Hart in 1861. The Circular dealt with issues of relevance to all Customs Houses and Commissioners. Until it was withdrawn or explicitly superseded it remained in force. The corpus of IG Circulars therefore formed a working set of instructions covering all aspects of Customs work. Numbered in sequence, they were eventually issued in three series. Series 1 contained those issued between 1861-75, and these were numbered in sequence for each year.

¹ The most prominent of these would be: Sir Robert Bredon (1908-10), A.H.F. Edwardes (1927-29), and C.H.B. Joly (1941-42).

Series 2 was issued from 1875, and numbered in one continuous sequence. At least 7,500 of them had been issued by 1949. Series 3 Circulars (Factory Products Circulars) passed on instructions about duty treatment of certain products from the Shuiwuchu (税处) (Bureau of Fiscal Affairs), to which the Customs Service was responsible from 1906, and its successor, the Guanwushu (处) (Bureau of Customs Affairs) from 1928.

Circular 9 of 1875 announced that henceforward all Circulars would be printed and authenticated by the signature of the Statistical Secretary. About 100 Circulars were issued a year. They were reissued in bound form in batches of 200 by the Statistical Department's press about once every two or three years. These bound volumes formed the core of every Commissioner's library. They outlined the philosophy of the Service, signalled important changes in overall Customs policy or in political circumstances, introduced and regulated changes to the scope of the Service's activities, and circulated decisions about its administrative or taxation routines. Some are general and discursive in tone, while others are highly technical and specific. From 1911 onwards Semi-Official (半关性)

Circulars were also issued. After 1944, a Chungking Inspectorate General Series (渝常字) was initiated to convey "instructions for general information only". This was continued until 1946 as the General Series (常字) with no change of sequence.

War disrupted this system. After the onset of the Sino-Japanese war in 1937, Frederick Maze maintained the Inspectorate in Shanghai's International Settlement, not occupied by the Japanese until after Pearl Harbour. The Wang Jingwei National Government sponsored by the Japanese dismissed Maze. Chiang Kaishek's National Government in response ordered C.H.B. Joly to establish the Inspectorate in Chongqing, the wartime capital, which he did on 16 December 1942. From 1942-45 two Inspector Generals – Horiuchi Kishimoto (岸本廣吉) in Shanghai, and successively Joly, Maze and Little in Chongqing – issued IG Circulars. To demonstrate the legitimacy of the Kishimoto regime (known in Chinese as the 'wei', or 'bogus') customs, the Circulars issued, starting with No.5769 on 11 December 1941 (announcing the appointment of the Japanese IG) maintained the existing sequence down to No.5918, 23 August 1945, which announced his resignation. In Chongqing, Joly began a Chungking

Inspectorate Series (C.I.S., 渝字) in December 1941. In December 1945, precisely to demonstrate the illegitimacy of the Kishimoto customs, the Deputy Inspector General ordered the C.I.S. Circulars to be renumbered for future publication starting at No.5769. The 'bogus' Circulars were thereby removed from the record, although they were not removed from the archive and they can be found here as well.

Circulars were restricted documents. They formed part of the confidential archives of each Commissioner's office. They belonged to the Office Series of Customs publications, not to be sold, "retained privately or lent to others for perusal" (see Circular No.179 of 2 February 1882). Although confidential "several of them are intended for the information of a Commissioner's subordinates generally, and are to be dealt with as directed". However, the point was reiterated periodically that they were confidential, indeed more so than despatches (Circular No.902). Circular No.179 was quite clear about this: "unauthorised possession of copies of official documents will entail dismissal from the service". Documents leaked, of course. In 1919 Aglen noted that excerpts from Circulars were being

printed in the treaty port press. He restated the 1882 injunction, and threat.

The archives of the Maritime Customs Service amount to nearly 55,000 titles. They are an unexplored resource for the study of modern China. Circulars were the texts that underpinned the Service, and all it did, from 1854 until 1949 (and beyond). Without a thorough knowledge of the Circulars, it will be difficult to develop an understanding of any depth of the Customs Service and consequently it will be difficult to make full use of the Customs Service archives themselves.

[How to use the Circulars:](#)

The first three volumes in Part One reproduce the latest index to the Circulars produced by the Customs Service itself. Although it was printed in 1936, subsequent circulars were issued with small slips for pasting into the index. This copy has references to Circulars numbered into the 7000s. Part I of the Index, arranged by subject, provides the Circular number, which can then be traced to the relevant volume. Part II concerns individual and general staff matters. This is arranged following the hierarchy of the service, starting with the Inspector General, and then alphabetically by subject. The wartime Chongqing circulars

can be approached through the Index to Inspector General's Circulars, Nos 1-1012, Chungking Inspectorate Series. This follows the same conventions. The volumes also contain some other indexes and registers which also might be useful. Very late period circulars are less easy to trace, although each bound volume contains its own index to the circulars within.

SECOND SERIES.

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ENCLOSURE No. 2

CIRCULAR 1802.
POSTAL No. 261.

Sub-Enclosure to I.G. Despatch No. 1424 to Shai-siu Chu.

I.

The present Postal Secretary, Mr. PING, is appointed Tsung Yu-ching-ssu in charge of the Postal Service under the Yu-chuan Pu; the despatch of appointment will be received before the date of handing over charge.

一現任郵政總辦
帛黎即派為總
郵政司上承
郵傳部管理郵
政事務該員由
正式公文委派
於交替之前發
給領收

II.

After assumption of charge, the control of the executive of all postal affairs, of the Post Offices, and the entire Postal Staff will be in charge of the Tsung Yu-ching-ssu, in a manner similar to that of the control exercised by the Inspector General of Customs over the Customs Administration.

On all matters of postal policy, the Tsung Yu-ching-ssu will refer to the President or Vice-Presidents of the Ministry for their instructions, and, when circumstances demand, he shall have direct relations with the former.

二交替後所有郵政各局事務及
所用各項人員統歸該總郵政
司處置似應照總稅務司管理
稅務之法參酌施行至關於郵
政一切事宜則由該員申請堂
憲候示遵辦遇事亦應與止
堂直接來往

III.

All appointments of employees to the Postal Service made by the Inspector General of Customs are hereby confirmed, and, subject to the Service regulations hitherto in force, all men will enjoy the same advantages in respect of continued employment, pay, promotion, leave, and retiring allowances as hitherto accorded to them under the Inspector General.

三在事之華洋郵政人
員凡經總稅務司准
定者現在均仍定用
即按現行之郵政章
程所有長久留用及
薪水階階請假養老
等事均照在總稅務
司轄下時無異

Call Number: 679 (1) 26909

Inspector General's Circulars, Vol. 12, Second Series, Nos
1801-2000, 1911-13