

Records of the Maritime Customs Service of China

London Office Files

The London Office of the Chinese Maritime Customs Service served successive Inspector Generals and the Service from 1874 until 1948. It was at once a recruiting centre, funnelling recruits from across Europe into posts in China, an office of the Inspectorate General (IG) abroad liaising on the IG's behalf (and per his instructions) with the British Foreign Office, and also the bureau which dealt after 1895 with the banks and consortia whose loans to China were secured on Customs revenues. The Non-Resident (or, less formally, 'London') Secretary secured equipment and supplies, but also ran an office which, in the eyes of one later Customs observer, was "to some extent during the early part of its history ... an agency of the Chinese Empire in England and Europe".¹

A 'London Agency of the Imperial Chinese Maritime Customs' was established in July 1867, and was run by Henry C. Batchelor until 1874. On 17 January 1874, Robert Hart (the IG) informed him that the Agency was to be closed, "chiefly on the grounds of its failure to come up to the standard of general efficiency", by which he in fact meant that he needed a man he could entrust confidential business to, not just a commission agent.² Hart's aims for the Customs Service were greater than the mere business of efficient revenue collection, and the internationalised context of his work also required more delicate handling than Batchelor could deliver. James Duncan Campbell (1833-1907), formerly Chief Secretary and Auditor of the Service, was appointed Non-Resident Secretary (NRS) from 31 March 1874.³

Campbell had left a promising career in the Treasury to join the Customs Service in 1862, and so knew Whitehall well. He had been mainly based in London after 1870, on various missions, and the new appointment formalised and regularised his position there and greatly broadened the scope of his work. He was to act as the Service's London agent until his death in 1907, attending to "the procuring and forwarding of all official supplies" as well as "performing the special duties confided to

¹ Cancelled draft Circular No.7497, 1948, in 679 (1) 17341, 'General Matters Concerning Organisation, Reorganisation, and Closing of London Office'.

² 679 (2) 1190, 'London Office: Dispatches to IG, 1874-1875', Robert Hart to H.C. Batchelor, 17 January 1874.

³ Hart's musings on the office and formal offer to Campbell are in John King Fairbank, Katherine Frost Bruner and Elizabeth Matheson (eds), *The I.G. in Peking: Letters of Robert Hart, Chinese Maritime Customs, 1868-1907*, 2 volumes (Cambridge MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1975) I, Letter 63, 31 August 1863.

him by the Inspector General” (Circular 3/1874, 30 January 1874). The London Office (伦敦办事处) was a formal branch of the Inspectorate, and listed as such in the *Service List* (职员提名录). “You are to carry out the IG’s orders”, wrote Hart, and “are to keep him supplied with information on all matters of interest”, but “you are to refrain from all initiative”.⁴

This London Office serviced the practical development of the Customs Service in all its activities, but also underpinned what was politically the most important foreign diplomatic relationship in the decades before Pearl Harbour. In premises at 8 Storey’s Gate, St James’s Park, and then, from 1892 at 12 (later renumbered 26) Old Queen Street, Westminster, the (officially titled) ‘London Office of the Inspectorate General of Chinese Maritime Customs’ functioned as a purchasing and recruitment centre. Candidates were examined there, and the papers (and photographs) of successful applicants were sent out to Hart. But it was also a quasi-diplomatic outpost, most notably serving to provide a back-door route for Hart and his successors (notably, but problematically, Sir Frederick Maze) to correspond with British diplomats and other officials, as well as financial interests. Sir Frances Aglen required C.A.V. Bowra (NRS 1924-26) to stick to Customs Service business, and not to think his office an alternative Chinese Legation, but Maze bombarded his NRS appointees with documents for forwarding on to the Foreign Office and others he thought influential and helpful.

From the London Office J.D. Campbell was involved in a number of diplomatic missions, but he also served as Hart’s private secretary in London, spending Sundays in the office dealing with the IG’s private correspondence and financial affairs, ordering new clothes to Hart’s designs, procuring sheet music and violins, and buying and selling shares for him. This private correspondence has already been published (and none of it is replicated here).⁵ Those letters, edited by John Fairbank and his team in the 1970s, proved to be a goldmine of information about the Customs Service itself, and about Hart of course, and also about the international relations of China and the developing role the Customs Service played as the Qing state struggled to order and normalise its foreign relations. Hart confided in his distant Secretary, let off steam, surveyed his own position, and issued instructions.

⁴ *I.G. in Peking*, I, Letter 133, 21 July 1875.

⁵ Hart’s letters, now in the archives at The School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, were published as Fairbank, Bruner, and Matheson (eds), *The I.G. in Peking*. Campbell’s side of the correspondence, and the telegrams the men exchanged, are in the Archives at Nanjing, and have been published as the four volume Chen Xiafei and Han Rongfang (eds), *Archives of China’s Imperial Maritime Customs: Confidential Correspondence between Robert Hart and James Duncan Campbell, 1874-1907* (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1990-93).

No other IG/NRS relationship was in itself as distinctive as that of Hart and Campbell (nor as long-lasting – for there were 11 different holders of the post after the latter’s death), but there is still a great deal to be learnt from the exchanges which are now made available for the first time.

Seen as effectively a luxury from the 1930s onwards, the Office closed on 5 August 1948, although E.N. Ensor remained as ‘London Representative’ thereafter. Financial reasons underpinned this decision, which was ordered by the Guanwushu (关务署) which oversaw Customs affairs in the Ministry of Finance as a way of saving foreign currency holdings, but the diminished British role in the Service generally was a key factor in the downgrading of the importance of the connection. A cancelled draft of Circular No.7497, announcing the closure, noted that “the elimination of this time-hallowed establishment signifies the final withdrawal of one phase of Customs activities and shifting of emphasis in other directions” – an American IG looked elsewhere for diplomatic support.

The London Office files

The formal Archives of the office itself were either destroyed or sent to the Inspectorate Archives in China when the office was closed in 1948 (details and packing lists are in file 679 (1) 31486). This unit of the Maritime Customs Service Archives collection is organised in six sections: 1) Three runs of registers of Dispatches and IGS letters to and from London and the IG; 2) Surviving London Letter Books (two series, 1874-1905, and 1883-98, 1906-26); 3) Semi-official correspondence between the NRS and the successive IGs, 1908-49); 4) Confidential, private and personal correspondence between them (1908-20, mostly with Aglen, and after 1938, mostly with Maze); 5) Sets of Pacific War-era memos and telegrams, and 6) A selection of materials concerning the history of the office, its archives, staff, office procedure and premises. The collection overall goes well beyond the activities of the London Office, and provides vital materials for understanding the broader history of the service and its activities.

The Dispatch Registers serve as a resource in themselves, outlining the broad concerns and the multifaceted minutiae of Customs Service work, and can be used to track correspondence and issues – and locate details of pertinent files in the Archive itself. The Letter Books are a melange of correspondence and a lively guide to the activities and concerns of the NRS. The third, fourth and fifth sections are incomplete, as is the archive, because Aglen, Maze and also Little (to varying

degrees) retained possession of their correspondence with the NRS (and others) when they left office (or in Maze's case, when the Pacific War loomed). Some of what they removed from the Inspectorate archives can now be found in the collections at the University of London's School of Oriental and African Studies (Aglen, Maze), and at Harvard University's Houghton Library (Little), but what is now made available here extensively supplements those holdings, and with the Semi-Official series provides a chronologically broader as well as deeper context for those materials. The Maze papers in particular have been widely used by historians of Sino-British relations in the run up to war, but another 15 files of correspondence are now made available here, and as Maze, notoriously, censored and shaped his archive, there is likely to be much that throws new light on the last British IG.

The Semi-Official correspondence, formally complete for the years 1908-49, contains the fortnightly letters sent from London to the IG (as from all formal Customs stations). These contained reflections on events and trends that were likely to be of interest to the IG, and in particular issues that might develop into the formal subject of a Dispatch, or which might not find an appropriate alternative forum for communication. The series forms an alternative commentary on British diplomatic policy towards China, loans and the Customs Service, but particularly also on IG policies and concerns. Maze liked to keep his NRS 'informed' about his policies and thinking, especially after the onset of the Sino-Japanese war in 1937, sending copies of his correspondence with embassies and his superiors.⁶

The twentieth century record of the London Office is strongly represented in these documents, which shed new light on the Customs Service after Hart, and on the Aglen and Maze eras in particular, but there is also much here more generally concerned with the multifaceted and non-political world of Customs Service work. The collection also includes three albums containing photographs of all new recruits sent out from London between 1903-33 – taken together these photographs provide a unique and enigmatic record of the mostly fresh, young, foreign faces of the Customs Service in the twentieth century.

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⁶ 679 (1) 31476, 'IGS and Confidential Letters to NRS, 1939-40', IGS 4, 24 September 1939 encloses copy of Maze to Wright, 24 September 1939.

Appendix 1: Non-Resident Secretaries (officers 'In Charge' inset):

James Duncan Campbell, 1874-1907

Edgar Bruce Hart, 1907-14

Paul King, 1914-20

A.G.H. Carruthers

G.F.H. Acheson, 1921-24

C.A.V. Bowra, 1924-26

J.H. Stephenson, 1926-31

F. Hayley Bell

P.R. Walsham, 1931-33

L.A. Lyall

J.H. Stephenson, 1933

J.H. Macoun, 1933-38

W.O. Law

Stanley Wright, 1939

J.H. Cubbon, 1939-43

Foster Hall, 1943-46

C.A. Pouncey, 1946-48

Appendix 2: Sources of further information:

Robert Ronald Campbell, *James Duncan Campbell: A memoir by his son* (Cambridge, MA: East Asian Research Center, Harvard University, 1970)

Chen Xiafei and Han Rongfang (eds), *Archives of China's Imperial Maritime Customs: Confidential Correspondence between Robert Hart and James Duncan Campbell, 1874-1907* (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1990-93)

John King Fairbank, Katherine Frost Bruner and Elizabeth Matheson (eds), *The I.G. in Peking: Letters of Robert Hart, Chinese Maritime Customs, 1868-1907*, 2 volumes (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1975)

Paul H. King, *In the Chinese Customs Service: A Personal Record of Forty-Seven Years* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1924), 45-59, 98, 270-303

Cancelled Circular No.7497, 1948, in 679 (1) 17341, 'General Matters Concerning Organisation, Reorganisation, and Closing of London Office'

'London Office: Handing Over Charge Memoranda, 1914-46', 679 (1) 17580

Appendix 3: London Office Dispatches in the Second Historical Archives of China, Nanjing

These excerpts from the catalogue of the Customs Service Archive at the Second Historical Archives, refer to files which can be cross-referenced with the Dispatch Registers filed in this Part.

1. Dispatches: London Office copies

All pre-1902 files were transferred to the Customs Reference Library in Shanghai, in 1933. This complied with an instruction issued to all Customs Stations in Semi-Official Circular No.91.⁷ These files were transferred from London as a result.

Classmark	Call number	Title	Period covered
679 (2)	1201	London Office: Dispatches from IG	1892-93
679 (2)	1202	London Office: Dispatches from IG	1894-95
679 (2)	1203	London Office: Dispatches from IG	1896
679 (2)	1204	London Office: Dispatches from IG	1897
679 (2)	1205	London Office: Dispatches from IG	1898-99
679 (2)	1206	London Office: Dispatches from IG	1900
679 (2)	1207	London Office: Dispatches to IG	1874-75
679 (2)	1190	London Office: Dispatches to IG	1874-75
679 (2)	1191	London Office: Dispatches to IG	1876-77
679 (2)	1208	London Office: Dispatches to IG	1876-77
679 (2)	1192	London Office: Dispatches to IG	1878-79
679 (2)	1209	London Office: Dispatches to IG	1878-80
679 (2)	1193	London Office: Dispatches to IG	1880
679 (2)	1194	London Office: Dispatches to IG	1881
679 (2)	1210	London Office: Dispatches to IG	1881-83
679 (2)	1195	London Office: Dispatches to IG	1882-83
679 (2)	1196	London Office: Dispatches to IG	1884
679 (2)	1211	London Office: Dispatches to IG	1884-85
679 (2)	1197	London Office: Dispatches to IG	1885
679 (2)	1212	London Office: Dispatches to IG	1886-87
679 (2)	1198	London Office: Dispatches to IG	1886-87
679 (2)	1219	London Office: Dispatches to IG	1887-92
679 (2)	1199	London Office: Dispatches to IG	1888-89
679 (2)	1213	London Office: Dispatches to IG	1888-90
679 (2)	1200	London Office: Dispatches to IG	1890-91
679 (2)	1214	London Office: Dispatches to IG	1891-92
679 (2)	1215	London Office: Dispatches to IG	1893-95
679 (2)	1220	London Office: Dispatches to IG	1893-1901
679 (2)	1216	London Office: Dispatches to IG	1896-97
679 (2)	1217	London Office: Dispatches to IG	1898-1901

⁷ *Documents Illustrative of the Origin, Development and Activities of the Chinese Customs Service* Vol. V, (Shanghai: Statistical Department, Inspectorate General of Customs, 1939), 118.

2. Dispatches: Inspectorate copies

Classmark	Call number	Title	Period covered
679 (2)	1311	Dispatches from London Office, Ningpo Customs	1867-88
679 (9)	7612	Dispatches, etc., from NRS	1874-78
679 (9)	7613	Dispatches, etc., from NRS	1882-84
679 (9)	7614	Dispatches, etc., from NRS	1885-86
679 (9)	7615	Dispatches, etc., from NRS	1887-89
679 (9)	7616	Dispatches, etc., from NRS	1890-91
679 (9)	7617	Dispatches, etc., from NRS	1893-94
679 (9)	7620	Dispatches, etc., from NRS	1895-97
679 (9)	7619	Dispatches, etc., from NRS	1898-1900
679 (9)	7618	Dispatches, etc., from NRS	1898-1900
679 (9)	7621	Dispatches, etc., from NRS	1898-1902
679 (9)	7622	Dispatches, etc., from NRS	1901-06
679 (9)	7624	Dispatches, etc., from NRS	1902-08
679 (9)	7623	Dispatches, etc., from NRS	1905-06
679 (9)	7625	Dispatches, etc., from NRS	1909-10
679 (9)	7626	Dispatches, etc., from NRS	1910-14
679 (9)	8050	NRS Dispatches Advising Shipment of Stores	1915-20
679 (3)	1579	NRS Dispatches, Nos.2488-3032	1896-1900
679 (3)	1580	NRS Dispatches, Nos.3033-3061	1900-01
679 (3)	1581	NRS Dispatches, Nos.3062-3106	1900-01
679 (3)	1582	NRS Dispatches, Nos.3107-3164	1901-02
679 (3)	1583	NRS Dispatches, Nos.3165-3216	1902
679 (3)	1584	NRS Dispatches, Nos.3217-3230	1902
679 (3)	1585	NRS Dispatches, Nos.3231-3270	1902-03
679 (3)	1586	NRS Dispatches, Nos.3271-3300	1903
679 (3)	1587	NRS Dispatches, Nos.3301-3340	1903-04
679 (3)	1588	NRS Dispatches, Nos.3341-3370	1904
679 (3)	1589	NRS Dispatches, Nos.3371-3390	1904
679 (3)	1590	NRS Dispatches, Nos.3391-3420	1904-05
679 (3)	1592	NRS Dispatches, Nos.3446-3470	1906
679 (3)	1593	NRS Dispatches, Nos.3471-3520	1906
679 (3)	1591	NRS Dispatches, Nos.3521-3545	1905
679 (3)	1594	NRS Dispatches, Nos.3546-3579	1907
679 (3)	1595	NRS Dispatches, Nos.3580-3600	1908
679 (3)	1596	NRS Dispatches, Nos.3601-3670	1908
679 (3)	1597	NRS Dispatches, Nos.3671-3710	1909
679 (3)	1598	NRS Dispatches, Nos.3711-3750	1910
679 (3)	1599	NRS Dispatches, Nos.3751-3800	1910
679 (3)	1600	NRS Dispatches, Nos.3801-3860	1911-12
679 (3)	1601	NRS Dispatches, Nos.3861-3950	1912-13
679 (3)	1602	NRS Dispatches, Nos.3951-4020	1913-14
679 (3)	1603	NRS Dispatches, Nos.4021-4100	1914
679 (3)	1604	NRS Dispatches, Nos.4101-4170	1914-16
679 (3)	1605	NRS Dispatches, Nos.4171-4265	1916-18
679 (3)	1606	NRS Dispatches, Nos.4266-4315	1918-19

679 (3)	1607	NRS Dispatches, Nos.4316-4342	1918-19
679 (3)	1608	NRS Dispatches, Nos.4343-4385	1919-20
679 (3)	1609	NRS Dispatches, Nos.4386-4399	1920
679 (3)	1610	NRS Dispatches, Nos.4400-4434	1920
679 (3)	1611	NRS Dispatches, Nos.4435-4450	1920
679 (3)	1612	NRS Dispatches, Nos.4451-4501	1920-21
679 (3)	1613	NRS Dispatches, Nos.4502-4508	1921
679 (3)	1614	NRS Dispatches, Nos.4509-4543	1921
679 (3)	1615	NRS Dispatches, Nos.4544-4545	1921
679 (3)	1616	NRS Dispatches, Nos.4546-4585	1921-22
679 (3)	1617	NRS Dispatches, Nos.4586-4587	1921-22
679 (3)	1618	NRS Dispatches, Nos.4588-4600	1922
679 (3)	1619	NRS Dispatches, Nos.4601-4640	1922-23
679 (3)	1620	NRS Dispatches, Nos.4641-4654	1923
679 (3)	1621	NRS Dispatches, Nos.4655-4720	1924
679 (3)	1622	NRS Dispatches, Nos.4721-4770	1924
679 (3)	1623	NRS Dispatches, Nos.4771-4830	1924
679 (3)	1624	NRS Dispatches, Nos.4831-4885	1925-26
679 (3)	1625	NRS Dispatches, Nos.4886-4930	1926-27
679 (3)	1626	NRS Dispatches, Nos.4931-5037	1927-29
679 (3)	1627	NRS Dispatches, Nos.5038-5211	1929-32
679 (1)	26259	NRS Dispatches to IG	1941-45
679 (1)	26215	Dispatches to NRS	1942-44
679 (1)	26537	Dispatches to NRS	1944-45