

## **Records of the Maritime Customs Service of China**

### **Semi-Official Correspondence from Selected Ports**

The Chinese Maritime Customs Service operated with a strictly delineated and strictly limited repertoire of official forms of internal communication including Circulars, Despatches, Memoranda and Returns, as well as Semi-Official letters (半官性函件). Surviving runs of the latter type from four important ports are reproduced here, and provide a significant and unique new resource for the study of national and local events, their reception and their representation, in each of the four cities concerned (Hankow 汉口, 江汉关, Harbin 哈尔滨, 滨江关, Shanghai 上海, 江海关, and Swatow 汕头, 潮海关). They also reveal much about the official -- and notably the unofficial -- history of the workings of the Customs Service and the lives of its personnel.

The first official document dealing with Semi-Official Correspondence (Circular 15/1874, see Appendix 1) drew attention to the existing standing requirement in letters of appointment issued to Commissioners that they:

address [the Inspector General] semi-officially or privately every fortnight, as well to supplement your despatches as to keep me informed of interesting or important occurrences at your port or in its vicinity – occurrences which it might be expedient to bring to my notice, but which could not properly form the subject of official correspondence.

In this Circular the Inspector General (IG), Robert Hart, went on to clarify what he wanted to find in these letters:

any non-customs business, whether affecting foreigners or natives, that is causing a reference to Peking or that is likely to evoke the intervention of the Peking officials, – any local occurrence tending to the benefit or detriment of local interests, or specially affecting interests elsewhere, – and any sayings or doings of individuals which, in the interests of the Service, ought to be brought to the Inspector General's notice[.]

The resulting files of letters offer a very rich insight into the activities of the Customs in each port, and to local politics and events of greater or lesser importance. They came from the Commissioners in each and every port, and from all branches of the Customs Service. The Second Historical Archives of China at Nanjing contains some 1,800 files of correspondence with 'Semi-Official' status in the

classmark 679 series, but the material of greatest general interest is the incoming correspondence from station Commissioners.<sup>1</sup>

From 1900 the letters were addressed as a matter of routine to the Deputy Inspector General, Sir Robert Bredon (Circular No.1213, 23 January 1905), although, Hart added in this latter Circular to Commissioners, 'When special circumstances seem to require it, or you desire to do so, I shall always be glad to hear from you direct'. Aglen, when IG, reinstated the pre-1900 system. Under Maze the Semi-Official became more formalized, and so important a channel did the Semi-Official become, that Commissioners were upbraided for not cross referencing them properly with prior correspondence.<sup>2</sup>

The files reproduced here are confined to the twentieth century because the destruction of the Inspectorate archives in the Boxer war of 1900 wiped out the surviving copies of this correspondence from the nineteenth century. Although, for example, many runs of nineteenth-century Despatches were preserved in Customs Station archives and were transferred to the Customs Reference Library in 1933 -- Semi-Official Correspondence, in spite of the injunctions in Circular 15/1874 -- retained an ambiguous official status in the eyes of Commissioners which meant that very few copies of the letters survived. Swatow Commissioner Edward Gilchrist (served 1890-1923), put the problem clearly in a 1910 -- Semi-Official -- letter responding to an instruction from Sir Francis Aglen to maintain copies of the correspondence in station safes:

[N]one of my predecessors have left any record of their semi-official correspondence, up to date, for the inspection of their successors, because it has been prepared entirely without such prospect in mind

Moreover, he made clear that the correspondence was copied into his personal press-copy volume ('not taken from official stationery'). Commissioners did not regard this correspondence as properly belonging to station archives, and so took their personal copies with them when they were transferred to new posts, or left the Service. This habit was in many senses an aspect of the intensely personal nature of the relationship that developed between the IG and Commissioners in the Hart and Aglen years. Hart's much commented-on 'autocracy' engendered strong personalised relations -- and

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<sup>1</sup> There are just over 900 files of Semi-Official letters from station Commissioners. Other files contain the same type of correspondence from Secretaries (Non-Resident (London), Statistical etc, as well as from the Marine Commissioner.

<sup>2</sup> 679(1) 32372 'Swatow Semi-Official, 1935'.

loyalties -- between the IG and his Commissioners. These overlaid, if at times they did not obscure, the formal and professional hierarchies and relationships within the Service.

Some nineteenth-century letter books have survived, however. John King Fairbank donated transcripts of H.B. Morse's Letter Books to the Customs Reference Library (679(2), 1222-1225). These are lodged, together with the correspondence from Commissioners in Korea (679(2), 1005-1077), and a few volumes from Hangzhou (679(2), 1329-1333). But overall the nineteenth century record of this correspondence is not available unless still held in private hands or in libraries and archives overseas with the other papers of former Commissioners.

Semi-Official Correspondence can give a richly-detailed and often much more personal view of events and personalities than the formal Despatches. As the letters were not preserved in Station archives until the 1910s they also escaped the eyes of Chinese or foreign subordinates, and so the Commissioners could write more freely than in other forms of correspondence with the IG. Detail came at the cost of the effort and time required for composition, however. London Secretary Bruce Hart registered his complaint about this duty in 1913:

this latter class of correspondence has, I know, its value (though, as a matter of personal view, I don't place it very high seeing how frequently its hap-hazard information is incorrect and consequently misleading), but, just as every man has his abilities and disabilities, so, small-talk and chatty script are inherently absent from my make-up<sup>3</sup>

Bruce, Sir Robert Hart's son and a difficult character, was deliberately courting an order to depart the service (he resigned 3 months later), but the view may have been more common.<sup>4</sup> 'I have not written for some time', wrote Commissioner Ohlmer from Tsingtao (青島, 胶关站) in March 1911, 'The last two months have been very trying -- work has been heavy and troubles many.'<sup>5</sup> Expressive too, though for different reasons, was one letter from Nanning in 1908:

Dear Sir Robert,

No news of any interest to report.

Yours obediently,

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<sup>3</sup> 679(1) 31840, E. Bruce Hart to Aglen 19 November 1913

<sup>4</sup> London Semi-Officials are to be found in Unit 2, 'London Office Files'.

<sup>5</sup> 679(1) 32013, 'Tsingtao Semi-Official, 1905-14', Ohlmer to Aglen, 17 March 1911.

E. von Strauch<sup>6</sup>

Such forlorn pithiness aside however -- and the Customs life, especially in such smaller ports, was often lonely and dull -- the Nanning correspondence gives a lively sense of the value of this type of record for understanding local events, debates and changes. A survey of Nanning Semi-Officials for the first years after a Commissioner arrived at this 'voluntarily opened mart' (1908) finds them replete with detail of topics such as a massacre of lepers, reports on provincial developments seen as evidence of 'westernisation', which stretched from the more obvious developments -- a new military academy opens, Japanese advisors arrive, foreign steamship companies experiment with new services -- to the more private and subtle, but no less important changes that shaped the new world of goods and practices in twentieth century China:

While at my place [the provincial governor] told me his Yamen was so hot, and as he had been indisposed for a few days, it was not so easy to sleep these hot nights. So I showed him a fan, run by methylated spirits, which took his fancy so that he asked me to telegraph for one to come up as soon as possible.<sup>7</sup>

Then there are the reports of local rumours, some of which involve the Customs, and some French activities in the region, while others reflect the concerns and fears of the inhabitants of Nanning, and lie behind the events and details recorded in Despatches or other reports.

Material in Semi-Official letters complements the official business recorded in the Despatches. Sometimes issues are first raised in the Semi-Officials, as a prelude to a Despatch, at other times the Semi-Official Correspondence contains reflections and details for which a Despatch would be inappropriate vehicle, or too public a document. But as Hart noted in 1905, 'what you wish to have done, or attended to, or answered, must be sent forward in a despatch'.<sup>8</sup> They also acted as a forum for letting off steam, for grumblings about local personalities or subordinates: 'Mr Mansfield', wrote von Strauch in 1907, 'is quite unfit for life at a lonely place. He is accustomed to gay company and the loneliness here makes him a unhappy and nervous and the result is, he is a very difficult companion.'<sup>9</sup>

### **The selected files**

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<sup>6</sup> 679(1) 32516, 'Nanning Semi-Official Correspondence, 1907-1912'. E.A.W. von Strauch, a German national appointed in 1899, served until his resignation in September 1916.

<sup>7</sup> 679(1) 32516, 'Nanning Semi-Official Correspondence, 1907-1912', 8 June 1908.

<sup>8</sup> Circular 1213 (Second Series), 23rd January 1905.

<sup>9</sup> 679(1) 32516, 'Nanning Semi-Official Correspondence, 1907-1912', 5 September 1907. R.D. Mansfield had joined in October 1903 as a 4th Assistant, and served until his death in 1925 when Acting Commissioner at Chungking and Wanhsien.

Twentieth century correspondence from four stations has been included in this unit: Shanghai (1900-1941, 1946-49), as the biggest and most important of the Customs posts; Swatow (1900-1941, 1945-49), as a representative smaller coastal station; Hankow as a Yangzi river port (1900-49), and Harbin (1900-1928, 1930-32, 1945-47) by way of representing Manchuria and the inland stations. The Hankow selection includes correspondence from the Classmark 2085 Series at the Second Historical Archives of China which contains materials from the Pacific War-era collaborationist Customs Commissioner to Japanese IG Kishimoto Hirokichi. Each of these stations had its full complement of the events that unfolded in China in these years, and each covers many incidents which directly affected the Customs – such as the Japanese invasion of Manchuria and the seizure of Customs stations there -- one of which was Harbin -- by the collaborationist Manzhouguo authorities.

The letters are often annotated by the IG and sometimes a response is drafted on the letter itself, but in most cases a bare acknowledgement was sent. The runs of material included here represent a fraction of the information flowing into the Inspectorate through this form of communication.

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## Appendix 1

*CIRCULAR No. 15 of 1874.*

INSPECTORATE GENERAL OF CUSTOMS,

PEKING, 10<sup>th</sup> April, 1874.

SIR,

Concerning Semi-official  
Correspondence

1. — In your sealed letter of appointment to the Commissionership of the port (I.G./F.I.), paragraph 6 reads thus:—

You will address me semi-officially or privately every fortnight, as well to supplement your despatches as to keep me informed of interesting or important occurrences at your port or in its vicinity – occurrences which it might be expedient to bring to my notice, but which could not properly form the “subject of official correspondence.

2.— On the whole, I have to thank all who have had charge of ports for the attention to the instructions contained in the paragraph quoted. A growing tendency, however, is becoming perceptible, on the one hand to substitute semi-official letters for despatches, and on the other to leave it to the Inspector General to find out for himself, from newspapers or other sources, what is occurring in the locality: on the one hand, the result is that questions asked and perhaps instructions sent in reply – both one and other semi-officially, or in letters relating to private or personal business – are not recorded, while, on the other, matters at the port, which the Inspector General ought to be the first to know about, are frequently those which, to the surprise of others and to the disadvantage of Service interests, he is the last to learn.

3.— As regards the outside matters which ought to be communicated to the Inspector General semi-officially, each Commissioner must judge for himself; but, generally speaking, any non-customs business, whether affecting foreigners or natives, that is causing a reference to Peking or that is likely to evoke the intervention of the Peking officials, – any local occurrence tending to the benefit or detriment of local interests, or specially affecting interests elsewhere, – and any sayings or doings of individuals which, in the interests of the Service, ought to be brought to the Inspector General’s notice, – these and kindred matters may properly form the subjects of semi-official correspondence. In this connection it ought to be remembered that it is in the interest of the Service generally, and therefore as much in their – the Commissioners’ – interest as in his own, that the Inspector General requires such intelligence; further, the communication of it in this semi-official way is as much a part of a Commissioner’s official duty as attention to the current work of the Custom House.

4. — In respect to the other matter, semi-official reference to business matters to be dealt with by the commissioner, there is no objection to such reference as long as it does no more than supplement, or rather

comment upon or explain the official treatment of the same subject or question in a despatch; but when such semi-official reference is made or allowed to take the place of the official treatment of the subject in a despatch, the result is often embarrassing. Semi-official letters received are, of course, preserved by the Inspector General, but copies are not kept of the Inspector General's private or semi-official replies; hence subjects are lost sight of that ought to be borne in mind, and advice or instructions forgotten, if not officially contradicted on some subsequent occasion. It is therefore desirable that you should remember, and be guided by the explanation: business questions, the statement of cases for the Inspector General's opinion or instructions, applications for the Inspector General's authority or sanction, &c., &c., &c., –these and kindred matters ought to be dealt with officially in despatches, so that the statement submitted and the instructions issued may be properly recorded for future guidance or reference; and when such business matters are treated of in semi-official letters, it is to be borne in mind that such semi-official treatment of them must not take the place of official reference, but is merely to be complementary or explanatory of what has been already written on the same subject in official despatches.

5. — I trust that these explanations will be of use, and assist in making semi-official letters what they ought, as well as preserve them from becoming what they ought not, to be.

I am &c.,

(Signed) ROBERT HART,  
*I.G.*

## Appendix 2

### Officers in Charge at Hankow, Harbin, Shanghai and Swatow, 1900-49

#### 1. Hankow Commissioners or officers in charge, 1900-49

	J. H. Hippisley (Officiating Commissioner)
23 May 1901	R.T.F. de Luca (Commissioner)
10 February 1902	E.T. Pym (A.W. Cross assumed charge vice Pym died)
10 March 1907	F. A. Aglen (Commissioner)
	A.H. Sugden (Commissioner)
1 May 1912	F. A. Carl (Commissioner)
20 October 1913	F.E. Taylor (Commissioner)
5 December 1914	F. A. Carl (Commissioner)
6 May 1916	J.F. Oiesen (Commissioner)
4 November 1918	H. Unwin (Commissioner)
17 November 1919	E. Lowder (Commissioner)
29 September 1920	R. A. Currie (Commissioner)
24 October 1921	F. Maze (Commissioner)
6 October 1925	J. W. H. Ferguson (Commissioner)
19 December 1927	R.C.L. d'Anjou (Commissioner)

3 November 1928	H.E. Prettejohn (Commissioner)
11 June 1930	E.G. Lebas (Commissioner)
24 August 1932	卢寿汶Lu Shou Wen (Acting Deputy Commissioner in charge ad interim)
23 November 1932	A.S. Campbell (Commissioner)
31 May 1934	B.E. Foster Hall (Deputy Commissioner in charge ad interim)
22 April 1935	W.R. Myers (Commissioner)
1 October 1936	M.C.D. Drummond (Acting Deputy Commissioner In charge ad interim)
21 October 1936	L.H. Lawford (Commissioner)
17 April 1937	E.N. Ensor (Commissioner)
30 June 1941	A.C.H. Lay (Deputy Commissioner in charge)
2 February 1942	雷忠炳Lei Chung Pin (Assistant in charge)
26 May 1942	方博Fang Po (Assistant in charge)
30 April 1943	末次晋S. Suetsugu
7 September 1945	华锦燦Hwa Chin Tsan
31 October 1945	范豪Fan Hao (Acting Commissioner)
18 March 1946	陈瓊琨K.K. Chen (Commissioner)
7 May 1947	杜秉和Tu Ping Ho (Commissioner)
	刘邦麟Liu Pang-lin (Deputy Commissioner in charge temp.)
25 January 1949	蔡学团Tsai Hsioh Tuan (Commissioner)

## 2. Harbin Commissioners or officers in charge, 1907-32, 1946-49

February 1907	N.A. Konovaloff (Commissioner)
30 November 1910	W.C.H. Watson (Commissioner)
16 April 1913	R. de Luca (Commissioner)
15 April 1915	R.J. Grevedon (Commissioner)
21 October 1919	R.C.L. d'Anjou (Commissioner)
1 May 1924	U. Marconi (Acting Commissioner)
21 April 1927	P.G.S. Barentzen (Acting Commissioner)
31 March 1930	R.C.L. d'Anjou (Commissioner)
15 April 1931	E.J. Ohrnberger
10 March 1946	V. Muling

## 3. Shanghai Commissioners or officers in charge, 1900-49

	F.A. Aglen (Officiating Commissioner)
c.1 April 1901	H.E. Hobson (Commissioner)
c.1 December 1909	H.F. Merrill (Commissioner)
c.1 July 1913	F.S. Unwin (Commissioner)
1 May 1917	R.H.R. Wade (Commissioner)
15 April 1919	L.A. Lyall (Commissioner)
4 October 1920	H.G. Lowder (Commissioner)
17 April 1922	C.N. Holwill (Dep. Commissioner. in charge temp.)
14 October 1922	L.A. Lyall (Commissioner)



8 October 1925	岸本廣吉H. Kishimoto (Officiating Commissioner ad interim)
31 October 1925	F.W. Maze (Commissioner)
10 January 1929	W.R. Myers (Commissioner in charge temp.)
1 June 1931	L.H. Lawford (Commissioner)
12 July 1932	F.D. Goddard (Officiating Commissioner)
6 October 1932	L.H. Lawford (Commissioner)
7 March 1933	A.C.E. Braud (Commissioner)
8 January 1935	L.H. Lawford (Commissioner)
15 October 1935	P.G.S. Barentzen (Commissioner)
21 April 1937	L.H. Lawford (Commissioner)
22 November 1941	赤谷由助Y. Akatani
5 October 1942	小山田一K. Oyamada
9 February 1943	谷冈胜美K. Tanioka
18 October 1943	K. Oyamada
23 November 1943	卢寿汶Lu Shou Wen (Commissioner in charge ad interim)
18 January 1944	黑泽二郎J. Kurosawa
20 August 1945	裘倬其Chiu Tso Chi
13 September 1945	丁贵堂K.T. Ting (Dep. Inspector General and Commissioner)
18 June 1946	E.A. Pritchard
25 October 1946	刘丙彝Liu Ping yi
30 December 1949	张勇年Chang Yung Nien

#### 4. Swatow Commissioners or officers in charge, 1900-49

	W.M. Andrew
	J.W. Innocent (Assistant in charge)
September 1900	C.H. Brewitt-Taylor (Acting Commissioner)
April 1901	S. Campbell (Commissioner)
26 March 1903	P.B. von Rautenfeld
	E. Gilchrist (Assistant in charge)
9 June 1903	F.A. Morgan (Commissioner)
15 October 1903	Frank Smith (Acting Commissioner)
12 March 1907	R.A. Currie (Acting Deputy Commissioner temp.)
17 May 1909	E. Glichrist (Commissioner)
December 1912	W.G. Lay (Commissioner)
14 September 1915	D. Percebois (Deputy Commissioner in charge temp.)
16 February 1916	W.G. Lay (Commissioner)
	A.G.H. Carruthers
	B.D. Tisdall (Acting Deputy Commissioner in charge temp.)
10 June 1918	J.H.M. Moorhead (Commissioner)
31 March 1921	P. Kremer (Deputy Commissioner in charge ad interim)
17 May 1921	C.E.S. Wakefield (Commissioner)
27 December 1921	R.M. Talbot (Acting Deputy Commissioner in charge ad interim)
20 February 1922	R.A. Currie (Commissioner)
3 May 1924	W.C.G. Howard (Deputy Commissioner in charge ad interim)
28 May 1924	F.W. Carey

13 October 1925	E.A. MacDonald
17 December 1925	R.F.C. Hedgeland
23 November 1926	J. Klubien (Commissioner)
15 October 1929	B.E.F. Hall (Acting Deputy Commissioner in charge ad interim)
23 October 1929	A. Sadoine (Commissioner)
13 August 1930	E. A. Pritchard (Deputy Commissioner in charge temp.)
13 April 1931	H. G. Fletcher (Commissioner)
15 April 1933	H. D. Hilliard (Commissioner)
1 April 1935	G.N. Gawler (Chief Assistant A Acting Deputy Commissioner in charge ad interim)
20 May 1935	C.G.C. Asker (Commissioner)
15 October 1936	H.St.J. Wilding (Commissioner)
15 April 1937	A.L. Newman (Acting Deputy Commissioner in charge ad interim)
1 May 1937	Y.H.J. Cloarec (Commissioner)
13 October 1937	A.L. Newman (Acting Deputy Commissioner in charge ad interim)
15 November 1937	J.C.O'G. Anderson (Commissioner)
28 March 1938	C.G.C. Asker (Commissioner)
19 June 1942	高桥明A. Takahashi (3 <sup>rd</sup> Assistant A Acting Deputy Commissioner in charge temp.)
25 February 1943	松冈宪二K. Matsuoka
13 May 1943	高桥明A. Takahashi
	黄志塞Huang Chih Chien (Acting Commissioner)
28 September 1946	杨明新Yang Ming Hsin (Commissioner)
Feb. 1947	R.C.P. Rouse
31 March 1949	史恩灏Shih Eng How (Acting Commissioner ad interim)
26 April 1949	E. Bathurst (Commissioner)