

# A Survey of Studies on the Chinese Maritime Customs Service

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The Chinese Maritime Customs Service (CMCS) has left this world with two sets of legacies, namely its history and its primary and secondary materials, and the intertwining of these with the international history of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The cosmopolitanism of the CMCS histories lies in the nature of its supervision of modern China's international trade and its hybrid staff of over twenty nationalities. The materials that record this supervision provide us with a comprehensive understanding of the modern world.

From the late-nineteenth century, the foreign employees of the CMCS had already realised the importance of these CMCS materials, as demonstrated by two Statistical Secretaries, H. B. Morse and E. Drew, who donated their private collections to Harvard, their alma mater, and these donations went on to inform the research of John Fairbank's and his protégés on nineteenth century Chinese history.

The importance of the CMCS materials has caught the attention of generations of historians, who were keen to get their hands on and analyse these records. Generally speaking, these records consist of three sets, 1) CMCS staff's personal records, 2) CMCS publications, and 3) CMCS internal documents.

Studies of the personal records of CMCS staff focus on the second Inspector-General, Sir Robert Hart (1835–1911), after whom the Harvard research team led by John Fairbank (1907–1991) named the entire editorial material on the subject as the “Hart Enterprise.” Fairbank founded his doctoral thesis, *Trade and Diplomacy*, which provides an account of the pre-Hartian history of the CMCS, on the “Hart Enterprise” collection. Based on this milestone monograph, Fairbank left the world with two edited sets of Robert Hart's personal records, including his letters to the Non-Resident Secretary in London, James Duncan Campbell: *The IG in Peking: Letters of Robert Hart Chinese Maritime Customs, 1868-1907* and the first eight volumes of Hart's journals, *Entering China's Service: Robert Hart's Journals, 1854-1863* and *Robert Hart and China's Early Modernization: His Journals, 1863-1866*. The “Hart Enterprise” ended in 1991, when the *Robert Hart and China's Early Modernization* was published and Fairbank passed away shortly after. Chinese historians also had their own “Hart Enterprise” and had also edited Hart's correspondence with Campbell. However, the Chinese version differed from its Harvard counterpart in that it contained only the letters from Campbell to Hart. It was compiled by Chen Xiafei and Han Rongfang in four volumes under the title of *Archives of China's Imperial Maritime Customs: Confidential Correspondence between Robert Hart and James Duncan Campbell, 1874–1907* (1990). While editing Robert Hart's correspondence and his diaries, John Fairbank inaugurated the “Harvard School” and established two highly influential theories for the study of modern Chinese history: “synarchy” and “impact-response”. The former interprets the

Sino-foreign joint administration of the CMCS and the treaty port world, and the latter discusses China's response to the joint administration. In other words, it can be argued that John Fairbank's works were inspired by his research on the history of the CMCS, and that the Harvard School's research was consolidated by the "Hart Enterprise".

The CMCS publications refer to the publications released by the Statistical Department of the CMCS in Shanghai. The Statistical Department edited seven series of publications,<sup>1</sup> but among the seven series, the most well-researched is the first series (Statistical Series).<sup>2</sup> The first series have been partially reproduced four times:

1) the 111-reel *China Maritime Customs Publications* compiled by the Center for Chinese Research Materials, Association of Research Libraries, Harvard University;

2) the 279-volume *Unpublished Chinese Maritime Customs Historical Materials (1860–1949) in Harvard University Libraries* (美国哈佛大学图书馆藏未刊中国旧海关史料) compiled by Songdi Wu;

3) the *Trade of China, 1902–1935* (中华民国海关华洋贸易总册, 1902–1935) edited by Academia Historica in Taiwan; and

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<sup>1</sup> The Customs Publications consist of seven series: 1. Statistical Series; 2. Special Series; 3. Miscellaneous Series; 4 Service Series; 5. Office Series; 6. Inspectorate Series; and 7. Customs Publications Not Included in Any of the Foregoing Series.

<sup>2</sup> The first series consists of nine numbers: No. 1, Shanghai Customs Daily Returns; No. 2, Quarterly Trade Returns; No. 3, Annual Returns of Trade; No. 4, Annual Reports on Trade; No. 5, Chinese Version of Returns of Trade and Reports of Trade; No. 6, Decennial Reports; No. 7, Native Customs Trade Returns; No. 8, Monthly Returns of the Foreign Trade of China; No. 9, Shanghai Monthly Returns of Foreign Trade.

4) *The Old Chinese Customs' Materials, 1859–1948* (中国旧海关史料) edited by the Second Historical Archive of China in Nanjing.

The impact of these reproduced materials is reflected in the works of a number of economic historians affiliated with the Institute of Modern History, Academia Sinica, in Taiwan, who had access to the 100-reel *China Maritime Customs Publications* that the Institute of Modern History purchased in 1965.<sup>3</sup> Since the 1970s, these economic historians in Japan and Taiwan began to analyse the trade data and deepen our understanding of the links between treaty ports and the socio-economic history of China. Published works in this regard include Manhoung Lin's *Tea, Sugar and Camphor in Taiwan's Socio-Economic Changes, 1860–1895* (茶、糖、樟腦業與台灣之社會經濟變遷, 1860–1895), Ciyu Chen's *The Development of Modern China's Tea Enterprise* (近代中国茶业之发展) and Sufen Liu's *The Studies on the Chefoo Trade, 1867–1919* (烟台貿易研究, 1867–1919). Hamashita Takeshi (濱下武志) categorises these historians as the “first generation of the CMCS scholars.”

The CMCS's internal documents refer to those official documents pertaining to the CMCS's operations. Unlike the previous two sets of materials that advance historians' understanding of key people and China's international trade, the internal documents focus on the institutional history of the CMCS. The first wave of large-scale historiographical works was completed by mainland Chinese historians. They began to reframe the history of the CMCS in terms of foreign aggression. One significant step

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<sup>3</sup> In the 1960s, the *China Maritime Customs Publications* only had 100 reels and then it increased to 111 reels. Zhang Cunwu (张存武), “The Introduction of the Chinese Customs Publications” (中国海关出版品简介), *近史所集刊* 9, 505.

was the compilation of the *Imperialism and the Maritime Customs* (帝国主义与中国海关) (1957–1965). Originally, *Imperialism and the Maritime Customs* was supposed to be a fifteen-volume publication. However, the outbreak of the Cultural Revolution brought a stop to this project and the three chief editors, Chen Hanshen (陈翰笙), Fan Wenlan (范文澜), and Qian Jiaju (千家驹), were also transferred out of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. As a result, the first, second, third, eleventh, and fourteenth volumes were not published. After the Cultural Revolution, the Xinhua Bookstore (新华书店) reprinted these ten volumes in 1983 and added one more volume in 1994. Thus, the current edition has eleven volumes. As the title indicates, these volumes of primary source materials in Chinese translation, including semi-official correspondence, despatches, telegrams, and so on, were hostile towards every aspect of the foreign presence in the CMCS.

However, at the end of the twentieth century, Hans van de Ven and Robert Bickers discovered that the archives of the CMCS remained intact in the Second Historical Archive of China (SHAC) in Nanjing. The SHAC still keeps 53,738 files of the CMCS and around 1,400 files of the collaborationist CMCS. Van de Ven and Bickers decided to carry out three projects: 1) compiling a complete index for the files; 2) building a concise database for all CMCS staff members; and 3) selecting particularly representative files. The third project led to the publication of a microfilm collection published by Gale, Cengage Learning under the title of *China and the West: The Maritime Customs Service Archive from the Second Historical Archives of China, Nanjing*. Of course, compared to the complete 55,000-plus files in the archives, the

710 files contained in *China and the West* are not sufficiently comprehensive.<sup>4</sup> However, as the complete CMCS archives of the CMCS are still locked in the SHAC, the 710 files, which were carefully selected by van de Ven and Bickers, remain extraordinarily valuable.

Based on the above project, van de Ven and Bickers organized two special issues of *Modern Asian Studies* 40, 3 (2006) and *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 36, 2 (2008) in order to broaden the scale and variety of the CMCS studies. As the authors' focus in these two special issues differed greatly from those of the 1970s economists, Hamashita, the leading historian of the first generation of CMCS scholars called them the "second generation of CMCS scholars." Not only did the second generation study the responsibilities of the CMCS, but also went far beyond customs administration. Notably, the second generation provided us with insights in the following aspects: the development of the Chinese postal service with its far-flung activities in the public sphere; the establishment of the Marine Department to secure maritime navigation by constructing a network of lighthouses, wireless signal stations, buoys, and beacons; and the creation of the Statistical Department for the compilation and publication of China's trade statistics, which remains till today the most precise and reliable quantitative data for researching the economic history of modern China.

As a member of the van de Ven–Bickers CMCS project team, I have witnessed the difficulties in compiling the internal documents of the CMCS. Unlike the CMCS publications, which were thoroughly edited by the Statistical Department, *China and*

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<sup>4</sup> The first batch was completed in 2004 and contained 102 files; the second batch finished in 2004 and contained 94 files; the third batch finished in 2005 and contained 96 files; the fourth batch finished in 2005 and contained 102 files; the fifth batch finished in 2006 and contained 104 files; and the sixth and seventh batches finished in 2007 and contained 212 files.

*the West* contains several different systems of documentations, reflecting a wide range of topics. This is also why the scale of reproduction of the CMCS publications has been much larger than that of the CMCS internal documents. However, it also means that the richness and complexity of the CMCS internal documents are probably higher than the staff records and the CMCS publications.

To recapitulate the twentieth-century historical research of the three sets of CMCS materials, it seems that Western historians such as John Fairbank and the Harvard School have focused more on the first set—CMCS staff's personal records, while Taiwanese historians have preferred to scrutinize the second set—CMCS publications, and Mainland Chinese historians have concentrated on the third set—CMCS international documents. Such preferences have defined the studies in this area in the twentieth century. However, in the twenty-first century, these three groups of historians have already transcended the boundaries, shifting their attention to other aspects of the CMCS. For example, the journal articles in *Modern Asian Studies* and *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* are more concerned with the CMCS' institutional development and internal history. I am working on the diaries of Lester Little, the fifth Inspector-General of CMCS, and the personal history of Kishimoto Hirokichi (岸本廣吉), the collaborationist head of the bogus Customs during the War of Resistance Against Japan. Meanwhile, Songdi Wu's project team at Fudan University is working on the socio-economic relations between treaty ports and the hinterlands.

The studies on the CMCS, the CMCS staff, and the CMCS's economic data have been combined into a major course on modern international history. This digitized databased by Gale—*China and the Modern World: Records of the Maritime Customs Service of China*—will definitely help historians to access these materials more

efficiently and effectively. This, then, could well be the bedrock of the “third generation of the CMCS scholars.”