

# The Value of FO 17 for Chinese and World History

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FO 17/504: Chart of Coast near Hong Kong and Macao, 1868.



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FO 17, whose full title reads 'Foreign Office: Political and Other Departments: General Correspondence before 1906: China,' contains no less than 1776 files with more than one million pages of texts. The entire series has been digitized by Gale, a Cengage Company, into a digital archive collection entitled *China and the Modern World: Imperial China and the West (1815–1905)*. The collection is released in two parts.

The term 'general correspondence' covers a wide range of documents, including despatches, letters, memorandums, notes, and private letters. They were sent between the UK Foreign Office in London and British institutions in China, including the legation, the consulates, the vessels of the British Admiralty's China Station, and the Shanghai Supreme Court. They touch on many of the great events in Sino-British relations in the nineteenth century, including the Opium Wars, the Taiping Rebellion, and the Boxer War as well as on the routine and the mundane such as appointments, handovers, deaths, births, marriages, title deeds, consular buildings, and disputes of all kinds. There is no historian who cannot find something of value in the collection.

Even a cursory reading of a few select files shows that the collection is extraordinarily rich. Some documents reveal an oddity, minor in itself but somehow evocative of an age. Others are of significance in a more traditional sense. An example of the first is the mention of 'stinkpots' in a message of 17 May 1866 from Hong Kong Governor Richard MacDonnell to D.B. Robertson, the British Consul at Guangzhou. MacDonnell wanted Robertson to prevail on the governor of Guangdong to prohibit vessels other than those of the Qing Dynasty navy from carrying weapons such as cannon, guns, muskets, and stinkpots.<sup>1</sup> The surprise is not that Chinese vessels carried weapons at a time when piracy was widespread. But stinkpots are rarely mentioned as an important piece of naval armament.

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<sup>1</sup> 'W. Mercer to D.B. Robertson to Colonial Secretary Office,' 17 May 1866, FO 17/803, 38. The message was written by W. Mercer, who had been acting Hong Kong Governor until MacDonnell's arrival on 12 March 1866.

share to put down the criminal  
excesses alluded to - and in case  
that Government has no Gunboats  
available, he has suggested that  
a pecuniary contribution might  
be given "ad interim" by the  
Chinese Government to defray the  
annual cost of four or five  
Gunboats.

Above all His Excellency  
has suggested the expediency of  
some Legislation being adopted by  
the Chinese Government to prohibit  
any but vessels of the Imperial  
Navy carrying Cannon - Stink Pots -  
Guns - Gun powder, or other munitions  
of war, and declaring that all  
vessels

A page from the despatch from W. Mercer to D.B. Robertson dated 17 May 1866, FO 17/803, 38.

Reading through the file reveals that stinkpots were earthenware containers filled with gunpowder, shot, firecrackers, and sulphur. They were kept in a wicker basket hung high up the mast of a pirate vessel. After setting them alight, pirates tossed them onto the deck of a vessel they were about to board. They caused, we learn, a good deal of fire, smoke, stink, and noise, but not much real damage. They were useful to the pirates, presumably, in stunning and overwhelming the crew of the ship they wanted to seize without wrecking it.

The presence of a stinkpot basket was enough to identify a ship as a pirate ship. Consul Robertson organised a joint counter-piracy operation with the Governor of Guangdong. The Governor's help was needed because British gunboats could not operate legally without Qing approval beyond three nautical miles from the shores of the British colony of Hong Kong. The Governor assigned a deputy, whose name the file recorded as Leang Kwo-ting, to accompany Robertson. Robertson was able to order British gunboats to destroy 21 'heavily armed vessels' once Leang agreed that vessels with stinkpots had to be pirate ships. That was all the evidence that Robertson needed to have legal cover for his operation.

This particular file illustrates the complexity of piracy. Reports about piracy filed with the Hong Kong Police Department tell us that pirates were after the opium, silver, pigs, dried fish, sextants, chronometers, liquor, gunpowder, and muskets carried from and to Hong Kong either from ports nearby or from as far away as Singapore. Much of that trade was still conducted by British sailing vessels, whose slow speed allowed fast Chinese vessels to work in pairs or groups to capture them. The Hong Kong government had a few steam-driven gunboats to protect British trade. However, Governor MacDonnell and Consul Robertson regularly complained to London that they were too decrepit, too prone to malfunction, and too few to be up to the challenge. A further problem was that the pirates had excellent informants in Hong Kong. The colony also provided an easy market for their wares.

A similar minor incident that evokes the contours of a larger historical context is reflected in a letter of 3 February 1877 from Guo Songtao (郭嵩焘), the first Qing dynasty envoy to the United Kingdom, to Foreign Secretary the Earl of Derby, Edward Stanley. Guo hailed from Hunan and had helped Marquis Zeng Guofan (曾国藩) to suppress the Taiping Rebellion there. In this letter, Guo pleaded for a reduction in 'the very harsh sentence' of two months hard labour that had been meted out by a magistrate at the Marlborough Police Station to a John Donovan. Donovan had assaulted a servant of the Chinese legation while drunk. Guo argued that this sentence was far too harsh given that the servant had suffered no wounds.<sup>2</sup> This incident is interesting because the British government objected to Chinese law and insisted on extraterritoriality for its subjects who had violated the law in China on the grounds that Qing law was too harsh. Guo – and no doubt Donovan – were disappointed when Derby informed Guo that despite 'every desire to further your wishes in the matter,' his investigations had uncovered no facts to permit him to intervene 'in the prisoner's favour.'<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> 'Kuo Sung-tao to the Earl of Derby,' 3 February 1877, FO 17/768, 23-24.

<sup>3</sup> 'Lord Derby to Kuo Sung-tao,' 22 February 1877, FO 17/768, 33.



Chinese Legation.  
45, Portland Place  
3<sup>rd</sup> February 1877.

The Chinese Minister presents his Compliments to the Earl of Derby, and begs to inform His Lordship, that on the 1<sup>st</sup> inst, a man named Donovan, was brought up before the Magistrate of the Marlborough Street Police Court, and sentenced to two months imprisonment with hard labour, for assaulting whilst in a drunken fit, one of the servants of the Chinese Legation. — The Chinese Minister, seeing that the servant was in no way injured, and being perfectly

to further your wishes in the matter he regrets that he is unable, upon the facts of the case as reported to him by the committing Magistrate, to discover any sufficient grounds to justify him, consistently with his Public Duty in advising any interference in the Prisoner's favour.

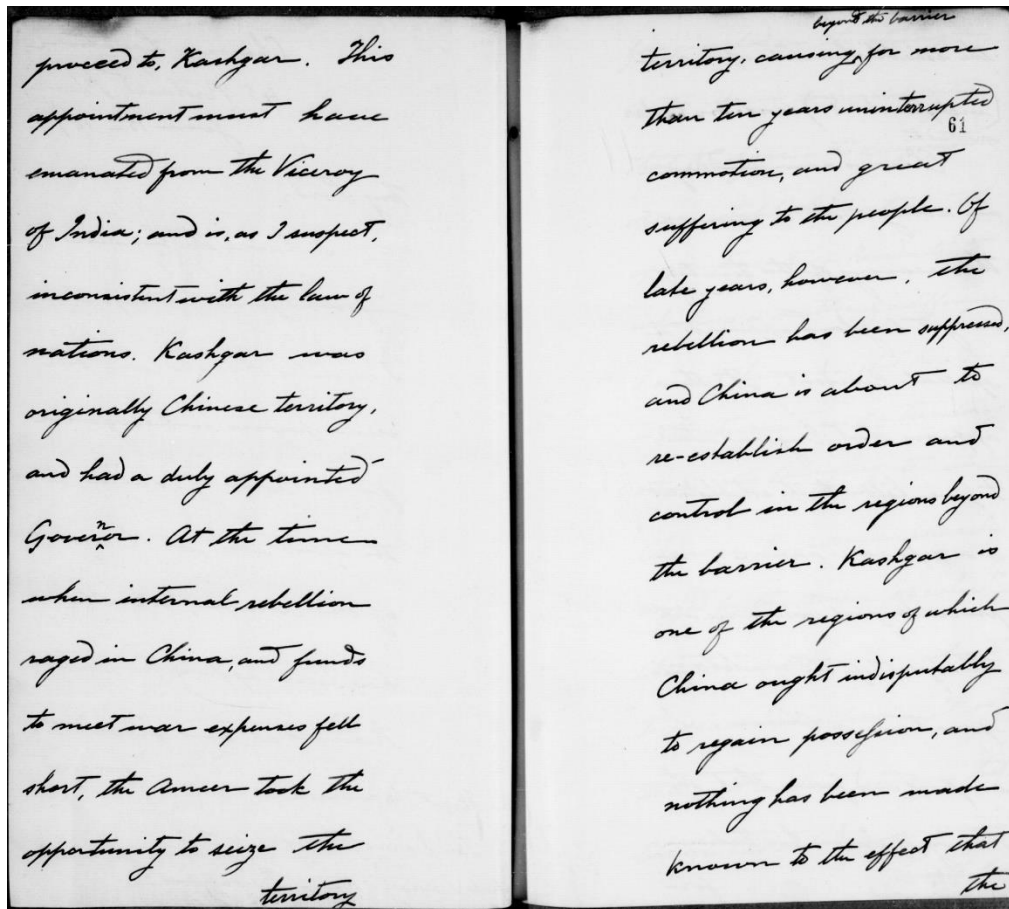
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Pages from Kuo Sung-tao's letter to the Earl of Derby dated 3 February 1877 and the Earl's reply dated 22 February 1877, FO 17/768, 23 and 33

Guo Songtao had bigger fish to fry than pleading Donovan's case. In June 1877 he protested the appointment by India's viceroy of a Mr [Robert] Shaw as British Resident of Kashgar, an oasis in the Tarim basin in Xinjiang. Guo had become aware of the development from a report carried in a Bombay (now Mumbai) newspaper. Guo acknowledged that the Qing dynasty had lost control over the region during the Taiping Rebellion, and that the Kashgar Amir had been able then to rule the region independently. According to Guo, the Amir had caused 'for more than ten years uninterrupted commotion and great suffering to the people.'<sup>4</sup> Guo argued that the appointment of Shaw as Resident violated international law because the act implied British recognition of Kashgar's independence from China. Guo told Foreign Secretary Stanley that Kashgar had been part of Qing territory for a very long time and that Qing dynasty forces led by General Zuo Zongtang were now restoring order

<sup>4</sup> 'Kuo Sung-tao to the Earl of Derby,' 15 June 1877, FO 17/768, 61.

there. Guo prevailed, or rather, Britain accepted realities when Qing forces re-occupied Xinjiang. There would be no Kashgaria.

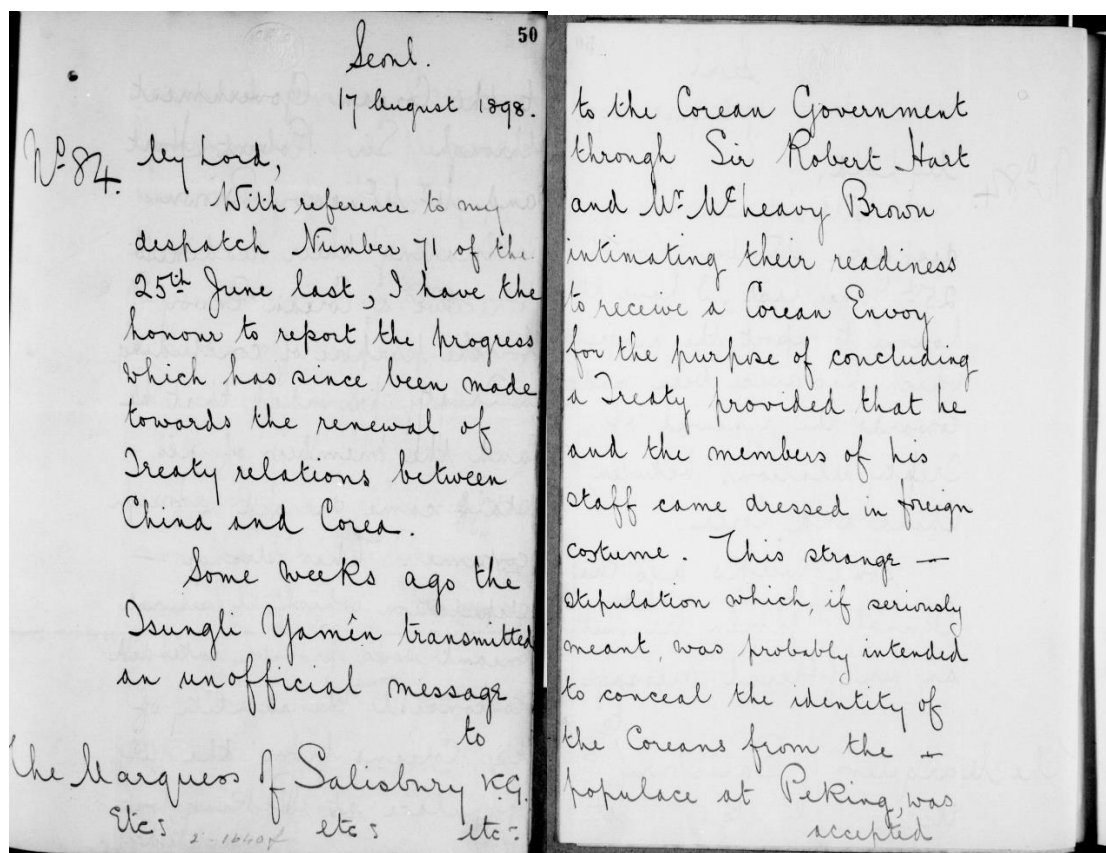


Pages from the letter of Guo Song Tao to the Early of Derby dated 15 June 1877

on the issue of Kashgar, FO 17/768, 60-61

Of similar significance in high politics is the correspondence between Prime Minister Lord Salisbury (Robert Arthur Talbot Gascoyne-Cecil) and John Jordan, who was first consul, then charge d'affaires, and finally minister in Seoul in the last decade of the nineteenth century. At the time, the Qing dynasty was resisting Japan's growing influence in Korea while Russia was aggressively expanding its influence in northeast Asia, which worried Britain. In the mid-1890s, British foreign policy moved away from splendid isolation to a more forward policy. Jordan's role in Seoul was to serve as a listening post. In a series of letters rather than official despatches, Jordan provided Salisbury with sensitive political information, including about an 1898 coup backed by Japan that failed, the activities of an Independence Party that pushed the Korean emperor to adopt political reform, and the Qing dynasty's use of Robert Hart, the Inspector General of the Chinese Maritime Customs

Service, to re-establish Beijing's influence at the Korean court.<sup>5</sup> Jordan was obviously well informed.



Pages from the despatch of John Jordan to British Prime Minister Lord Salisbury

dated 17 August 1898, FO 17/1350, 50

John Jordan would play a prominent role in China's history. In Korea he developed a close working relation with Yuan Shikai, who was also stationed at Seoul as the Qing dynasty's representative. After completing his stint in Korea, Jordan served as British Minister to the Qing dynasty and then the Republic of China from 1906 to 1920. His support for Yuan Shikai helped shape Britain's response to the 1911 Revolution, which helped Yuan to become the Republic's first president.

There are many ways of exploring this rich archive. It simply pays off, as I hope the above examples show, just to wander through its files and let chance take its course, in the same way that walking along the bookshelves of a library is often productive. The core of FO

<sup>5</sup> Contained in FO 17/1350, 50.

17 is the correspondence between the British heads of mission in China and the Foreign Office's Political Department. Below is a list of these heads for the period covered by FO 17.

Name	Start	End
Sir George Elliot	February 1840	August 1841
Sir Henry Pottinger	August 1841	May 1844
Sir John Francis Davis	May 1844	March 1848
Sir George Bonham	March 1848	1853
Sir John Bowring	December 1853	April 1857
Sir James Bruce (the Earl of Elgin)	1857	1860
Sir Frederick Bruce	November 1860	June 1864
Sir Thomas Wade	June 1864	December 1865
Sir Rutherford Alcock	December 1865	November 1869
Hugh Fraser	November 1869	November 1869
Sir Thomas Wade	November 1869	November 1876
Hugh Fraser	November 1876	June 1879
Sir Thomas Wade	June 1879	August 1882
Thomas Grosvenor	August 1882	September 1883
Sir Harry Parkes	September 1883	March 1885
Sir Nicholas O'Connor	March 1885	June 1886
Sir John Walsham	June 1886	September 1892
William Beauclerk	September 1892	November 1892
Sir Nicholas O'Connor	November 1892	September 1895
William Beauclerk	September 1895	April 1896
Sir Claude MacDonald	April 1896	October 1900
Sir Ernest Satow	October 1900	September 1906
Sir John Jordan	September 1906	March 1910



So far we have only one serious biography for these key figures in UK-Qing relations.<sup>6</sup> A good use of FO 17 would be for historians and biographers to change that situation.

A second important part of FO 17 is a series of correspondence with British consulates in China. The most prominent of these was the Consulate General in Shanghai. Consuls corresponded about a whole range of issues not just with the legation and other consulates, but also with local Qing officials, fellow consuls of other countries, and businesspersons of all kinds. This series will yield a good amount of information about local affairs.

Particularly prominent issues generated their own correspondence series. For instance, FO 17/571–81 collects documents concerning the negotiations about the 1858 Tianjin Treaty that transformed UK-China relations, opening further ports to Western trade, allowing foreigners to travel throughout China, and permitting foreign diplomats to reside in Beijing. The coolie trade, which in many ways replaced the slave trade and has yet to receive the attention it deserves, also has its own files: FO 17/873–881, 891, 1701–1704, 1082, and 1083. The post-Boxer War negotiations about trade tariffs are the subjects of FO 17/1563 to 1590. Piracy is covered in FO 17/802–807 and 1110–1113. Useful materials for the study of the creation of a telegraph network in China are preserved in FO17/1007–1011, 1097, and 1189. This is not an exhaustive list.

FO 17 also has runs of files dealing with the Qing Dynasty's neighbouring countries. They will be useful for the study of the Qing's relations with these countries and of imperial rivalries between the Qing Dynasty, France, and the British, Japanese, and Russian empires for influence in these regions. 47 volumes cover the affairs of Burma, Siam, and French Indochina (FO 17/1059–1065, 1994–95, 1150–1152, 1175–1188, 1219–1226, and 1265–1296). Tibet is the subject of 12 volumes of material (FO 17/1745–1756). The files for Korea are more spread out, but they include FO 17/962, 996, 1107, 1697–1700, 1027, 1634, 1662, 1719, 1348–1352, 1388–1392, 1453–1457, 1512–1516, 1558–1562, 1623–1627, and 1659.

UK Foreign Office staff dealing with China in the nineteenth century did not have the time to wade through whole correspondence series to find the information they needed then and there. In addition, the titles of many files in FO 17 are decidedly vague. 'Various,' for instance, is all the catalogue tells us about no fewer than 132 files. A correspondence series

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<sup>6</sup> James Cooley, *T.F. Wade in China: Pioneer in Global Diplomacy* (Leiden, Brill, 1981).

carrying just the personal name of the office holder is not particularly helpful either. Foreign Office staff therefore kept registers of correspondences. These priceless finding aids preserved in FO 605 and FO 566 are available on microfilm in the Reading Room of the UK National Archive. Each item in the registers contains such important information as volume number, despatch number, date, author and/or recipient, as well as descriptive notes. We must be grateful to Gale for transcribing FO 605 and FO 566 and incorporating their information into this digital collection as metadata. Rather than having to rely on luck, this makes it possible to conduct systemic and targeted searches, making this collection extraordinarily valuable.

#### **Citation**

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