



THROUGH TURBULENT WATERS

Foreign Administration of the Chinese Maritime Customs Service, 1923–1937

by

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It is common knowledge that during the past eight or nine decades the quasi-British controlled Inspectorate of Customs has hitherto been a corner-stone of the British position in China and has been co-equal with the name of England in the Far East. And it should be considered furthermore, that the influence and prestige of the Inspectorate General throughout this period was attained and sustained solely by individual exertions....

Frederick Maze
21st December 1943

*For my parents,
Don and Kathleen Brunero*

Table of Contents

TABLE OF CONTENTS		<i>iv</i>
LIST OF TABLES AND FIGURES		<i>vi</i>
ABSTRACT		<i>vii</i>
THESIS SUBMISSION STATEMENT		<i>viii</i>
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS		<i>ix</i>
CHAPTER ONE	Introduction	1
	Explaining the Customs Service.....	7
	Overview of Chapters.....	13
CHAPTER TWO	The First Seventy Years of the Maritime Customs Service	17
	The Origins of the MCS	18
	Robert Hart’s Vision for the Imperial Maritime Customs... ..	23
	The Coming of the Republic: The End of the Customs Golden Age	34
	A Privileged Life: Foreigners in the Customs Service	40
CHAPTER THREE	The Maritime Customs Service: An Institutional Review	53
	The Structures of the Customs Service	53
	Regulating and Rewarding Staff in the MCS.....	62
	Financing the Republic	68
	The Custom’s London Office: Administrative Support, Cultivating “Allies” and Creating the “Customs Man”?	79
CHAPTER FOUR	The Maritime Customs and the Rise of Nationalist Struggle Against Imperialism 1923–1927	98
	Gunboats and Revenue: Sun Yat-sen and the Canton Customs, 1923	99
	The Diplomatic Body’s “Policy of Procrastination”	103
	Gunboat Diplomacy in Action.....	107
	Where was the MCS in the Canton Controversy?.....	110
	The Rise of Anti-Imperialism and the MCS.....	115
	The MCS and the Canton–Hong Kong Boycotts of 1925–1926	119
CHAPTER FIVE	Nationalist Ascendancy and the Customs Service in Turmoil	141
	The Dismissal of Aglen: A Watershed for the Service	141
	1927–1929 in Perspective	145
	The Nanking Incident and its Implications for the Customs Service	148
	The Succession Crisis Overviewed	152

	Edwardes and Maze: The Potential Inspectors General	155
	Significance of the Succession Crisis.....	166
	An IG Scorned: Maze and the Politics of Being IG	169
	The Maze Administration's First Year.....	173
CHAPTER SIX	Into Calmer Waters: The Proposed Hong Kong–China Trade and Customs Agreement, 1929–1930	177
	An Introduction to Hong Kong–MCS Relations.....	179
	The Proposed Hong Kong–China Trade and Customs Agreement, 1929–1930	184
	A Dead Letter.....	198
CHAPTER SEVEN	Decline of the Maritime Customs Service	202
	The Tientsin Customs Seizure: An Overview	204
	Tientsin's De Facto Customs Establishment	215
	Reclaiming the Tientsin Customs	221
	Learning from Tientsin: Compromise at Canton, 1931	224
	Carving Up the Service: The Loss of Customs Houses in the Northeast.....	228
	Manchukuo and the MCS	232
	Dairen and the Fukomoto Affair	239
	Manchukuo's Move Against the Customs Service (March–June 1932): An Overview	243
	CONCLUDING REMARKS.....	248
	APPENDIX 1: "A Legion in Far Cathay" by T. Holman, R.N.....	253
	APPENDIX 2: Transcript of Personal Interview with Yvonne King 26 July 1998.....	256
	APPENDIX 3: MCS Confidential Staff Report Form.....	265
	APPENDIX 4: Biographical Glossary.....	267
	BIBLIOGRAPHY	281

List of Tables and Figures

TABLES

2.1	The Opening of Treaty Ports and Customs Houses	21/22
3.1	Selected Commissioners of 1911.....	57
3.2	Revenue and Receipts of the Nationalist Government from 1929 to 1934	72/73
3.3	Total Payments for the Ministry of Finance, 1929–1934.....	73/74
3.4	Revenue of the Maritime Customs Service, 1923–1937.....	77/78
6.1	Coastal Piracies Since 1923	179/180

FIGURES

2.1	The Imperial Maritime Customs Service Brass Band	28
2.2	Sir Frederick Maze circa 1930	32
2.3	Customs Commissioner’s Residence, Macao	47
2.4	The Lebas Family Entertaining Guests on Verandah	47
2.5	Customs Commissioner’s Residence, Macao; from road	48
2.6	View across Macao, from Commissioner’s Residence	48
2.7	Customs Cruiser, Macao	50
2.8	Guests aboard Customs Cruiser	50
2.9	Guests about Customs Cruiser, from another angle.....	51
3.1	Structure of the Maritime Customs Service, circa 1922.....	54
3.2	Flow of Information in the Customs Service	55
3.3	Customs Medal for Meritorious Service	67
3.4	Customs Revenue and Import/Export Duties in Proportion to Revenue ..	78
3.5	Examination for Prospective Customs Recruits.....	91
3.6	Ranks and Pay of Indoor Staff in 1922.....	94
4.1	Sapajou, “The Real Solution of the China Problem”	121
4.2	Hankow Customs House Guarded by British Soldiers	124
4.3	Sapajou, “A Very Patient Beast, but Better not Roused”	125
4.4	Sapajou, “The Wolves That Keep the Door”	127
4.5	Hayley Bell Patrolling the Canton Bund.....	129
5.1	Sapajou, “Still Out of Control—Even in Nanking!”	151
7.1	Maritime Customs Revenue, 1930.....	209
7.2	Sapajou, “A Domestic Question—What it is No Use Crying Over”	212
7.3	Sapajou, “Heads or Haunches? The Shadow and the Substance”	213
7.4	Sapajou, “Thoughts on the Crisis”	214
7.5	Sapajou, “More Kidnapping”	233
7.6	Percentage of Customs Revenue Collected at Manchurian Ports in 1925, 1927, 1929 and 1931.....	236

Abstract

Through Turbulent Waters: Foreign Administration of the Chinese Maritime Customs, 1923–1937

In modern times customs services are the institutions entrusted with monitoring trade through collecting duties on imports and exports, preventing smuggling and patrolling national boundaries. The Chinese Maritime Customs Service of the Republic was imbued with many of these modern ideas. The Service maintained an extensive network of Customs houses both along China's coastline and inland. It maintained harbours and lighthouses and also established a preventive service to counteract smuggling. The comparisons, however, end here. The Chinese Maritime Customs Service was a uniquely cosmopolitan institution that emerged as a product of the Opium Wars and the Unequal Treaties. Headed by successive British Inspectors General, Sir Robert Hart (1863–1911), Sir Francis Aglen (1911–1927) and Sir Frederick Maze (1929–1943), the Service recruited foreigners to administer the Customs establishments. This dissertation examines the fate of the Customs foreign Inspectorate during the 1923–1937 period. By examining episodes such as the Canton Customs controversy of 1923; the Canton–Hong Kong Boycott 1925–1926; the Customs succession crisis; negotiations surrounding the proposed Hong Kong–China Trade and Customs Agreement 1929–30; the seizure of the Tientsin Customs 1930; and the loss of Customs houses in the northeast to Manchukuo authorities in 1923–1933, the themes of resistance and change are brought to the fore. The foreign administration of the Service encountered growing resistance on the part of the Chinese nationalists and it also faced resistance from the British establishment in China who no longer perceived the Service as an ongoing concern. To ensure its survival the Service had to change and in doing so embrace the Nationalist regime. Although during this period the significance of Customs revenue to the Chinese government and to foreign investors was unsurpassed, the Service itself was undergoing a steady decline as it was pulled deeper into the machinations of China's political sphere without a British anchor for security.