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
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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.