1-2022

In the Age of Imperialism: A Study of Hankow Based on the Maritime Customs Decennial Report (1892-1901)

Sze Pui Yin Daisy

Chinese University of Hong Kong

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.georgiasouthern.edu/aujh>

Part of the [History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Daisy, Sze Pui Yin (2022) "In the Age of Imperialism: A Study of Hankow Based on the Maritime Customs Decennial Report (1892-1901)," *Armstrong Undergraduate Journal of History*. Vol. 12 : Iss. 1 , Article 3.

DOI: 10.20429/aujh.2022.120103

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.georgiasouthern.edu/aujh/vol12/iss1/3>

This article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at Digital Commons@Georgia Southern. It has been accepted for inclusion in Armstrong Undergraduate Journal of History by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons@Georgia Southern. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@georgiasouthern.edu.

In the Age of Imperialism:

A Study of Hankow Based on the Maritime Customs Decennial Report (1892-1901)

Sze Pui Yin Daisy

Chinese University of Hong Kong

Introduction

A few days later, they arrive at Wuchang, on which the office of the Viceroy of Huguang is founded. Overseeing Hubei and Hunan Provinces, he is responsible for the administration of both the military and the populace, which is in harmony with the ancient system of *jiedushi* (regional governor in Tang China). Hankow, whose trading activities have been flourishing in recent decades, is situated on the other side of the river. It has thereafter been opened as a concession of foreigners. As steamboats that navigate along the Yangtze River deem Shanghai as the lower end whilst Hankow as the upper end, it becomes a confluence that connects northern and southern provinces. Despite the incompleteness of railroads, its jetty is one of the most prominent ones in China. Therefore, there are numerous Chinese and foreign merchants doing business here, from which the establishment of embassies ensues, ascertaining convenient negotiations and management of their compatriots... In the pursuit of modernization, the Viceroy contributes to both significant and petty accomplishments – he not only establishes (the Hubei) Cotton Mills, (Hanyang) Arsenal, and schools for different purposes, but he also encourages the publication of newspaper and literary works.¹

¹ Bo-yuan Lee, *Modern Times*, ed. Qin Ke & Gong Jun (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1997), 70. Unless specifically stated, all translations in this essay are done by the author.

This account is extracted from a realistic novel, entitled *Modern Times*, which was composed in late Qing China. Notwithstanding its made-up anecdotes, it provides us with some glimpses of its contemporary era: trades were prevalent in Hankow, which turned it gradually into a global emporium; concessions were established, more foreigners were involved in the development of Hankow; the Viceroy was capable and passionate about modernizing Hankow, new institutions and infrastructure thus came into being.² As such, this reveals the big picture of Hankow in the late Qing Dynasty. Nonetheless, an essential institution was neglected – the Imperial Maritime Customs Service (IMCS). Not only did it facilitate and negotiate trades between China and the West, but it also helped prompt China to modernize and incorporate it into the world system.³ Hence, the Maritime Customs Decennial Report (1892-1901) is of vital importance to understand the situation of Hankow in Late Qing thoroughly. It is from here that we take up the story.

This essay is based mainly on the Maritime Customs Decennial Report (1892-1901) to scrutinize the circumstances and development of Hankow in the Age of Imperialism. The first part elucidates the general history of the Imperial Maritime Customs Service, which renders us a basis to further understand its role and functions in Hankow. By examining its port

² In Qing China, Hankow was an important port city next to the Yangtze River. It was town-twinning to Hanyang and Wuchang, forming part of the Hubei Province, which was overseen by the Viceroy of Huguang. See appendix for its map in the early twentieth century.

³ Chi-yun Chang, "Modern China's Custom Services: A Brief Introduction," accessed April 20, 2021, <http://gis.rchss.sinica.edu.tw/cmcs/modern-china's-customs-services-a-brief-introduction> and Hans van de Ven, *Breaking with the Past: The Maritime Customs Service and the Global Origins of Modernity in China* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014).

activities and fluctuations in trades, the second part portrays the prosperity of this global emporium. The third part illustrates the foreign activities in this multinational hub, which was henceforth more interconnected with the world. The last part focuses on the means by which the Viceroy of Huguang, Zhang Zhidong, took the “advantage of backwardness” in China, who acquired new technologies and assistance from the western powers to achieve modernization.⁴ In so doing, this essay argues that the western powers did not merely exploit Chinese resources in the Age of Imperialism, but they also facilitated trades and introduced new technologies to China, giving fresh impetus to its modernization.

A Mechanism of Imperialism? A History of the IMCS

Historians have held different views of the Imperial Maritime Customs Service. Some deemed it as a means by which the British imperialism spread across China, just as Donna Brunero expressed that “the Service stood as a prime mechanism for exercising foreign influence in China’s affair.”⁵ She explained that the IMCS was largely dominated by the

⁴ “The advantage of backwardness” is a concept coined by Gerschenkron, an economic historian. He explained that the more developed countries were the “cores” whilst the less developed were the “rimlands”. Despite being economically backward, these “rimlands” could acquire technologies and knowledge from the “cores”. This contributed to their rapid industrialization and modernization. Therefore, they could become the “cores” themselves. See Alexander Gerschenkron, *Economic Backwardness in Historical Perspective: A Book of Essays* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1962).

⁵ Donna Brunero, *Britain’s Imperial Cornerstone in China: The Chinese Maritime Customs Service, 1854-1949* (London: Routledge, 2004), 3.

British, who undermined the tariff autonomy of China.⁶ Some Chinese scholars adopted a resembling view, like Chen Xiafei and Han Rongfang treated it as a tool of imperialism.⁷ Whilst the other stressed that the IMCS was indeed a prominent institution for facilitating modernization in late Qing China. For instance, endeavoring to analyze from an economic perspective, Stanley wright stated that the IMCS worked for the sake of China. Also, John King Fairbank raised his well-known theory of “synarchy”, which referred the IMCS to a “striking” form of joint administration – foreign commissioners were employed by the Chinese emperors under the supervision of the British Inspector-General.⁸ On the other hand, although van de Ven agreed that the IMCS helped prevent the partition of China in 1900 and bring China into the globalized world, he believed that “neither imperialism nor synarchy” could explain the situation thoroughly.⁹ All these suggested that it is indeed intricate to understand the nature of the IMCS. To this end, it seems to be important to understand, beforehand, its history and functions in late Qing China.

⁶ Brunero, *Britain's Imperial Cornerstone in China*, 5.

⁷ Chen Xiafei & Han Rongfang, *The Archives of the China's Imperial Maritime Customs Service: The Confidential Correspondence between Robert Hart and James Duncan Campbell* (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1990-1993. Quoted from Hans van de Ven, “Hart and Detring during the Boxer Rebellion,” *Modern Asian Studies* 40, no. 3 (July 2006): 632.

⁸ In his book, he defined “synarchy” as “the intricate institution of joint Sino-foreign administration of the government of China under a foreign dynasty.” Fairbank, John K, “Synarchy under the Treaties,” in *Chinese Thoughts and Institutions*, ed. Fairbank, John K (Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 1957), 205, 222; van de Ven, *Breaking with the Past*, 50.

⁹ van de Ven, *Breaking with the Past*, 3; van de Ven, “Hart and Detring during the Boxer Rebellion,” 661-662.

The IMCS was a fruit of the series of turbulence in the nineteenth century – the Opium Wars (1839), the Taiping Rebellion (1850), and the revolt of Short Sword Society in Shanghai (1853). To replace the pre-existing corrupted Chinese Maritime Customs, a conference was held amongst the Shanghai taotai, the British, the American, and the French consul at Shanghai in 1854, reaching a consensus to transform the Maritime Customs to a western style. Horatio Nelson Lay, who had been appointed as the British Inspector to oversee foreign trade, set up the Inspectorate General of Customs in Shanghai, and was inaugurated by the Zongli Yamen as the first official Inspector General in 1861. He was the one who took advantage of the Treaty of Tientsin (1858) to extend the system of the inspectorate to other ports,¹⁰ laying the foundation for the future development of the IMCS.

Succeeding Lay as the Inspector General, Robert Hart, who was more accommodating and considerate, impressed Prince Gong and Wenxiang.¹¹ He could fit into the Chinese official world easily as he understood the means by which one could thrive in China – following the “Chinese bureaucratic procedure” and knowing the “official etiquette”.¹² It was Hart who set the tenor of the IMCS, which became a centralized and self-contained bureaucracy that performed multi-functions. Not only did the IMCS assess duties on cargoes

¹⁰ van de Ven, *Breaking with the Past*, 35-38.

¹¹ Ting-yi Guo, *Jindai zhongguo shigang (The Summary of Modern Chinese History)* (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 2019), 187.

¹² van de Ven, “Hart and Detring during the Boxer Rebellion,” 663.

arriving in foreign steamships, but they also helped China with such naval reforms as the constructions of lighthouses, buoys, and beacons, which facilitated the development of China's port.¹³ Moreover, they absorbed China "into a new world of diplomacy", incorporating it into the world system. As such, the IMCS demonstrated a "civilizing mission" that prompted Qing China to modernize.¹⁴ It was noteworthy that rather than being contemptuous of China, Hart attempted to take China into a partnership, treating the Chinese as his countrymen. To exemplify this, he warned his fellows not to "arrogate to the tone of the Superintendent" and stressed that the IMCS should remain as a Chinese instead of a foreign institution.¹⁵ Under Hart's leadership, the IMCS rectified the problems of the Chinese Maritime Customs, which not only secured the British profits but also guaranteed the tax revenue of China. Within merely a couple of decades, the tax revenue of China increased and reached 20 million, serving as a promising insurance for foreign indemnity.¹⁶

In spite of Hart's contributions, one of the most heated controversies was about the recruitment and position of the Chinese in the IMCS. Advocating that the recruitment should

¹³ The IMCS even collected the duties afterwards. For the case of Hankow, it started collecting duties in 1899, which resulted in an increment of revenue. van de Ven, *Breaking with the Past*, 3; Erskine T. Pym, *Imperial Maritime Customs Decennial Reports: Hankow 1892-1901* (Shanghai: Statistical Department of the Inspectorate General of Customs, 1904), 293-323. Rpt. Liu Hui ed., *Wushinian gebu haiguan baogao 1882-1931* (Beijing: Zhongguo haiguan chubanshe, 2009) Vol. 3, 309 & 318.

¹⁴ van de Ven, *Breaking with the Past*, 3; Henk Vynckier & Chih-yun Chang, "'Imperium in Imperio': Robert Hart, The Chinese Maritime Customs Service, and Its (Self-)Representations," *Biography* 37, no.1 (Winter 2014):71 & 74-75.

¹⁵ Fairbank, "Synarchy under the Treaties," 223; van de Ven, *Breaking with the Past*, 50.

¹⁶ Guo, *The Summary of Modern Chinese History*, 188; Chang, "Modern China's Custom Services: A Brief Introduction."; Harrison, *China*, 65.

be cosmopolitan on principle, Hart hired foreigners from over twenty countries, albeit the British were in the majority.¹⁷ He expected his staff to be moral, polite, “smart, good looking and lusty lads,” who were capable of dealing with complicated tasks. Inside the Service, meanwhile, Chinese staffs were usually responsible for low-end posts, such as go-betweens and interpreters, who could barely reach the important posts or senior ranks.¹⁸ However, the situation changed when it entered the Republican Era. The IMCS was renamed the Chinese Maritime Customs Services (CMCS), whose functions were narrowed down, focusing more on tax collection and indemnity installation.¹⁹ Then, Sir Francis Aglen succeeded Hart to be the new Inspector General. When it came to the 1920s, the rise of Chinese nationalism spawned an anti-foreign atmosphere in China, putting a curb to the new recruitment of foreigners – they faded out and were supplanted by the Chinese. Thereafter, the Chinese filled the elite positions of the indoor staff. This was the upshot of the IMCS.

Throughout the brief history of the IMCS, one could understand that it played a crucial role in the treaty ports in late Qing China, which took charge of varieties of tasks and negotiations between China and the West. In this way, it was “the outsourcing by the Qing to foreign expertise—and quotidian responsibility—of the ever-tricky business of dealing with

¹⁷ van de Ven, *Breaking with the Past*, 94; Vynckier & Chang, “‘Imperium in Imperio’: Robert Hart, The Chinese Maritime Customs Service, and Its (Self-)Representations,” 70.

¹⁸ van de Ven, *Breaking with the Past*, 93-99; Brunero, *Britain's Imperial Cornerstone in China*, 15.

¹⁹ Chang, "Modern China's Custom Services: A Brief Introduction."

foreign traders.”²⁰ Therefore, if one has to understand the general outlook of a treaty port in late Qing China, the decennial reports of the IMCS loom large. This essay would make use of a decennial report to zoom into the circumstances of Hankow from 1892 to 1901, which throws light on a bigger picture of the trading activities, foreign involvements, and new constructions in Hankow. This manifested the progress of which Hankow turned not only to be a global emporium but also a modernized hub.

A Global Emporium: Trade and Prosperity in Hankow

According to the decennial report, Hankow was the “center of large commercial enterprise and rapidly developing trade.”²¹ Table 1a shows its general overview of the net value of trade from 1892 to 1901:

Table 1a. Net Value of Trade from 1892 to 1901²²

	Total Net Value	Net Foreign Import	Net Native Import	Net Original Export
1892 (Hk. Tls)	36,901,697	11,905,648	5,432,109	19,563,940
1901 (Hk. Tls)	62,219,698	25,685,954	7,161,102	29,372,642
Increment (%)	69	116	32	50

Note: The data above suggested that Hankow was in every aspect positively developing between 1892 and 1901, its total net value of trade increased drastically about 69% within a decade. This is a good place to start our discussion.

²⁰ Bickers, “Revisiting the Chinese Maritime Customs Service, 1854-1950,” 222.

²¹ *Decennial Reports: Hankow (1892-1901)*, 293.

²² *Decennial Reports: Hankow (1892-1901)*, 295.

The late Qing has always been deemed as the epoch of which western imperialism expanded – by signing a series of unequal treaties, the Westerners exploited the Chinese resources, undermined China’s tariff autonomy, and even partitioned its territories. However, its “total gain from trade and the capacity to import were measurably improved” in the meantime.²³ In other words, there seemed to be an impressive economic development in China during this “Age of Western Imperialism”. This part examined the importation and exportation of goods in Hankow, suggesting that the advent of the Westerners in Chinese treaty ports could foster economic growth and the development of auxiliary economic institutions. Under this circumstance, transformations took place, such as the commencement of modern entrepreneurship, a more open-minded attitude towards commercial boom, and the advancement of technological level. The prosperity of trading activities, more importantly, even fueled China’s early industrialization.²⁴ As such, these bestowed Hankow, as a treaty port, with a more modern outlook.

Both foreign and native importation increased within this decade; table 1b displays some of the imported items:

²³ Yen-ping Hao, *The Commercial Revolution in 19th Century China: The Rise of the Sino-Western Mercantile Capitalism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 355.

²⁴ Hao, *The Commercial Revolution in 19th Century China*, 349 & 355.

Table 1b. Imported Items from 1892 to 1901 (in piculs, unless specifically stated)²⁵

	1892	1897	1899	1900	1901
Raw Cotton	31,600	122,000	/	/	1,700
Cotton Yarn	80,000	/	284,000	226,000	250,000
Brown Sugar	52,900	/	/	/	82,400
White and Refined Sugar	/	/	/	/	93,000
Hemp Bag (in Hk. Tls.)	63,000	/	172,000	/	145,000
Kerosene Oil (in gallons)	5,000,000	/	/	/	16,767,895

According to the data in table 1b, the amount of importation of Kerosene oil increased remarkably by 235%, which suggested that it was prevalent in Hankow. As a Hankow commissioner, R. B. Moorhead, noted that it was “a very good oil, but somewhat inflammable,” so that it had caused some “disastrous fires.”²⁶ Amongst these items, it seemed that only the amount of importation of raw cotton decreased. As raw cotton was unadorned, which required extra works before being weaved, it was gradually supplanted by the cotton yarn. There are several types of cotton yarns from different origins, including India (248,000 piculs), Japan (194,400 piculs), and England (3,500 piculs). Notwithstanding the mounting importation of Indian cotton yarn, most of them were re-exported, only 24.3% (60,400 piculs) was preserved in Hankow for local use. In contrast, 95% (186,000 piculs) of the Japanese cotton yarn was retained in the local market, suggesting that it seemed to have met the local taste best.

²⁵ *Decennial Reports: Hankow (1892-1901)*, 298-300.

²⁶ van de Ven, *Breaking with the Past*, 125.

Apart from the listed objects, the introduction of salt into Hankow was also noteworthy.

Table 1c shows the consumption and tax revenue of salt from different regions:

Table 1c. Consumption and Tax Revenue of Salt from Different Origins²⁷

	Consumption (piculs)	Tax (K'u-p'ing Tls)
Huai or Sea Salt	1,038,000	1,452,000
Szechwan Well Salt	1,136,600	2,316,200
Hupei Salt	8,000	9,230
Others (contraband)	218,200	/
Total	2,400,600	2,470,630

Salt was a government monopoly, whose transportation was put under a close scrutiny of the state. Most of the salt in Hankow came from the Szechwan well, which was accounted for around 47%. As salt was one of the most indispensable commodities in the Chinese societies, the consumption of salt in Hankow was unsurprisingly enormous, which helped generate a promising amount of tax revenue. Under the deputy of the commissioner in the Service, the Hubei Salt Likin Collectorate was founded in 1898, who was responsible for securing the repayment of the Anglo-German loan made after the Sino-Japanese War.²⁸ Moreover, a new indemnity was created after the Boxer Uprising (1899-1901), which imposed a new taxation of two cash per catty on the salt sold in Hubei.

²⁷ *Decennial Reports: Hankow (1892-1901)*, 300.

²⁸ *Decennial Reports: Hankow (1892-1901)*, 318.

The importation of native opium superseded, as expected in the previous decennial report (1882-1891), the foreign ones.

Table 1d. Importation of Opium From 1892 to 1901 (in piculs)²⁹

		Foreign Opium	Szechwan Opium	Yunnan Opium
Import	1892	497	2,305	/
	1901	148	12,840	/
	Total for local consumption	2,966	3,434	757

As table 1d shows that the importation of foreign opium was reduced greatly by 70% within the decade; whilst the importation of Szechwan opium was increased drastically by 457%. Despite most of Szechwan opium was re-exported to other cities, its total amount for local consumption was still more significant than that of foreign opium.

As the outstanding amount of importation revealed that there was a constant demand for different types of goods from Hankow, demonstrating that Hankow was highly, if not heavily, populated and congested with commercial dealings. By the same token, when the amount of exportation was also impressive, this manifested that Hankow was either rich in natural resources or proficient in manufacturing industries. Table 2 displays a list of exported items from 1892 to 1901:

²⁹ *Decennial Reports: Hankow (1892-1901)*, 310.

Table 2. Exported Items from 1892 to 1901 (in piculs, unless specifically stated)³⁰

Items\Years	1892	1895	1898	1900	1901
Beancake	24,400	/	/	822,600	535,300
Coal (in tons)	44,100	/	/	/	74,100
Gypsum	144,500	/	/	/	337,100
Rice	1,276,200	/	533,200	1,500	5,200
Leaf Tobacco	50,000	/	123,000	/	101,500
Wood Poles	276,800	/	/	/	497,100
Antimony Ore	/	1,008	/	73,135	55,507
Bristles	2,035	/	/	/	5990
Egret feathers	/	/	754	756	286
Hides	50,000	/	/	/	162,635
Wood Oil	284,000	/	/	/	280,000
Sesame Seed Oil	8,400	/	/	/	18,200
Sesame Seed	45,200	/	/	/	453,000
Vegetable Tallow	139,000	/	/	/	20,000
Tea (to Russia; in lb)	27,000,000	/	/	43,000,000	/

The exportation of goods substantially increased from 1892 to 1901, notwithstanding certain exceptional situations. For instance, on the grounds of the unfavorable government policy, or the occurrence of natural hazards that contributed to crop failure, the exportation of rice decreased. Another example was the decrease in the exportation of egret feathers. As the fashion sense changed in the market, egret feather could no longer meet the consumers' taste, which undermined its demand. In this way, the amount of exportation fluctuated. This was not only affected by the availability of the products *per se* but also shaped by market forces.

³⁰ *Decennial Reports: Hankow (1892-1901)*, 301-303.

This also happened to the exportation of tea to the world market. Chinese tea used to dominate the world market in the 1860s;³¹ China could supply the world with 86% of its total consumption. However, the situation changed completely in the 1890s – it occupied only a quarter of the global consumption. To explain this, the change in the British attitude towards Chinese tea was critical. The British stopped shipping tea from China directly to Great Britain but purchased Indian and Ceylon tea. As the Hankow commissioner explained that Indian and Ceylon tea possessed a more “pungent and stronger flavor” that could stand two or three brews, which was more affordable and thus favorable for the lower classes in Britain.³² In this sense, the Chinese should ameliorate the means by which they cultivate and process the tea leaf if they wanted to get back the hegemony of tea trade. Nonetheless, Indian and Ceylon tea had never entirely knocked Chinese tea out of the world market. As shown in table 2 that Russia still preferred Chinese tea to the Indian tea; the exportation to Russia even increased significantly by 60% from 1892 to 1900. The United States and Canada also continued to consume Chinese tea, despite their relatively obscure demand.

By and large, the data of both importation and exportation of goods demonstrated a glowing prospect of trades in Hankow, which contributed to a greater demand for better port administration and the construction of some auxiliary institutions. The activities of steamships became a more pronounced scene along the river and the coast. There was a great

³¹ *Decennial Reports: Hankow (1892-1901)*, 293.

³² *Decennial Reports: Hankow (1892-1901)*, 302; van de Ven, *Breaking with the Past*, 124.

improvement in the service of steamers between Hankow and Yichang, Moorhead believed that this “development was responsible for the revival of trade along the Yangtze river.”³³ For example, both Germany and Japan had their companies that owned steamers founded in the Orient.³⁴ The circumstances became even more optimistic in the year 1898, in which the Rules and Regulations for Inland Navigation were proposed.³⁵ This allowed steamers to connect the inland ports with the outside world more frequently. Henceforth, with the assistance of the “excellent water communication, Hankow was brought closer touch with the world.”³⁶

As trading activities thrived, the emergence of the confidence in credit system was its natural outcome; foreign banks were established. The branch of Russo-Chinese Bank first appeared in Hankow in 1896, ensued was Deutch-Asiatische Bank in 1898, Banque de l'Indo-Chine, and Yasuda Ginko in 1902. These banks facilitated the circulation of capital in the market, encouraged investment, and even nourished the idea of entrepreneurship. Hence, this fostered the development of native banks as well. For example, there were 29 large native banks operated within this decade, each could reach from 1,000,000 to 4,000,000 taels; the smaller ones could also reach from 10,000 to 100,000 taels. These banks even started issuing

³³ *Decennial Reports: Hankow (1892-1901)*, 297.

³⁴ *Decennial Reports: Hankow (1892-1901)*, 296.

³⁵ *Decennial Reports: Hankow (1892-1901)*, 298.

³⁶ *Decennial Reports: Hankow (1892-1901)*, 295.

banknotes, which were readily validated in the markets.³⁷ The absence of serious bankruptcy implied that most of these banks were well-managed and had great prospect.

The sophistication of postal services embodied another characteristic feature. The Chinese Postal Department was established in 1897 “under the aegis of the Service”; its branch and box offices blossomed in nodal points of the transportation networks or major cities. Therefore, the public could utilize them to send ordinary and registered mails or parcels from place to place, facilitating the dissemination of news and information. During 1897 and 1901, the articles received by the Postal Department increased 9.2 times from 3,390 to 31,388. Also, the total revenue of the Postal Department increased for 442% within a decade.³⁸ All this said that the Post office became a reliable tool for people. The emergence of these auxiliary institutions and systems generated a “modern” outlook of Hankow, of which the advent of foreigners might have been the major driving force.

Concessions and Foreign Activities

Amongst the Westerners, the British were the pioneers who settled in Hankow right after the Arrow War in the February of 1860; they successfully obtained the concession a year

³⁷ *Decennial Reports: Hankow (1892-1901)*, 310-311.

³⁸ *Decennial Reports: Hankow (1892-1901)*, 317, 323.

later.³⁹ For the following thirty years, this concession was the only cluster in which foreigners of different nationalities could reside in Hankow. Inside, there was a municipal council of six residents, which was a *de jure* joint government that included representatives from different countries. However, the British Consul General was the *de facto* ruling authority in this territory. They installed a police force of 32 Sikhs, 28 Chinese, 2 detectives, and an interpreter, which helped secure stability in the concession.⁴⁰ The Sikhs, as a normal practice, were drawn from other British colonies in Southeast Asia. Moreover, there were a Roman Catholic Cathedral, a Cathedral of the American Episcopal Church, and a Greek Orthodox Church. As only foreigners and prestigious Chinese were permitted to live in the concession, these churches were obviously founded to meet the demand of these religious western settlers but not to preach and convert the Chinese populace. As such, the presence of diverse sects of Christianity suggested that a variety of nationalities inhabited the concession. It occupied 290,932 square yards, with which new constructions were soon filled. As a result of the expanding foreign population, the concession was further extended for 247,000 square yards.⁴¹ In this way, it remained the largest one even after other countries also obtained their concessions in Hankow.

³⁹ Er-xun Zhao & Shao-min Ke, *Qing Shigao (Draft History of Qing)* (Taipei: Academia Historia Office, 1986), 4315.

⁴⁰ *Decennial Reports: Hankow (1892-1901)*, 294.

⁴¹ *Decennial Reports: Hankow (1892-1901)*, 293.

During this decade, three countries also obtained concessions in Hankow consecutively, which were Germany (1895), Russia (1896), and France (1896).⁴² News from the North China Herald in 1896 provided us with some glimpses of the means by which these three countries obtained their concessions. They had been “concession-hunting at various ports”; when they had a liking for a “large and suitable piece of land”, they would just tell “the Chinese authority that they wanted it” and “erect the boundary stone” there to declare their possessions.⁴³ Notwithstanding that they had to pay a small land and rice tax to the Chinese government annually.⁴⁴ Each of them also arranged a small police force to maintain the social order inside the concession, just as the British concession. Japan had also obtained a concession from the Chinese government although they had not been active on it. Belgium, nevertheless, had not been promised by the Chinese government to obtain a concession, despite their request. Scrutinizing through this constellation of foreign concessions, one could extrapolate that the sphere of western influence was enlarging in Hankow. The number of foreign firms increased from 45 to 76 within a decade, which revealed the flourishing foreign activities in Hankow. The foreign population even tripled from 374 heads to 990 heads, the majority of whom were the British and the American.⁴⁵ The population augmentation was

⁴² *Decennial Reports: Hankow (1892-1901)*, 293-294.

⁴³ “North China Herald (29/05/1896),” Brill, accessed April 29, 2021, <https://primarysources.brillonline.com/browse/north-china-herald-online>.

⁴⁴ *Decennial Reports: Hankow (1892-1901)*, 293.

⁴⁵ *Decennial Reports: Hankow (1892-1901)*, 313.

thanks to the construction of railways that linked Hankow to other parts of China, which increased intra-regional demographic mobility in China, contributing to the changing population landscapes in its future.

Inside the concessions, the foreigners built numerous factories, which rendered Hankow “quite the appearance of a manufacturing town.”⁴⁶ Hankow was famous for the commercial production of rice, tea, and eggs.⁴⁷ For instance, the two brick tea factories in the Russian and the British concessions respectively were the “most important industrial institution” in this port.⁴⁸ It was estimated that the total value of both Brick and Tablet Tea that passed through the Customs Service reached Hk. Tls. 26,415,571, most of which were involved in the exportation to Siberia. Another example was the Albumen Factory in the French Concession. By separating the egg white from the yolk, they will place the egg white in shallow trays. After being steamed, they would evaporate and remain as a “thin and gelatinous sheet”, which could be used in industries like photography, dyeing, and confectionery.⁴⁹ However, on the grounds of the keen competitions from other Chinese factories and chemical albumen factories, this business was no longer profitable. Table 3 shows its value depreciation from 1898 to 1901.

⁴⁶ *Decennial Reports: Hankow (1892-1901)*, 303.

⁴⁷ Hao, *The Commercial Revolution in 19th Century China*, 7.

⁴⁸ *Decennial Reports: Hankow (1892-1901)*, 304.

⁴⁹ *Decennial Reports: Hankow (1892-1901)*, 304.

Table 3. Piculs of Albumen and Yolk, and their value from 1898 to 1901⁵⁰

Year	Albumen (piculs)	Value (Hk Tls)	Yolk (piculs)	Value (Hk Tls)
1898	1,012	25,323	8,251	372121
1899	1,541	382524	112582	522154
1900	2,3773	59,351	18,928	85,222
1901	951	18,159	4,017	18,084

As the demand dropped significantly in the year 1901, it was believed that this industry could no longer secure a bright prospect. The last example was the match factory built in the Japanese concession in 1897; the matches were not for long-distance trade but for local consumption. From these examples, one could observe that most of the factories in the concessions were light industries, they were labor-intensive and required low-skilled labors to partake in the standardized procedure of production. In this way, they increased employment opportunities for the Chinese in the neighboring districts – the Russian factory of brick tea was a source of livelihood for many thousands of Natives” and the Japanese match factory also employed 1,200 people. Bringing their “most modern machinery” along to launch their business in Hankow, the foreigners eventually transferred their technologies to China and drove “modern improvement” in various ways.⁵¹

⁵⁰ *Decennial Reports: Hankow (1892-1901)*, 303.

⁵¹ *Decennial Reports: Hankow (1892-1901)*, 304; The “modern improvement” was brought not merely by the establishment of factories, but also by their everyday lives. For instance, the use of telephones and electronic light. Some modern maritime infrastructure was also built, such as large warehouses, wharves, and oil-tanks. They helped Hankow to be the “commercial center of a great country.” *Decennial Reports: Hankow (1892-1901)*, 295.

To be sure, the foreign activities in Hankow were not exclusive to commercial dealings but also diplomatic and social engagement. Prince Henry of Prussia, the brother of the German Emperor, paid a visit to Hankow in 1899.⁵² As reported in the North China Herald, he who was rendered a closed carriage (just like those of the high officials in China), rode to the *yamen* of Viceroy Zhang Zhidong to have a two-hour meeting with him. Throughout his journey, the Chinese troops surrounded and protected him. It was noticeable that Zhang did not follow the ordinary custom to bow to him, but he shook hands with those officers. Also, he offered both soda water and tea to them.⁵³ All these reflected the means by which he, a Chinese official, endeavored to accommodate himself to the western practice.

Considering the foreign activities in Hankow, one should not overlook their missionary groups, which caused not merely religious ramifications upon this Chinese society. Not only did they do charity works, but they also provided social welfares and medical assistance, taking care of the marginalized groups in the society. For instance, the Italian Franciscan Mission that was established in 1839, built a convent on the British Concession, there inhabited approximately 1,300 Chinese girls and 157 old women. They also spent some mission funds to build a hospital for the Chinese, which was currently providing medical care for about 1,000 patients.⁵⁴ The London Mission also built hospitals, dispensaries, schools,

⁵² *Decennial Reports: Hankow (1892-1901)*, 315.

⁵³ "North China Herald (15/05/1899)."

⁵⁴ *Decennial Reports: Hankow (1892-1901)*, 319.

and even an asylum for lepers. By demonstrating their benevolence, they eventually gained some supports from the Chinese, which resulted in the spread of their religion.⁵⁵ For example, the Italian Franciscan Mission baptized 18,664 converts; the Spanish Augustinian Mission gained some 1,500 converts; the London Mission converted 4,717 heads; the American Episcopal Mission also had 3,350 converts.⁵⁶ As such, the foreign activities in Hankow were multi-facet, which was not limited to economic transactions.

In a nutshell, albeit the undeniable exploitation of resources in Hankow, the Westerners participated in different activities and made contributions to the development of this port. For most of the time, these foreigners and the Chinese could indeed maintain a peaceful relationship. Even during the Boxer Uprising, from which many foreigners suffered, those who resided in Hankow could “enjoy immunity from acts of violence.”⁵⁷ This was also owing to the wise leadership of the Viceroy of Huguang Zhang Zhidong, who promised to “suppress all anti-foreign movement and protect foreign lives and property.”⁵⁸ Later, when the Qing State declared wars on the foreign powers, Zhang even conducted a non-involvement pact with the foreign consuls, declaring that the southeastern provinces in China would not be involved in the war.⁵⁹ This led Hankow to be “perfectly free from any

⁵⁵ *Decennial Reports: Hankow (1892-1901)*, 315.

⁵⁶ *Decennial Reports: Hankow (1892-1901)*, 319.

⁵⁷ *Decennial Reports: Hankow (1892-1901)*, 295.

⁵⁸ *Decennial Reports: Hankow (1892-1901)*, 314. Zhao & Ke, *Draft History of Qing*, 4330.

disturbance.”⁶⁰ Having this sound ability to manage the Sino-foreign relationships in Hankow, Zhang was, therefore, always extolled in the decennial report. This is the reason for which his contributions deserve our attention.

Taking the Advantage of Backwardness:

The Passionate Viceroy and His Contributions

Guo Tingyi, an eminent Chinese historian, made a short summary of Zhang Zhidong’s contributions during the self-strengthening movement in late Qing:

In 1888, Zhang planned to establish a Guangzhou Textile Bureau. After becoming the Viceroy of Wuguang, he moved the bureau to Wuchang, renamed it Hubei Cotton Mills, which started operating in 1892. Two years later, he gathered capital from merchants and planned to establish the Hubei Textile Bureau that consisted of silk, reel, hemp, and spinning mills. Amongst these mills, only the latter one was operated by the state, whilst the other three would be co-operated by merchants and the state. To this end, Zhang hoped to compensate the operation of Hanyang Government Iron and Steel Work by these mills. In other words, he attempted to consolidate the military industry by the livelihood industries. In reality, however, he failed.⁶¹

The self-strengthening movement was, as Henrietta Harrison put, “funded and controlled by the increasingly powerful group of Han Chinese regional officials,”⁶² Zhang was obviously one of whom. From Kuo’s description, it is not difficult to perceive Zhang’s eagerness to

⁵⁹ Harrison, *China*, 83; Zhao & Ke, *Draft History of Qing*, 10424.

⁶⁰ *Decennial Reports: Hankow (1892-1901)*, 295.

⁶¹ Guo, *The Summary of Modern Chinese history*, 249.

⁶² Harrison, *China*, 67.

modernize and reform Qing China; he was ashamed of the series of Chinese failures in diplomacy and warfare.⁶³ As such, this summary throws light on the contributions of Zhang to Hankow. We could start by understanding what had happened to the Hanyang Government Iron and Steel Work.

The initial objective of the construction of the Hanyang Government Iron and Steel Work was to furnish rails for the Pei-Han railway.⁶⁴ Nevertheless, its production of iron and steel could hardly reach the demand. In 1894, the year in which Zhang planned to build the Hubei Textile Bureau, only 1,100 tons of pig irons were shipped; the situation was even bitter a year later. Fortunately, its production started improving from 1895 to 1901, that “6,800 tons of pig iron, 700 tons of manufactured iron bars, 1600 tons of steel bars, 22,100 tons of rails, and 3,700 tons of manufactured iron” were produced.⁶⁵ They used exclusively the quality coke from Pingxiang for their blast furnaces, consuming 4,000 tons per month.⁶⁶ To facilitate the manufacturing procedure, they even employed over 40 Europeans at work, who were

⁶³ Zhao & Ke, *Draft History of Qing*, 10423.

⁶⁴ Pei-han railway refers to the railway that linked up Peking and Hankow, Zhang Zhidong operated the Hanyang Government Iron and Steel Work for sake of it. Zhao & Ke, *Draft History of Qing*, 10423. For the information of the Pei-han railway *per se*, further information would be given in the following paragraphs. *Decennial Reports: Hankow (1892-1901)*, 304.

⁶⁵ *Decennial Reports: Hankow (1892-1901)*, 304.

⁶⁶ Pingxiang was situated on the borders of the Hunan-Kiangsi provinces. *Decennial Reports: Hankow (1892-1901)*, 309.

more familiar with the use of the machinery and possessed knowledge of the advanced technology.⁶⁷

The Hubei Arsenal and Small Arms Factory, adjoining the Iron and Steel work, used their metals for armaments production. Acquiring special personnel from Germany, they could utilize the German technologies to produce more bettered weapons, such as Mauser rifles, quick-firing guns, smokeless powder, and numerous ammunitions.⁶⁸ This resulted in the gradual abandonment of old-style Chinese weapons in the Qing armies, which strengthened their military power.

Moreover, the Hubei Cotton Mills was installed in 1892, which was capable of operating 1,000 looms and producing 360 pieces of shirting per day. From 1893 to 1901, notwithstanding the increment of the production of cotton yarn, the production of the more value-added grey shirting decreased gradually. There was even a sharp decline in production in 1900, the year when the Boxer Uprising took place; it dropped by 68% from 14,886 pieces to 4,731 pieces. The production of drills, despite its usual obscureness, also decreased. All these revealed that the operation of the Hubei Cotton Mills was worse than expected, if not poor.⁶⁹

⁶⁷ *Decennial Reports: Hankow (1892-1901)*, 304.

⁶⁸ *Decennial Reports: Hankow (1892-1901)*, 306.

⁶⁹ *Decennial Reports: Hankow (1892-1901)*, 305-306.

In 1895, Zhang also founded the Wuchang Mint, which could mint three million taels worth of dollars and one tael worth of small coins per year. It was noticeable that another Mint was established in Wuchang three years later. Nonetheless, on the grounds of the mounting price of copper, it became more lucrative to mint silver coins in lieu of copper coins, which thereafter became a routine. The production of coins almost tripled from 240,300 in 1895 to 709,482 in 1901, despite the fluctuations between these six years.⁷⁰

All this said, numerous factories emerged in the Age of Self-Strengthening, manifesting the influx of western technology and science, which aided China in modernization. In so doing, the Chinese could take advantage of their relative backwardness to enjoy rapid improvement – they needed not to initiate the scientific and industrial revolutions that the West had experienced but received instant technological transfers from the Westerners.⁷¹ In addition to the establishment of factories, the construction of railways could also demonstrate this “advantage of backwardness”.⁷² As mentioned in the *Qingshigao*:

Hardly could the frontiers of China be reached before the construction of railways. Since the railway system was kick-started, provinces from all directions could immediately join one another. Even if places were geographically distant from one another, one could reach them within a few days. This helped summon people more efficiently.⁷³

⁷⁰ *Decennial Reports: Hankow (1892-1901)*, 305.

⁷¹ Gerschenkron, *Economic Backwardness in Historical Perspective*.

⁷² *Decennial Reports: Hankow (1892-1901)*, 306-309.

⁷³ Zhao & Ke, *Draft History of Qing*, 4225.

Zhang also paid heed to the benefits brought by railways: “The populace could benefit from the construction of railways as the exchange of products will be quicker. Ensued were the military advantages. Hence, it is now appropriate to build a railway that joins the Lugou Bridge and Hankow via Henan. This railway will undoubtedly become the pivot of the country!”⁷⁴ To be sure, the contemporaries indeed recognized the military and industrial advantages brought by railways.⁷⁵ Therefore, they could utilize the more advanced foreign technology to build railways, which prompted them to modernize.

An imperial edict in 1896 permitted the construction of a railway from Peking to Hankow, passing through the Marco Polo Bridge, Baoding Fu, Shunde, Zhangde, Weihui, and across the Yellow River to Xinyang. Two years later, another imperial edict appointed Sheng Xuanhuai Director-General of the Imperial Chinese Railways and allowed the Viceroy to borrow foreign capitals to build the Pei-Han railway. In this way, a company, entitled Societe d’Etude des Chemins de Fer en Chine, issued bonds of a total of 112,500,000 francs, which was at a 5% interest rate and redeemable in 20 years, to the Viceroy. In the meantime, they also hired myriads of westerners for this construction project, including 40 Frenchmen, 30 Belgians, 25 Italians, and 12 of other nationalities.⁷⁶ As a result, China took advantage of backwardness to modernize. These foreigners provided China with a reliable

⁷⁴ Zhao & Ke, *Draft History of Qing*, 10423.

⁷⁵ *Decennial Reports: Hankow (1892-1901)*, 318.

⁷⁶ *Decennial Reports: Hankow (1892-1901)*, 306-307.

stream of capital with a low-interest rate, living qualified personnel, and modern technologies that were required in the construction of railways. As Peking had already been connected to the Trans-Siberian railroad by Tientsin and Shanhaikwan railway; another Hankow-Canton line was also proposed,⁷⁷ the whole country could eventually be integrated by this transportation network, which “must give a tremendous impetus to all trade.”⁷⁸

In tandem with the importation of foreign technologies, Zhang endeavored to cultivate “modernized” people who were potential for facilitating modernization in the future. Under this circumstance, education reforms took place; new schools were established. For instance, a military college at Wuchang purposed to train men to be gallant soldiers, who could manipulate western weapons in battlefields.⁷⁹ Another college was also operated to teach civil and military students such useful foreign languages as Japanese, English, French, and German. On the other hand, several fundamental but practical skills were also taught, including the knowledge of agriculture, silkworm rearing, and translation.⁸⁰ According to the North China Herald in 1897, Zhang also founded the Ziqiang Xuetang, breeding mathematic and scientific personnel at Wuchang.⁸¹ These schools embodied the Chinese attempts to

⁷⁷ The Hankow-Canton Railway would be terminated at Wuchang. The Chinese government had issued bonds \$42,500,000 gold, which were turned over to the American China Development Company, at an interest rate of 5% and was redeemable for 50 years. *Decennial Reports: Hankow (1892-1901)*, 307-308.

⁷⁸ *Decennial Reports: Hankow (1892-1901)*, 316.

⁷⁹ *Decennial Reports: Hankow (1892-1901)*, 318.

⁸⁰ *Decennial Reports: Hankow (1892-1901)*, 315-316.

⁸¹ “North China Herald (07/05/1897).”

accept western knowledge to modernize – “the barricade of hatred of everything new has been broken down, and the march of progress has begun.”⁸² By and large, this seems to be an age of ambivalence, should one deem the late Qing as an epoch of which western imperialism encroached or modernization proceeded at full speed?

Conclusion: An Era of Western Imperialism or Modernization?

In contrast with some western powers, Qing China endured technological backwardness over a longer time span. After visiting China in 1793, Lord Macartney, a British diplomat, commented that “the empire of China is an old, crazy, first rate man-of-war... (which) overawes their neighbors merely by her bulk and appearance.”⁸³ Almost half a century later, Armine Mountain, a British general who partook in the First Opium War (1839-1842), also marveled at the Chinese unconsciousness “of the march of the world through centuries, and of all modern usage, invention, or improvement.”⁸⁴ As the world became more globalized, the developments of countries were highly intertwined with one another, the problems of the backward countries were no longer exclusive to themselves – “advance countries could not

⁸² *Decennial Reports: Hankow (1892-1901)*, 320.

⁸³ Macartney, *An Embassy to China: Lord Macartney's Journal, 1793-1794*, ed. J. L. Cranmer-Byng (Hamden & Connecticut: Anchor Books, 1963), 212.

⁸⁴ Ian, Morris, *Why the West Rules—For Now: The Patterns of History, and What They Reveal About the Future* (London: Profile Books, 2011), 143.

afford to ignore (their) economic backwardness” as well.⁸⁵ As such, the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, of which the Europeans commenced to expand their power over China and exploit its local resources, should not be deemed merely as a “Century of Humiliation” or the “Age of Imperialism.”⁸⁶ After a series of unequal treaties, the establishment of the “cultural invader” IMCS, and the European scramble for China, ensued was the transmission of western ideologies and technologies that prompted China to modernize by leaps and bounds. In this way, China started to be in line with the development of the world.

In this study, the case of Hankow exemplified the means by which modernization took place in the late Qing. The advent of westerners, bringing along with capitals, commodities, and technologies, gave fresh impetus to its development and improvement. This transformed Hankow into a global emporium with not only new constructions but also several metropolitan characteristics. To this end, imperialism and modernization could indeed co-exist.

Appendix:

⁸⁵ Gerschenkron, *Economic Backwardness in Historical Perspective*, 29-30.

⁸⁶ van de Ven, *Breaking with the Past*, 6.

The University of Texas at Austin. “Hankow with Hanyang and Wuchang 1915.” Perry-Castañeda Library Map Collection (Historical Maps of China). Accessed July 25, 2021. https://maps.lib.utexas.edu/maps/historical/history_china.html.

About the author

Sze Pui Yin Daisy is a final year History major from the Chinese University of Hong Kong.

Daisy is interested in the history of colonialism, maritime trade, and the east-west convergence in the premodern period.

Bibliography

Bickers, Robert. "Revisiting the Chinese Maritime Customs Service, 1854-1950." *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 36, no. 2 (June 2008): 221-226.

Accessed April 29, 2021. <https://primarysources.brillonline.com/browse/north-china-herald-online>.

Brunero, Donna. *Britain's Imperial Cornerstone in China: The Chinese Maritime Customs Service, 1854-1949*. London: Routledge, 2004.

Chang, Chi-yun. "Modern China's Custom Services: A Brief Introduction." Accessed April 20, 2021. <http://gis.rchss.sinica.edu.tw/cmcs/modern-china's-customs-services-a-brief-introduction>.

Fairbank, John K. "Synarchy under the Treaties." In *Chinese Thoughts and Institutions*, edited by Fairbank, John K, 204-231. Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 1957.

Gerschenkron, Alexander. *Economic Backwardness in Historical Perspective: A Book of Essays*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1962.

Guo, Tingyi. *Jindai Zhongguo Shigang (The Summary of Modern Chinese History)*. Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 2019.

- Hao, Yen-ping. *The Commercial Revolution in 19th Century China: The Rise of the Sino-Western Mercantile Capitalism*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986.
- Harrison, Henrietta. *China*. London: Arnold; New York: Oxford University Press, 2001.
- Li, Bo-yuan. *Modern Times*. Edited by Qin Ke & Gong Jun. Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1997.
- Macartney. *An Embassy to China: Lord Macartney's Journal, 1793-1794*. Edited by J. L. Cranmer-Byng. Hamden, Connecticut: Anchor Books, 1963
- Morris, Ian. *Why the West Rules—For Now: The Patterns of History, and What They Reveal About the Future*. London: Profile Books, 2011.
- Pym, Erskine T. *Imperial Maritime Customs Decennial Reports: Hankow 1892-1901*. Shanghai: Statistical Department of the Inspectorate General of Customs, 1904, 293-323.
- Rpt. Liu Hui edited by *Wushinian gebu haiguan baogao 1882-1931*. Beijing: Zhongguo haiguan chubanshe, 2009, Vol. 3, 325-357.
- Rowe, William T. *Hankow: Commerce and Society in a Chinese City, 1796-1889*. Stanford & California: Stanford University Press, 1984.
- The University of Texas at Austin. “Hankow with Hanyang and Wuchang 1915.” Perry-Castañeda Library Map Collection (Historical Maps of China). Accessed July 25, 2021.
- https://maps.lib.utexas.edu/maps/historical/history_china.html.

van de Ven, Hans. *Breaking with the Past: The Maritime Customs Service and the Global*

Origins of Modernity in China. New York: Columbia University Press, 2014.

van de Ven, Hans. "Hart and Detring during the Boxer Rebellion." *Modern Asian Studies* 40,

no.3 (July 2006): 631-662.

Vynckier, Henk & Chang, Chih-yun. "'Imperium in Imperio': Robert Hart, The Chinese

Maritime Customs Service, and Its (Self-)Representations." *Biography* 37, no. 1 (Winter 2014): 69-92.

Zhao, Er-xun & Ke, Shao-min. *Qing Shigao (Draft History of Qing)* Taipei: Academia

Historia Office, 1986.