

THE BRITISH AND THE CHINESE TREATY PORTS

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As quiet began to descend on battlefields in Europe and in Asia at the end of the Second World War, one of the largest periods of mass movements of people in human history commenced. The victorious allies began to demobilise their own armies, and to start to ship back from still-occupied territory millions of enemy combatants. Civilian refugees began to move back home; others found themselves in temporary camps. Much of this process was voluntary, but there were extensive involuntary migrations. Ethnic Germans living beyond the borders of the rump state now occupied by the Allied powers were expelled. The dissolution of the Japanese empire saw the deportation of hundreds of thousands of settlers and colonial officials back to the home islands. These are familiar episodes, but hidden amongst them also is the story of the winding up of a sophisticated network of communities and institutions that formed part of the network of Allied colonial interests: the treaty ports of China. These are victors who lost, amongst them the British in China, including those who called themselves Shanghailanders and Tientsinites.

In this article I will sketch out the history of this group and the world they developed and lived in, and provide some thoughts about researching its records, including some that can be accessed through 'China Families', a new platform I run at the University of Bristol.¹ Between 1843 and 1943, in cities along the Chinese coast and the Yangzi river, the British and other powers established in port cities opened by treaty with the Qing Empire, scores of 'concessions' and 'settlements'. Some Chinese cities housed just one or two of these concessions, but others hosted a number of different neighbourhoods that were administered by foreign powers. The great northern city of Tianjin, the gateway to the capital, Beijing, was the site at one time of nine different concessions. Small parts of the

city were ruled by the British, Germans, Japanese, French, Russians, Italians, Belgians, Austria-Hungary, while an American concession had been laid out and then handed over to the British. Side by side, each had its own form of governance, laid out roads, dug sewers, organised a police force, created and enhanced public spaces with administration buildings designed to showcase national styles, erected statues, and named the streets in its own languages. The Rue de France led into Victoria Road, then Woodrow Wilson; Vittorio Emanuele led into Petrograd; from Yamaguchi you could turn off into Rue de Takou, which became Taku Road.

The world came to Chinese cities. A Chinese resident of Tianjin might, in the course of a single walk, pass along a route that traversed Japanese, French, British and German territory, and laws, passing a Vietnamese or a Sikh policeman, as well as a Japanese and German one. At Shanghai, a French concession was formally a part of the French Empire, and its administration answered to the Governor-General of Indo-China. A much larger 'International Settlement' evolved a more independently-minded zone, with its own annually-elected council (in which elections a British majority was routinely reinforced), and governed the heart of what evolved into China's most important commercial, educational, financial, industrial and political centre. A Chinese rickshaw needed three licences to navigate the entire city, one for each foreign zone, and one for Chinese-controlled territory. Meanwhile at Hong Kong, and Qingdao, and in Taiwan, foreign-run colonies alienated Chinese territory in perpetuity, while 99-year leases were taken by the Japanese at Dalian, the British in the Kowloon New Territories and at Weihaiwei, and the French at Guangzhouwan.

The treaty ports were knitted together by shipping networks, and by small fleets of river gunboats backed up by foreign navies, army garrisons, and by

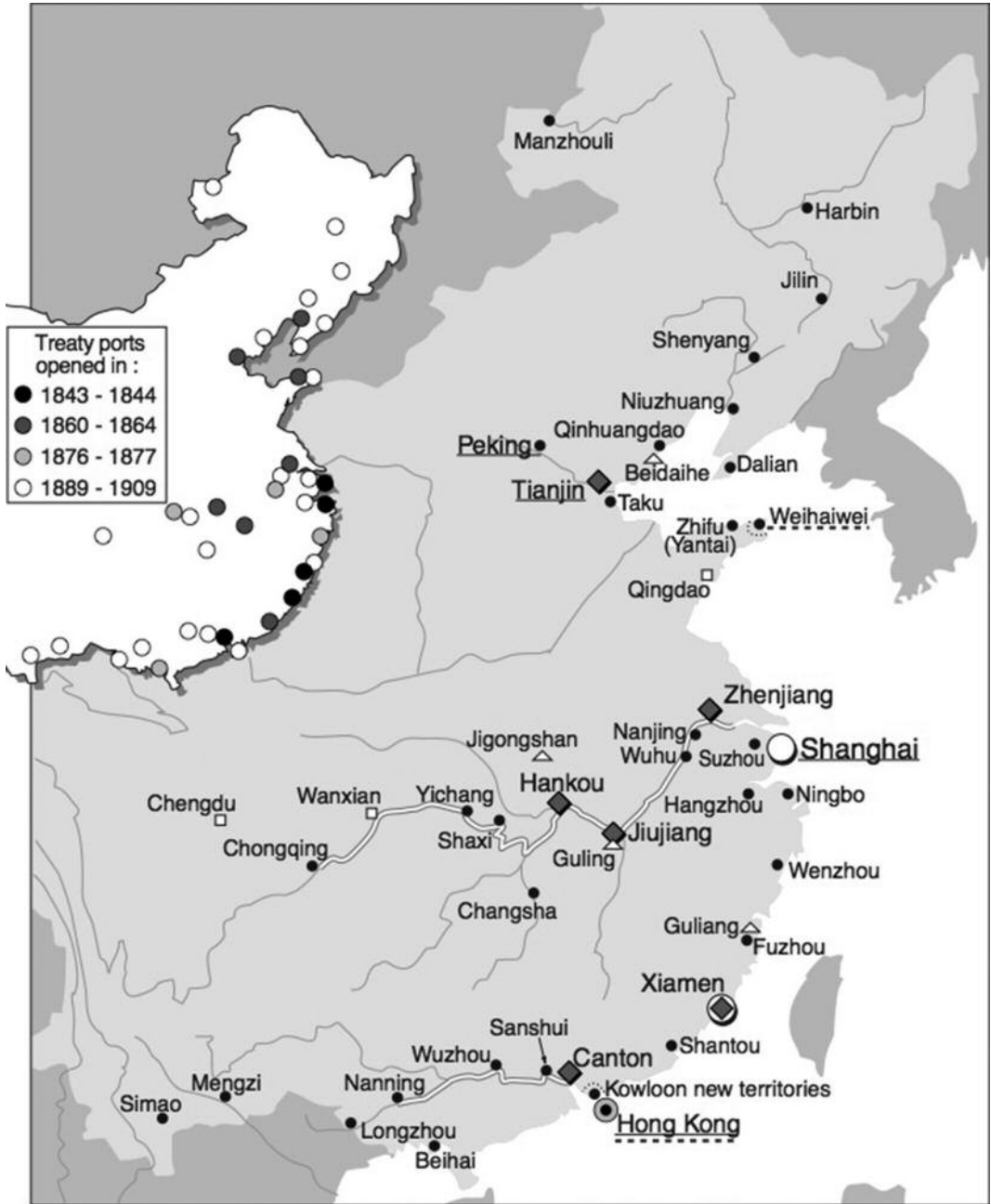
networks of foreign consuls who from buildings on Rue du Consulat or Consulate Road administered their charges, who were exempted as a result from Chinese jurisdiction. Foreign courts, laws, and lawyers, oversaw the lives of most foreign nationals. Memories, loyalties and rituals - Remembrance Day ceremonies held at their war memorials, for example, parades on Empire Day or the King's birthday, also generated a sense of particular local identity. These were, as the Chinese noted, states within a state, their political impact far outweighing the practical advantages many of them gave their owners. After all, a Briton could pace around the tiny concession at Xiamen (Amoy) in barely twenty minutes, walking slowly.

If our Briton grew tired of such a circumscribed round, he, or she, could decamp to the treaty port equivalents of India's Hill Stations, to the highland resorts at Kuling (pun intended), close to Jiujiang, or Monkanshan (Moganshan), accessible from Shanghai; or to the beach resort at Peitaho (Beidaihe), or Chinwangtao, or to Tsingtao. China coast residents often vacationed in Japan. Both Kuling, and Chefoo (Yantai), on Shandong province's north coast, were homes to boarding schools for foreign children. Chefoo's largely served the families of the China Inland Mission. (School registers are held in the School of Oriental & African Studies). Boarding school days for 70 children in 1935 were enlivened by the piracy of the ship taking them north from Shanghai back to Chefoo. This was not a catch the pirates had expected, nor one they wanted. The pirates were not as piratical as some of the children thought they ought to have been, according to press reports. (All the children survived unharmed, though one guard did not). Chinese bandits and pirates were very much to liking of foreign writers and journalists in the 1920s and 1930s, forming, along with Chinese warlords, a gallery of villains who were the subject of hit movies such as 'Shanghai Express', or 'The Bitter Tea of General Yen', but most people encountered neither. This foreign degradation of the sovereignty of the Qing Empire survived the dynasty's deposition in 1911 and the establishment of a Republic of China. The reach and character of the foreign presence was constantly changing nonetheless - when China entered the First World War on the Allied side, it seized German and Austria-Hungarian assets and

the new Soviet state renounced its privileges. Established in 1927, the National Government of the Guomindang - popularly known as the Nationalists, led by Chiang Kai-shek - operated to check the operations of these administrations, and claw back control. In the revolution that brought it to power, two British concessions were seized in January 1927, and were subsequently surrendered (at Wuhan - Hankow - and at Jiujiang - Kiukiang). In the years immediately after the revolution, a few more concessions were returned (including Chinkiang, Amoy, and the leased territory at Weihaiwei on the tip of Shandong province). British Municipal Concessions on the Yangzi which had on a modest scale all the appearance of town government in England, were abolished. Few of these were missed by the diplomats - the British had quickly labelled Weihaiwei 'Where-are-we?', or 'Why-oh-Why?' But they were able to retain after retrocession its use as a summer home for the Royal Navy's China Station.

There is something potentially absurd about elements of this world, with seeming grand colonial designs made concrete in a few roads laid out on marshy territory that usually housed a small and unwilling subject population. There was nothing absurd about the politics of opposition to this system, which grew to take a central role in the great nationalist upsurge in mid-20th century China, and which still shapes its nationalism today. The Japanese invasion of China that unfolded after the seizure in 1931 of the Northeastern provinces known as Manchuria prompted in response a fourteen-year war of resistance that was eventually folded into the Second World War. But there was also nothing absurd about the functional role these little bits of Britain or France played in the global networks of trade, information, communications, and the movements of people and transfer of personnel, that characterised the wider empires and extent of British and French power. The treaty port network was actually abolished twice: the Japanese occupation authorities in China abolished those they had seized and handed them to the Chinese collaborationist governments from 1 August 1943; the British and Americans had also surrendered their treaty privileges in February that year. Nobody asked the Britons and Americans who lived in Shanghai, Tianjin, or Wuhan what they

British treaty ports in China, 1927.



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| ○ International Settlements | ⋯ Border of Leased Territories |
| ◆ British concessions | ⋈ River patrolled by Royal Navy's China Station |
| ● Crown colony | Shanghai British troops |
| △ Hill stations & resorts | Weihaiwei China Station base |
| • Other treaty ports | |
| □ Other places mentioned in text | |

thought about this, and they were shortly afterwards interned. After the end of the conflict the abolition of this network, with the exceptions of the British Crown Colony at Hong Kong, and Portuguese-administered Macao, was confirmed. British policemen, Public Works Department inspectors, municipal gardeners, nurses, teachers, surveyors and architects, found that they had lost their jobs and, it turned out, their pensions.



Fig. 1 - The Hacking family at tea in Hong Kong, c.1912.

Although they are scattered, the British network has left copious records, and it drew into it for even only a small period of time, tens of thousands of Britons. At its peak, in about 1930, there were between 15-20,000 Britons living and working in China outside Hong Kong. And in addition thousands passed through each year, including men of the merchant navy, or Royal Navy (most naval personnel had a term of service on the China Station), or others passing through seeking employment (or even, by the 1930s, on holiday). The Chinese Customs Service employed 5,500 different British nationals between 1854 and 1949; and the same number again of other Europeans, Japanese and Americans combined. The International Settlement recruited some 2,500 British men to its police force between 1854 and 1941. While many of these men and women barely stayed a few years, and many moved on to Australia or to Canada (a favourite retirement spot for the wealthier), some stayed lifetimes, and some families could count three, some four, and one or two five generations of residence. Many died there. A British Supreme Court for China was established in 1865. By 1941 it had dealt with nearly 4,000 probate cases relating to Britons who had died

in China; consulate records at Shanghai list another 2,000 men and women who died intestate. (Some cemetery lists survive, but these are fragmentary). The tangled business of the living - disputes, law cases, divorces, property ownership, can be traced in consular and court documents. A vibrant press quickly developed, with the first English-language newspaper being printed in Shanghai in 1850, quickly joined by titles in Wuhan, Fuzhou, Tianjin, Beijing, and in the Manchurian cities. Some of these are lost altogether, but others survive almost in their entirety. They record the treaty port British at play, at work, at meetings of Lodges and Recreation Clubs, on the sports field and at the races, at school plays, and on vacation. (There you can find young Peggy Hookham, later Margot Fonteyn, who learned to dance in Tianjin and in Shanghai.) Annual resident and business directories were published, and more ephemeral travellers can be glimpsed in the passenger lists regularly published in the press.



Fig. 2 - Young Peggy Hookham (Margot Fonteyn), in Tientsin, 1928.

We have much by way of surviving material through which we can trace the lives of those Britons who lived in this treaty port world. The vast majority arrived by sea, and passenger lists in the *North China Herald*, the most widely available English-language newspapers (1850-1941) are a good place to start. (British, US and Canadian passenger lists are also invaluable). At least four different digitised sets of the *North China Herald* are available to search (the most accessible via subscription on NewspaperArchive is incomplete, but holds 76 years of it, from 1850-1926). This does not catch everybody, and certainly not those who arrived by rail when the Trans-Siberian railway opened. Published directories capture tens of thousands of



Fig. 3 - At the races in Amoy, 1889.

names and occupations, and a great number are freely-available online and can be searched (links to 60 of these between 1842-1939) can be found on the China Families platform). A useful short-cut can be provided the extensive collection of research notes collected by a Hong Kong-based historian, the Rev Carl T. Smith, who combed through newspapers, directories and a wide range of archival material in Hong Kong, and transcribed his findings on to index cards that can now be searched and viewed on the website of the Hong Kong Public Record Office. (In addition, Familysearch.com holds image files of all these cards). To complement this, the public library system in Hong Kong has digitised several historic titles which are freely available on its Multi-Media Information System.² This is not indexed for searching, but can be navigated to specific dates. China Families provides links to other openly accessible runs of China newspapers. The NewspaperSG platform holds newspapers from Singapore and the Straits, and these also frequently contain China coast snippets (as do Trove and Papers Past).

The British official apparatus in China generated official documents of vital events that can be

viewed at the National Archives in Kew (probates, intestate memo books, consular correspondence, some BMD registers), while registers from the Anglican Holy Trinity Cathedral, and non-denominational Union Church, can be found at Lambeth Palace Library. Catholic Church records are not so easy to find, however (with the exception of Catholic cemeteries in Hong Kong, with burial lists available through Familysearch). However, the institutions of the treaty port world were not British government agencies. Policemen were recruited by the Shanghai Municipal Council, not the Foreign or Colonial Office. The Customs Service was an office of the Chinese government. There are no records in Britain relating to the internal operations of such organisations, although there is much about the politics of policing or the Customs Service at the National Archives (and some material on those fruitless claims for pensions). Some sets of private papers now lodged in libraries and archives overseas hold much vital information. For example, the correspondence of Sir Robert Hart, the Ulsterman who headed the Customs from 1861 until his death in 1911, contains much detail about the men he recruited, and sometimes their families (especially if he found that a subordinate had a

musical, and attractive, wife).³ Although British subjects lived and worked under the umbrella of consular jurisdiction, and were required by law to register annually with consulates, this does still leave extensive gaps in the records one might expect to find (starting with the registers, which do not survive barring two sets of cards). Registration of births at consulates was routine, but many deaths were not formally recorded. This applies especially to the offspring of unmarried couples, especially when the mother was Asian and father British, and to registration of many deaths of the Asian wives, if indeed they were formally married: instead, the euphemism ‘housekeeper’ often surfaces in wills, and sometimes in public records.

The records of bodies like the Shanghai Municipal Council do in fact actually survive, and are extensive. The revolutionary state established by the Chinese Communist Party in 1949 was keen to preserve the records of its enemies, for what better source of evidence for imperialist crimes and Chinese ‘collaborators’ might there be than in the archives of the imperialists themselves (as they were viewed). The Shanghai Municipal Archives, and similar city archives in Tianjin and other cities hold these records. However, while much survives and is accessible, access to records has recently become very difficult. Where once I might call up the personnel files of three-score Britons who joined the Shanghai Police (when researching my history of the force, published as *Empire Made Me: An Englishman Adrift in Shanghai* (Penguin)) now all personnel files are closed. Land and property archives have always been closed, and the records of municipal registration of births and deaths might well survive, but have never been sighted. The extensive historic records of the Customs Service, which holds records of its staff amongst its 60,000 operational files, closed a decade ago and have not been re-opened. The digital copies of many editions of the annual *Service List* of the Customs can be found on the Harvard University Library catalogue, and this is invaluable, but only scratches the surface of the information that survives in China.

But if the archives are closed in China, there is much yet to be found overseas. While the archives of many foreign enterprises were retained after they withdrew in the early 1950s, some extensive collections can be

found in London (John Swire & Sons, Hongkong & Shanghai Bank), and Cambridge (Jardine Matheson), and some employee records are held within these. The Protestant missionary enterprise, which extended far beyond China’s treaty ports, was headquartered from overseas (with the singular exception of the China Inland Mission, now known as the Overseas Missionary Fellowship). The headquarters archives of the congregationalist London Missionary Society, and Wesleyan missionary societies, are held in the Special Collections of the School of Oriental & African Studies. The Church Missionary Society archive is held at Birmingham University’s Cadbury Library. Yale Divinity School has digitised and made freely available online a great deal of published and archival material, and a collaborative International Mission Photography Archive hosts thousands of photographs that allow this world to be visualised. I direct a more specialist site, ‘Historical Photographs of China’, which presents online privately-owned photographs from family collections.⁴ It is now easier than ever before to get a sense of what these places looked like, and the texture of the lives that people lived within them.

Researchers have more luck with China’s libraries, and the Shanghai Library has been digitising its large collection of English-language newspapers (*North China Herald*, its sister title *North China Daily News*, the American-owned *China Press*, and *Shanghai Evening Post & Mercury*, and others). The library also holds runs of such local magazines as the illustrated *Social Shanghai*, which is not widely available outside China, and *China Weekly Review*, and *China Journal of Arts & Sciences* (a magazine with a less high-brow range of content than the title suggests). Little survives from the schools that operated in these settlements, such as the Cathedral School in Shanghai (known to many through its portrayal in former pupil J.G. Ballard’s *Empire of the Sun*), but the Shanghai press carried extensive notes on schools’ activities. The social world can also be explored through the books that are also often found amongst the collections of families with China backgrounds: Patricia Allan’s A.A. Milne-esque *Shanghai Picture Verse*, delightfully illustrated by the Russian cartoonist ‘Sapajou’ (who captured many foreign residents in his newspaper sketches); J.O.P. Bland’s verse tales of shooting holidays, *Houseboat Days in China*,

and Daniel Varé's light fictions of Chinese life. One critical but flavoursome survey can be found in the pages of W. Somerset Maugham's *On a Chinese Screen* (1922), drawn from his travels around the treaty ports in 1919-20. He was not impressed, and - his hosts believed - had abused their hospitality and penned a grotesque caricature. A more positive story can be found in the accounts in the local press of the treaty port men who left to fight in 1914-18, including 110 men who sailed back to London together as the First Shanghai Volunteer Contingent, and the patriotic activities that the communities organised to raise funds to buy a Spitfire in World War Two. Guidebooks and handbooks for residents can provide a rich taste of the practical side of life, especially C. E. Darwent's *Shanghai* (1st edition 1908), and W.F. Mayers and N.B. Dennys, *The Treaty Ports of China and Japan* (1867), both available online. These will also provide basic lessons in the lingua franca of treaty port life: 'pidgin English'. Many books and pamphlets published in the treaty ports can be found on Internet Archive. The *Virtual Shanghai* online platform hosts dozens of maps, digitised books and photographs and provides a great deal

of useful material including SMC Annual Reports and other publications.



Fig. 4 - The Shanghai Scottish Company of the Shanghai Volunteer Corps, on parade with pipes on Nanking Road, 1924.

Most of these stories are unexceptional, even if we think they sound exotic, because before 1949 China was in fact a perfectly normal field of opportunity in which Britons sought employment. But it might also be remembered that the world in China was also a world in which a man or woman might reinvent themselves, for at such a distance from the more densely traversed routes through

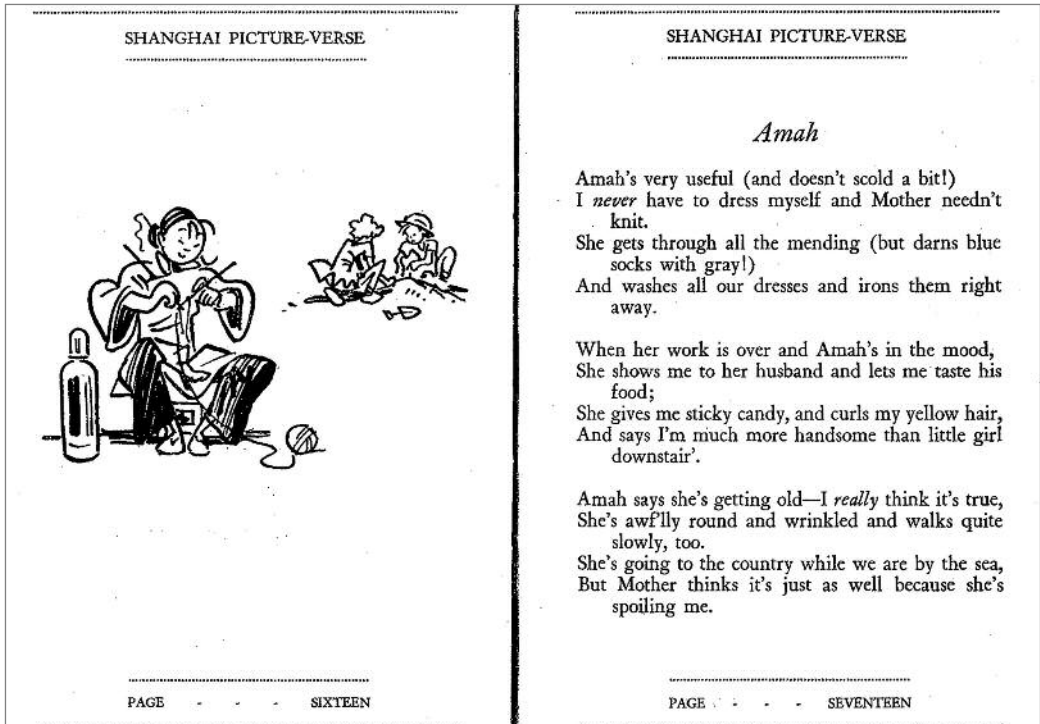


Fig. 5 - Shanghai Picture-Verse, 1940,

which Britons circulated, a new arrival might have to be taken at face value. The records of the Special Branch of the Shanghai Municipal Police (its political branch) are an exception to the rule that the records of the treaty ports reside in the former treaty ports, for in 1949 US intelligence agents heard tale that its guardians were offering its contents for sale. They acquired the entire surviving archive, which eventually found its way to the headquarters of the CIA, and after a further twenty-years or so, to the US National Archives. Badly catalogued, it is nonetheless a treasure-trove rich in fraudsters and confidence tricksters, and other ‘bobbery’ (trouble), and in Britons - if such they really were in some cases - who talked loudly and confidently in the bars and clubs of the International Settlement, flashed the name cards of their friends the Brigadier this, company chairman that, but turned out to be grifters, making their way, sometimes chop chop, from one port to another, now Singapore, next Hong Kong, now Shanghai. Most residents were of course perfectly law-abiding, and lived lives far removed from the exotic Shanghai of fiction and film, but ‘maskee!’ (never mind), there are just enough of the chancers and tricksters in the Special Branch files to help the city’s history retain its special flavour.

Recommended reading

The course of the rise and fall, and legacies, of the Chinese treaty ports is presented in my books *The Scramble for China: Foreign Devils in the Qing Empire, 1832-1941*, and *Out of China: How the Chinese Ended the Era of Foreign Domination* (both in Penguin). A useful survey can also be found in Robert Nield, *China’s Foreign Places: The Foreign Presence in China in the Treaty Port Era, 1840-1943* (Hong Kong University Press). An engaging social history is Frances Wood, *No Dogs, and Not Many Chinese* (John Murray). The best short history of Britain’s longest-lasting possession is John M. Carroll, *A Concise History of Hong Kong* (Hong Kong University Press).

British concessions in China, 1842-1997

Under ‘most favoured nation’ clauses in Sino-foreign treaties, all foreign nationals from states that had a treaty relationship with China could reside in ports open to foreign residence and trade by any other power. Britons lived in many other towns and cities as well, but in those listed below there were British-controlled, or British-dominated municipal administrations.

- Shanghai International Settlement, 1842-1943.
- Canton (Guangzhou), British concession, 1842-1943.
- Foochow (Fuzhou), opened 1842.
- Amoy (Xiamen), British concession, 1852-1930.
- Tientsin (Tianjin), British concession, 1860-1943.
- Hankow (Hankou, part of Wuhan), British concession, 1861-1927.
- Kiukiang (Jiujiang), British concession, 1861-1927.
- Chinkiang (Zhenjiang), British concession, 1861-1930.
- Weihaiwei Leased Territory, 1898-1930.
- Kulangsu International Settlement (Gulangyu island, Xiamen), 1903-1943.
- In addition, its fate intertwined with these cities, the British occupied Hong Kong island in 1841, establishing a Crown Colony in 1842 that was retroceded to China in 1997. The original possession was significantly augmented with the transfer to British control of the Kowloon New Territories in 1898 on a 99-year lease.

All photographs courtesy of Historical Photographs of China project, www.hpcbristol.net

Notes

1. China Families: www.chinafamilies.net This platform hosts cross-searchable data relating to: Allied civilian internees in China & Hong Kong, 1943-45; non-interred foreign nationals in Shanghai in 1944; Chinese Maritime Customs Service staff, outline careers 1854-1950 (and additionally ‘Outdoor’ staff register, Shanghai, 1870s-1880s); Shanghai Municipal Police European, North American and Japanese staff, 1854-1945; intestate British subjects, 1868-1935; probates of British subjects, 1857-1941; Shanghai International Settlement death registers, 1873-77; various lists of cemeteries in China; marine staff, China Navigation Company, 1883-1900.
2. Links to all of these can be found through: www.chinafamilies.net/links-for-further-research/hong-kong/
3. John King Fairbank et al, *The I.G. in Peking: Letters of Robert Hart Chinese Maritime Customs 1868-1907* (2 volumes, Harvard University Press).
4. International Mission Photography Archive: <https://tinyurl.com/missionphotographs>; Historical Photographs of China: <http://hpcbristol.net>

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