

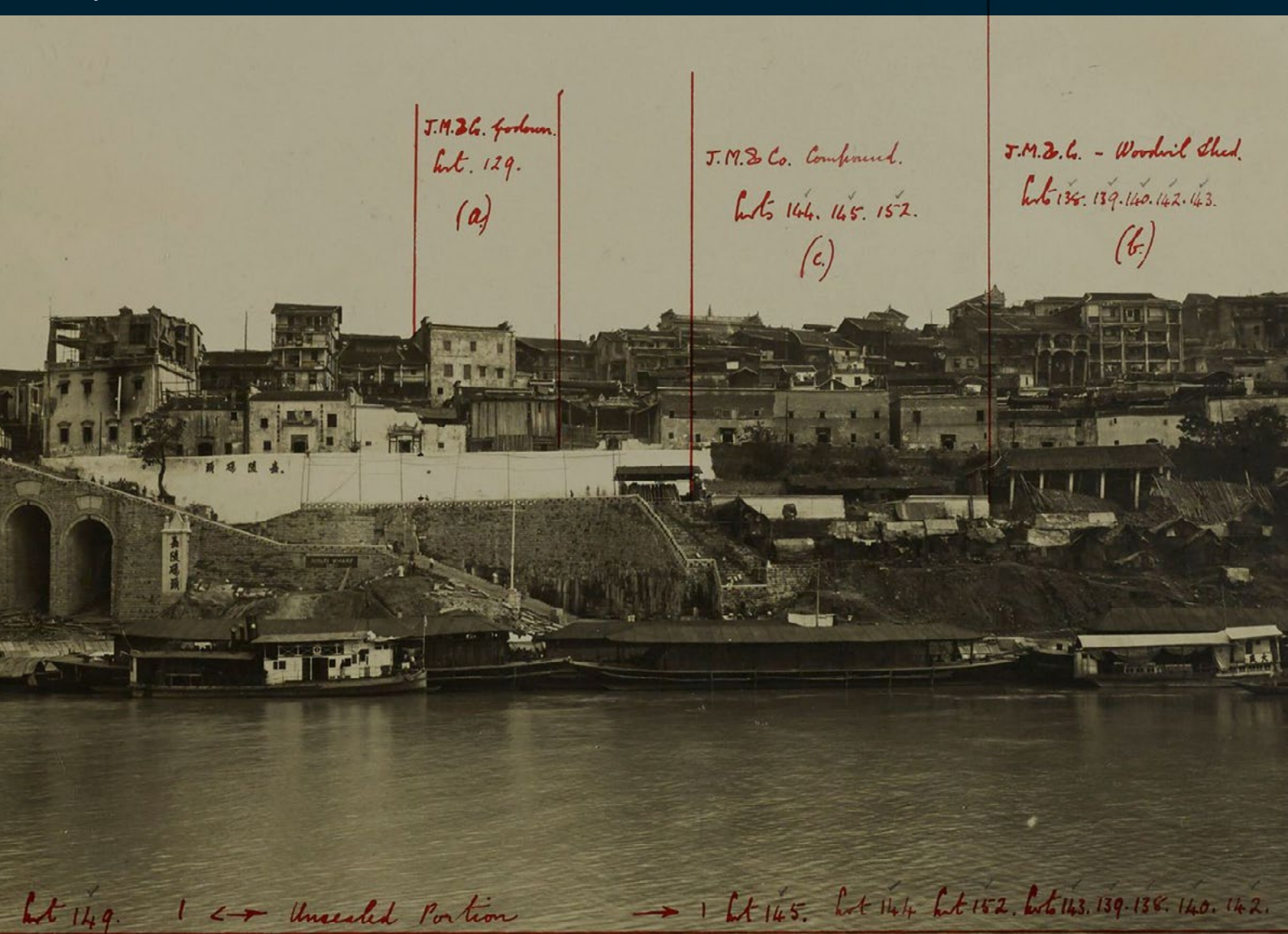
Gale Primary Sources:  
Regional China and the West, 1759-1972

# The Local Scene: Archives of British Consulates in China

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Photograph showing the Jardine Matheson & Co. properties in Chungking in 1920. MS FO 678 Foreign Office: Various Consulates, China: Deeds FO 678/431. The National Archives (Kew, United Kingdom). China and the Modern World



At its peak in 1927, the British official establishment in China had consular districts that covered the entire country. At the heart of each was a consulate. The first five were opened in the years after the Treaty of Nanjing was signed in August 1842 in Guangzhou, Xiamen, Fuzhou, Ningbo, and Shanghai – although this did not prove to be a smooth process. After first establishing themselves in various makeshift quarters, plots were marked out and buildings erected to provide offices and homes for consular staff and their families.<sup>1</sup> After the ratification of the 1858 Tianjin Treaty in the Convention of Peking of October 1860, several new ports were opened to foreign trade and residence along the coast and the Yangzi River, and in north China. A Legation was established in Beijing, and a Minister appointed as the British diplomatic representative to China. In time, and as new ports were opened, the Legation oversaw the operations of consulates from Simao in the southwest, to Harbin in the northwest, Chongqing on the upper reaches of the Yangzi River, and on Taiwan. The surviving archives of this network form the core of the over 2,300 files collected in this Gale digital archive entitled *China and the Modern World: Regional China and the West, 1759-1972*.

The business of a consulate was diverse. The consul represented the British state, provided intelligence on affairs and personalities as well as on economic developments and opportunities in his district to the Minister, liaised with other British agencies, such as the Royal Navy, protected the interests of British subjects in his district within the terms of the treaties, registered the business of their lives – births, marriages, deaths – and of the lives of their businesses, which might mean pressing the local authorities for action to resolve disputes. He often battled to establish whether those who sought his services had any right to them. Consuls policed the claims of British colonial subjects to be registered and supported, checked their paperwork and other

bona fides, and would refuse to register their claims if these were in doubt. In the near century after 1842, this business got more and more complex, as society in the treaty ports grew more diverse and sophisticated, and as the numbers of residents increased, nationality law changed, marriages were contracted, and children were born. War and revolution exacerbated the challenge. In times of disorder, consuls sought to protect their charges, but also often acted to restrain them and to keep the peace. It could be hard and stressful work. The service was always understaffed, opportunities for promotion were slow, and the physical and psychological impact could prove overwhelming.<sup>2</sup> In a large city with busy trade, there might be a great deal of work, but many posts – there were still formally 23 in late 1936 – could be quieter.

Consuls exercised wide-ranging jurisdiction over the actions of their charges. Under the terms of the mid-nineteenth century treaties, and the body of agreements that had followed, augmented by “most favoured nation” clauses that applied the gains of any one state’s bilateral agreements with China to all those with formal treaties, Britons were subject to consular, not to Chinese jurisdiction. This is often misunderstood as exempting Britons from the law, but it was designed to more effectively subject them to it and with sanctions and punishments that were believed to be fairer and more humane. (British observers developed what became a set of firmly embedded caricatures about Chinese juridical cruelty and corruption). A consul tried and could fine British subjects, and indeed in some ports he could jail them. Consulates might employ a constable who would double as jailor. Serious cases would be sent on to the Supreme Court at Shanghai.<sup>3</sup>

On top of this, the organisation of the foreign presence in Chinese cities took diverse forms. There were two international settlements, at Shanghai

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1 The early experience of consular business is nicely caught in Andrew Hillier, *The Alcock Album: Scenes of China Consular Life, 1843-1853* (Hong Kong: City University of Hong Kong Press, 2024). On the background to, and first decades of the foreign establishment in China see Robert Bickers, *The Scramble for China: Foreign Devils in the Qing Empire, 1832-1914* (London: Allen Lane, 2011).

2 The men who occupied these posts, and their private and official affairs are discussed in P. D. Coates, *The China Consuls: British Consular Officers, 1843-1943* (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1988). This also covers the development of the service, which is further discussed in D. C. M. Platt, *The Cinderella Service: British Consuls since 1825* (London: Longman, 1971). Consular private life is the subject of a forthcoming study by Andrew Hillier, “Shadowy Lives: Women and the China Consular Service 1842-1914.”

3 On this see Alexander Thompson, *British Law and Governance in Treaty Port China 1842-1927* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2024); and Emily Whewell, *Law across imperial borders: British consuls and colonial connections on China’s western frontiers, 1880-1943* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2019).

and Gulangyu Island at Xiamen, with elected multi-national administrations, but in some other cities there were concession areas, leased to the British state (or German, French etc), that were administered by municipal councils over which consuls had different degrees of formal authority.<sup>4</sup> Consuls, then, might also have a formal degree of responsibility for the smooth operation of an alienated district in a Chinese city. Even with the international settlements, consular officials had some formal role in the transaction of municipal affairs. So they could be local government officers, as well as intelligence gatherers, trade facilitators, and magistrates, and they were expected to provide leadership to the community of Britons amongst whom they lived.

This diversity means that the surviving records of British consulates hold a dizzying range of material. The first recourse of a scholar is often to the highest-level archive, principally, in the China case, to the correspondence with London (e.g., FO 17, which has been digitized by Gale into the two-part *China and the Modern World: Imperial China and the West*), and to the archives of the Beijing Legation itself. This is sensible, but only up to a point, for the Legation sat at the heart of the British information network, receiving and reviewing consular despatches and reports, in return sending replies noting, approving, sometimes reprimanding officials. This is also where policy developments can be tracked, and the detail of major international incidents recorded. But corresponding with the Legation was just part of a consul's life, the greatest part of which involved tending to the local responsibilities he was entrusted with. This is where a richly detailed view of the British presence in China can be found. It also serves as a window on to the activities of other national communities in China, and indeed on the local history of their districts. Augmented by reports in the foreign language press, a textured record of the activities in districts far from Shanghai geographically, and in terms of the business

of diplomacy can be found in these files.

Some of the material here survives now only because a historian nosed it out. In the winter of 1934–1935, the American historian John King Fairbank, then living in Beijing, toured the older British China consulates to look at their earliest records, still held in their storerooms. Afterwards he lobbied the Foreign Office and the Legation urging them to extract the surviving files out of their stores and have them transferred to London. It was not simply that they were long redundant as active consular files and ought to be moved before they decayed, but that there was a level of detail about the everyday world of the early treaty ports revealed in them that was mostly missing from anything that could be found in other records in any language. Fairbank argued that in those files was to be found “the most detailed picture of the actual day-to-day conduct of Sino-foreign relations, the issues involved and the tactics used on either side,” and, looking beyond that, “the details of the local scene from day to day.”<sup>5</sup> They were in the main “adequately housed” but the “ravages of climate” were always a threat. Unfortunately, the material at Guangzhou was deemed too damaged by insects, and too fragile to be rebound, while the records room too unhealthy for staff to work in. The archive was destroyed.<sup>6</sup>

As he noted, Fairbank was mostly interested in Sino-foreign relations, and there is much in this collection that explicitly falls under that heading, but it is also extremely rich in material that can help us understand the complex social history of the treaty ports, as well as family histories.<sup>7</sup> The seemingly routine documentation of life-course events in birth, marriage, and death registers, and probate files, holds a vast amount of information about the ways in which men and women of diverse origin, with claims to British protection, lived their lives in China. A list of indigent British subjects living in a former internment camp in Shanghai in 1946 includes men and women

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4 Different nations adopted differing forms of administration, sometimes borrowing from those used by other powers, sometimes not. On Shanghai see Isabella Jackson, *Shaping Modern Shanghai: Colonialism in China's Global City* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017). For a comparative view, see the papers collected in Robert Bickers & Isabella Jackson (eds), *Treaty Ports in Modern China: Law, Land and Power* (London: Routledge, 2016).

5 J. K. Fairbank to S. Gaselee, 7 February 1935, and memo, L1280/1280/402, and J. K. Fairbank to A. T. Cox, 19 February 1935, L2141/1280/402: TNA, FO 370/583.

6 W. Cowan to S. Gaselee, 4 January 1937, L1137/16/402: TNA, FO 370/527. A report from Danshui, in Taiwan, noted the effect of “years of damp and insect pests” on the station's records. C.A. Archer to Foreign Office, No. 18, 25 July 1935 L5537/1280/402: TNA, FO 370/583.

7 The tour provided materials that he would use in his first book, *Trade and Diplomacy on the China Coast: the Opening of the Treaty Ports 1842-1854* 2 vols. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1953-54).



born to British fathers in Hong Kong, Shanghai, Ningbo, Wuhan, Wenzhou, Yokohama, Russia, Rangoon, Penang, Singapore, Bombay, Baghdad, and elsewhere (see FO 369/3449). These include women whose British husbands had died, or abandoned them, and their children. This simple list starkly illuminates the nature of the challenge that consular business presented.

C O P Y. (B)

HONGKONG BORN ASH INDIGENTS.

<u>Name.</u>	<u>Age</u>	<u>When last in Hongkong.</u>
Mr. D'Aguine	53	1906
Mr. Joseph Ezra	56	Left at age 4; never returned even for visit.
Mrs. Hopkins	71	Left H.K. 'very young' never been there since.
Mrs. Hyndman	60	1927
Mrs. Jones	67	1904 (except for two short visits since)
Miss Morrison	61	1894
Mrs. Watson	65	1938.

Maintenance of indigent British subjects in the Internee Centre at 'Ash Camp' in Shanghai. Code 210 file 16813. 1946. MS FO 369 Foreign Office: Consular Department: General Correspondence from 1906 FO 369/3449. The National Archives (Kew, United Kingdom). China and the Modern World, [link.gale.com/apps/doc/LZSXC171244348/CFER?u=asiademo&sid=bookmark-CFER&xid=ba77b390&pg=24](http://link.gale.com/apps/doc/LZSXC171244348/CFER?u=asiademo&sid=bookmark-CFER&xid=ba77b390&pg=24).

The commercial activities of those whose interests were protected by British consuls are also revealed in these files. There are large numbers of company registration documents, copies of legal documents, property registrations and transfers, and case files relating to disputes. In some instances, the surviving consulate correspondence is extensive, but in others only registers – themselves useful, nonetheless – or lists of the archives held when taken over by the Japanese in 1941 survive [e.g., Chefoo or Yantai]. Significant sets of commercial records survive for the largest of the British China companies – the Hongkong and Shanghai Bank, Jardine, Matheson & Co, and John Swire & Sons – but we have far less on the smaller firms that formed such a large part of the picture. Details of a great number of those operations can be found here.

To H.B.M. Consulate General, TIENTSIN. 23

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<u>Name of Company</u>	<u>Address of Registered Office</u> (cont'd)
X Cheng Ho Company Limited <i>&amp; Agenciam</i>	49 Bruce Road, Tientsin
Corner House Limited <i>&amp; Thomas Co.</i>	Liddell Building Taku Road, Tientsin
X Eastern Engineering Works, Limited <i>&amp; Agenciam</i>	169 Taku Road, Tientsin
Far Eastern Adjusters, Limited <i>&amp; Agenciam</i>	Liddells Building, Taku Road, Tientsin
X Hall C.T. and Company Ltd. <i>Not registered</i>	52 Taku Road, Tientsin
X Hemming and Parkin, Ltd. <i>Not registered</i>	76 Victoria Road, Tientsin
International Export Co. (Tientsin) Ltd.	Belgian Bund, Pa Chi Ku, Tientsin
Liscum Estates Limited <i>&amp; Agenciam</i>	49 Taku Road, Tientsin
Local Investment Limited <i>&amp; Agenciam</i>	Liddell Building Taku Road, Tientsin
X North China Commercial Co. Ltd. <i>&amp; Agenciam</i>	33 Canton Road, Tientsin
North China Wool Company Limited <i>&amp; Agenciam</i>	73 Consular Road, Tientsin
Rialive Motors Limited <i>&amp; Agenciam</i>	75 Consular Road, Tientsin
X Taku Tug & Lighter Company Ltd. <i>&amp; Agenciam</i>	76 Victoria Road, Tientsin
Talati Estates Limited	31 Bromley Road, Tientsin
Tientsin Building & Loan Co. Ltd. <i>&amp; Agenciam</i>	12 Victoria Terrace, Tientsin
Tientsin Investment Trust Limited <i>&amp; Agenciam</i>	49 Taku Road, Tientsin
X Tientsin Native City Waterworks Co. Ltd. <i>&amp; Agenciam</i>	85 Rue Fontanier, Tientsin
Twyford Engineering Limited	166 Davenport Road, Tientsin
Chinwangtao Cooperative Society, Ltd.	Chinwangtao

List of companies and their registered addresses in Tianjin. Company registration. 1946. MS FO 674 Foreign Office: Consulate, Tientsin, China: General Correspondence, Various Registers and Supreme Court Records FO 674/253. The National Archives (Kew, United Kingdom). China and the Modern World, [link.gale.com/apps/doc/ECJAT1795628038/CFER?u=asiademo&sid=bookmark-CFER&xid=20c68f13&pg=24](http://link.gale.com/apps/doc/ECJAT1795628038/CFER?u=asiademo&sid=bookmark-CFER&xid=20c68f13&pg=24).

Included here also are sets of files from the pre-treaty era (some of which must have travelled from Macao or Hong Kong to Beijing in 1860, and then a century later to London), and a good number from afterwards. Consulates still operated after the abrogation of what were labelled the "Unequal Treaties" in the Sino-British Friendship Treaty of January 1943 and the Japanese surrender in August 1945. British subjects were thereafter subject to Chinese law, and other privileges enjoyed by British interests – such as inland navigation rights for shipping – which had been upheld by consuls for almost a century, had been surrendered. So these files also record the aftermath of the consular system at its zenith, when

fewer and fewer British nationals lived and worked in China. There was less and less consular business to conduct.<sup>8</sup>

There is much here about the British official establishment in China as well, principally in the FO 369 series, about its staff and their travails, its facilities and their upkeep, promotions, sickness, defalcations, and disputes. Some of it seems quite ridiculous, such as extended discussion about who should be responsible for the cost of a few missing toilette sets in 1906. But that reminds us that economy was always an abiding principle, and a daily reality, in the operation of Britain's official business in China.<sup>9</sup> If the men who staffed the service, filed the reports collected here, and protected British interests in China were by no means high flyers when they joined, nor were they well prepared – one memoirist recorded how he had learned lessons as a schoolmaster before entering the service “which were of real value in my subsequent relations with the Chinese.”<sup>10</sup> But lengthy service in the country, intensive language training after they joined, and sometimes a surfeit of distractions in smaller posts after the office had closed, meant that a few learned a great deal about China, and were able to share that knowledge in print with an Anglophone readership.

8 Robert Bickers, *Out of China: How the Chinese Ended the Era of Western Domination* (London: Allen Lane, 2017).

9 See File 40357: Lost toilette sets, the property of His Majesty's Government, at the Peking Legation, FO 369/12/59. <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/ZDRXVL491342958/CFER?u=asiademo&sid=bookmark-CFER&xid=6f3fcb95&pg=2>.

10 Sir Meyrick Hewlett, *Forty Years in China* (London: Macmillan & Co, 1943), p. 1-2