

# Theories and Histories: Reconstructing the Legacies of Sir Robert Hart and the Chinese Maritime Customs Service

Chihyun Chang

Shanghai Jiao Tong University

Xiaoling Li

Shanghai Jiao Tong University

## Abstract

The legacies of Sir Robert Hart and the Chinese Maritime Customs Service have been characterised by a variety of theories in modern China, ranging from Cantonisation, *imperium in imperio*, synarchy, impact-response, tradition-modernity, revolutionary Marxism, informal empire, institutional breakthrough, etc. The controversy demonstrates the wide gap between the ways in which the theories and histories of Hart and the CMCS have been told and remembered in China, on the one hand, and in the West, on the other hand, in the twentieth century. The reconstruction of the legacies of Sir Robert and the CMCS enriches the theoretical ingredients bridging Chinese and Western scholars' different theories about modern China. The theorization of modern China was an evolutionary process which combines different groups of scholars' memories, experiences and histories. This article aims to examine how theories were generated from the research

---

**Chihyun Chang**, Research Fellow of Modern History in the Department of History, Shanghai Jiao Tong University, receives his doctorate in historical studies from University of Bristol, UK, specializing in modern Sino-British history and historical theories. He is also the author of *Government, Imperialism and Nationalism in China: The Maritime Customs Service and its Chinese Staff* (London: Routledge, 2013.) E-mail: [chihyun@sjtu.edu.cn](mailto:chihyun@sjtu.edu.cn)

**Xiaoling Li**, Research Associate in the School of Humanities, Shanghai Jiao Tong University, receives her master in international history from Eastern China Normal University, China, with her research interest in the eighteenth century Sinology. E-mail: [lixiaoling@sjtu.edu.cn](mailto:lixiaoling@sjtu.edu.cn)

(Received 30 June 2015; Accepted 15 June 2016)

on the CMCS, how these theories argue against each other and how these debates generate new theories.

**Keywords:** *imperium in imperio*, synarchy, informal empire, impact-response, and institutional breakthrough

## Introduction

Modern China's decline in the nineteenth century stimulated Western scholars to provide explanations for theorizing and interpreting peculiar cases in the old Middle Kingdom. These explanations needed first-hand observations and the western "old China hands" who lived in China became the most reliable sources. These 'old China hands', generally speaking, consisted of three groups: namely western diplomats (e.g. ministers, consular officials, etc.), missionaries (Protestants and Catholics) and staff of the Chinese Maritime Customs Service (CMCS). The records left by these three groups of old China hands, however, had respective strengths and weaknesses towards the western understanding of China. The diplomats' records, e.g. the British Foreign Office No. 371 files, witnessed China's high politics, and the missionaries immersed themselves into Chinese peasants' daily life, especially in Shangxi province. But the CMCS staff had a rather unique position which differentiated them from the former two groups of "old China hands."

The reason for this was that the CMCS staff had a unique position deeply rooted in the CMCS' unique characteristics. The CMCS was a consultant service for China's international trade in treaty ports and was put in charge of declared value appraisal, trade good examination and Customs revenue transaction audition. But it went far beyond these responsibilities. Over 20 nationalities and 11,000 foreign nationals served in the CMCS and, unlike the diplomats and missionaries who just stayed in Beijing or suburbs, their stations were widely spread from Tibet to Shanghai and from Manchuria to Kowloon. These CMCS high-ranking officers, i.e. Commissioners, had to work in China for more than two decades and had a sound knowledge of Chinese dialects, language and culture. Because of the nature of their work, they usually had a close relationship with local provincial Governors, Governors-General and Viceroys, as well as western traders, Chinese merchants or even paddlers. Hence, their records became the most reliable documents to advance western scholars' understanding of China in the twentieth century.

Different generations of scholars endeavored to reconstruct the memories and histories of the CMCS by compiling and editing the CMCS records and the most influential of these scholars were John Fairbank and his "Harvard School." But Fairbank and his protégés' theories and interpretations were just one branch among the various holistic theories generated from the reconstruction of Sir Robert Hart<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Sir Robert Hart (1835-1911, 2<sup>nd</sup> Inspector-General, IG, 1863-1911) was the long-serving IG of the CMCS and major architect of Qing China's modernization. His contributions went far beyond

and the CMCS.<sup>2</sup>

### The CMCS Staff's Theories: Cantonisation and *Imperium in Imperio*

The first theory which explains China's response to her opening to international trade at the five ports, namely Canton, Shanghai, Amoy, Foochow and Ningpo was the notion of "Cantonisation," i.e. the application of the Canton Cohong comprador trade model to the other four ports. This theory challenges the misconception that between the opening of the five ports in 1842 and the inauguration of the CMCS in 1854, a "Shanghai model" was applied to the other four ports. The cause of this misconception was because of the acting Shanghai *Taotai* during the Taiping and Small Knife (小刀會, a local triad secret society) rebellions, Wu Jianzhang (1815-1866),<sup>3</sup> better known as *Samqua* (爽官) in the nineteenth century. Although he was the Shanghai *Taotai*, Wu was originally from Canton and was a former Canton Cohong Taipan. Thus, the Shanghai Custom House was actually Cantonised first, and the other three ports then follow the course of Cantonisation.

The practice of Cantonisation was researched by Hosea Ballou Morse and Stanley Wright, who both served in the CMCS, and focused on how the Shanghai Custom House was Cantonised. Morse, in his *The International Relations of the*

---

Customs administration such as the building up of the Chinese postal service with its far-flung activities in the public weal; the establishment of the Marine Department secure the navigation, – lighthouses, wireless signal stations, buoys, and beacons – located at every corner along the Chinese coastline and rivers; the setting up of the Statistical Department for the compiling and publishing of China's trade statistics, which today are still the most precise and reliable quantitative data for researching the economic history of modern China. The studies of his achievement were the key to understand nineteenth-century China's westernization and this became the bedrock for John Fairbank and the Harvard School to research twentieth-century China's industrialization.

<sup>2</sup> The studies on Robert Hart's legacies inaugurate a series of editorial projects on Hart's correspondence and diaries. The two projects were called the "Hart industry." This term was coined by Elizabeth Bruner, who transcribed the Hart diaries in the 1970s, and refers to the collection, reorganization and editing the primary materials relating to Hart (Cohen, 1992: 228-229). The history of how the "Hart Industry" was planned, whom were involved and which issues were debated is discussed by Chihyun Chang 張志雲 and I-chun Fan 范毅軍. "Zhongguo Jindai Shiguan de Fengqi: Hede Gongcheng Yansheng de Tiaolun yu Zhengyi" 中國近代史觀的分歧—「赫德工程」衍生的討論與爭議, *New History Journal* 24, 1 (2012): 206-236. Print. This article analyzes the CMCS' and Hart's legacies from a more theoretical angle – the theories generated by studies on the CMCS and the theoretical debates among these theorists.

<sup>3</sup> Wu Jianzhang's (吳健彰) name has three different English spellings in three works: Woo Chien-chang in Wright's *The Origin and Development of the Chinese Customs Service: An Historical Outline, 1843-1911*; Wu Kien-chang in Morse's *The Trade and Administration of the Chinese Empire*; Wu Chien-chang in Fairbank's *Trade and Diplomacy on the China Coast: The Opening of the Treaty Ports, 1842-1854*.

*Chinese Empire*, volume III (1918) stated that “In the old factory days at Canton, before the treaties, there was no smuggling, nor was there any temptation to smuggle, in the general articles of trade. There was, it is true, a general disposition to import and export those articles of which the movement was absolutely prohibited – opium inwards, and tutenague (spelter) and silver outward – but this was done with the full sanction of the responsible officials who, for a consideration, were active abettors in the infraction of the written law” (Morse 17-18). Wright then linked the “Canton old factory days” to Shanghai *Taotai* Wu Jiangzhang:

Examination and valuation of the goods imported and exported, checking of manifests, assessment of duties, and collecting of all such were, of course, matters left entirely in the hands of the *Taotai*'s staff (Wu's staff). With the evil tradition of Canton behind them, lack of adequate pay and the still more serious lack of civil service ideals, it is small wonder that abuses abounded, and that foreigners many of whom were in the widest sense of the term merchant adventurers, were as willing to profit by these abuses as the Chinese themselves. (Wright, 1938: 85-86)<sup>4</sup>

Wu's personal history is equally important to Cantonisation because Wu was the person who allowed Britain, America and France to take over the Shanghai Custom House's practice. However, his history still lacks proper research although Fairbank described Wu as “an arriviste and commercial minded opportunist” (Fairbank: 1954, 372) who privately recruited his Cantonese gang in the 1850s and was “the first exemplar of the treaty port type of Chinese merchant-official, who made his parasitic way upward by manipulating China's foreign relations and foreign trade” (Fairbank: 1954, 395) In the Chinese academic world, Wu's personal history has not been fully explored either.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Also see “the accompanying abuses and corruptions in the Chinese Customs House—corruption for which the Superintendent Woo Chien-chang was in a large measure responsible. The Canton Customs in the pre-treaty days of the cohong had been corrupt, but it was a corruption with which foreign merchants were not directly associated, as all their Customs business had to be done for them by authorised Chinese agents. Now, however, that they were brought by the treaty into direct contact with the Customs House, they rapidly took on protective colouring and soon became as adept as the Chinese themselves in the art of swindling the revenue” (Wright, 1950: 79).

<sup>5</sup> Fairbank's typical oversimplification happens here again. Although Wu was from the Guangdong province and he spoke Cantonese, he was not Cantonese but rather *chaozhouren* (潮州人), according to Zhang Wenqin (章文欽), “From A Feudal Merchant-Official to A Comprador—Wu Jiangzhang” (從封建官商到買辦官僚—吳健彰析論), *Contemporary Historical Studies* (近代史研究) 5 (1989): 31-54. *Chaozhouren* are not considered as Cantonese in Guangzhou or Hong Kong because they have very special ethnic characteristics different from Cantonese. Their dialect is more similar to Taiwanese rather than Cantonese. Although Cantonisation also refers to their Cohong experience in Guangzhou, Fairbank still simplified people from the Guangdong province as Cantonese and Wu's *chaozhou* characteristics also would play a part in Cantonisation.

For more information, please see Gong Fengfei 宮峰飛. “Shanghai Daotai Wu Jiangzhang Shenshi Kaoding” 上海道台吳健彰身世考訂. *Contemporary Historical Studies* 3 (2015): 154-158. Print.

The second notion to interpret the foreign presence in China was “*imperium in imperio*” and this theory explains how nineteenth-century CMCS staff perceived themselves. As the initial five treat ports were standardised by the application of the Canton trade model, Hart applied this model to all China’s Custom Houses and built up his Customs empire. This standardization and synchronization in Imperial China was the theoretical connotation of “*imperium in imperio*” (empire within empire). Unlike Cantonisation which has a rather rigid definition, “*Imperium in imperio*” delivers two levels of messages.

At the lower level, it delivered a rather sectional and institutional message as this historical Latin term was used by the CMCS foreign staff to describe Hart’s absolute power in the CMCS and the CMCS became Hart’s “*imperium* (empire).” The research of Hart’s “*imperium*” was done by two Statistical Secretaries (put in charge of the collection and edition of the CMCS publications), Morse and Paul King. Before he started to write *The International Relations of the Chinese Empire*, Morse had planned to study Imperial China by studying his “central figure,” Robert Hart, as the “connecting thread” (Morse, 1918: vi-vii). Another Statistical Secretary Paul King also queried, “how to maintain the *imperium in imperio* without ‘loss of face’ on either side” (King, 195)? King further recorded that ‘it has been a common conceit in the Service to describe Mr. Hart as a benevolent despot. Despot he certainly was, but his victims were rarely the objects of his benevolence,’ (King 21) and he once sent Hart a Christmas card with a note, “*Ave, Imperator, \* te salutant*” (King 184).

At the higher level, this theory was lifted to national level and evaluated the CMCS’ autonomy in the Chinese state. This also became the target of Chinese nationalism as IG Francis Aglen was given the nickname of the “Supreme Minister of Finance” by Wellington V. K. Koo (顧維鈞), former acting Premier in 1925 and long-serving diplomat. The *imperium in imperio*, indeed, represented an embarrassing situation because of the CMCS’ absolute autonomy and the fact that the central government could not direct the CMCS and the IG. The IG, however, could easily resist the sovereign power of the central government and go his own way. This is the interpretation of the *imperium* concept which was adopted by revolutionary Marxism to criticize the imperialist-colonial characteristics of the CMCS.

### **John Fairbank and the Harvard School: Synarchy, Impact-Response and Tradition-Modernity**

After Morse and Stanley’s Cantonisation and the various *imperium* concepts,

the next most influential theory was “synarchy,”<sup>6</sup> which was developed by John Fairbank. Fairbank’s interests in modern Chinese history could be attributed to his acquaintance with Morse in England when he pursued a B.Litt., thesis on “British Policy in Relation to the Origin of the Chinese Imperial Maritime Customs Service, 1850-1854” in 1930 at University of Oxford (Evans, 18). However, Fairbank’s research was different from Morse and Wright’s research on the CMCS *per se*, because he focused more on the pre-CMCS era, i.e. 1842-1854. He commented to himself:

From this invaluable initiation drew the erroneous conclusion that I could best get a running start on the Customs by studying its origin in the Foreign Inspectorate that was set up at Shanghai in 1854. This overlooked the Iron Law of Retrogression that I have been able to warn students about ever since. History looks backward, seeking causes: if you want to understand events of 1980, start with 1980. You will be pulled back into the 1970s soon enough. If you start with 1970 supposedly *en route* to 1980, you will find yourself inexorably involved with 1960 and accelerating backward.

I would have done better to start with the Customs in 1883, when Hart briefly accepted the post of British minister to China and then thought better of it. As it was, 1854 led me back at once to 1850 and my D.Phil. later began with 1842. I never got beyond 1858, which was actually where I had wanted to begin. How easily careers can go astray! (Fairbank, 1982: 22)

Based on his doctoral studies on the joint administration on the Customs Service between the Chinese Superintendents of Customs and the foreign Commissioners of Customs, Fairbank coined a new term, “synarchy.” The nature of synarchy can be explained by Hart’s original design for the CMCS. Hart stated in the Circular No. 8 of 1864 that the foreign Commissioners were “appointed to take charge of the Foreign staff that aids the Chinese Superintendent in the collection of the Revenue, and in the transaction of Customs’ business; he is by position the head, under the Superintendent, of the executive, and, by courtesy, though not necessarily, he is the adviser of the Superintendent in all that concerns Foreign trade at the port question.”<sup>7</sup> The separated power of Chinese execution and foreign advisory then became the key meaning of synarchy – Sino-foreign joint administration.

But if we closely examine whether or not synarchy is applicable to the case

<sup>6</sup> The reason why Fairbank coined “synarchy” instead of using “dyarchy” was that “the latter term implies that only two parties are involved and already has a special meaning with reference to British India” (Fairbank, 1957: 205).

<sup>7</sup> *Documents Illustrative of the Origin, Development, and Activities of the Chinese Customs Service*, vol. I (Shanghai: Statistical Department of the Inspectorate General of Customs, 1937), 36.

of the CMCS, the answer is controversial.<sup>8</sup> The reason can be explained by Wright's studies on the evolution of power shift from Superintendent to Commissioner:

At first, as we have seen, executive power at each port was theoretically vested in the Chinese Superintendent, but force of circumstances gradually diverted this executive power and responsibility more and more into the hands of the Superintendent's colleague, the foreign Commissioner; and in questions where technical knowledge and experience were required, such harbour administration, the Superintendent gladly left all actual arrangements to his foreign colleague. (Wright, 1950: 301)

The fact that foreign commissioners were becoming the *de facto* head of local Customs made the nature of Sino-foreign joint administration in synarchy less convincing.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, scholars find synarchy unconvincing because synarchy implies that the CMCS was jointly administered by Chinese and foreign staff or by the Chinese and foreign governments. As the leading administrative positions within the CMCS were always occupied by foreigners and the Chinese staff were put in charge of lower jobs, there was doubtful synarchy.

In order to deepen his understanding of the CMCS' synarchic nature, the "Iron Law of Retrogression" pushed Fairbank towards the world of the Qing Court's diplomatic mentality. Fuller Ting-fu Tsiang (蔣廷黻 1895-1965, Professor of Modern Chinese History at Tisng-hua University, Ambassador to America and first batch of Academician at Academia Sinica in humanities) led Fairbank to an important newly published *A Complete Account of the Management of Barbaric Affairs* (籌辦夷務始末) containing the primary materials about the history of Sino-Western relations from 1836-1874. Twenty years after Fairbank left China, he was "still working on them [*A Complete Account of the Management of Barbaric Affairs*] while teaching my seminar students how to do it" (Fairbank, 1982: 86).

Fairbank's studies on imperial China's diplomatic materials allowed him to push "synarchy" into its second phase. He adapted the synarchic focus on the CMCS and applied synarchy to ancient China's "alien rule," which Fairbank argued was "one of the commonplaces of the Chinese political tradition" (Fairbank, 1957: 204). Together with this "second phase synarchy" Fairbank developed his

<sup>8</sup> Fairbank was also aware that synarchy might oversimplify nineteenth-century Chinese history and he suggests that "perhaps after 1860, it might be better to call a Manchu-Chinese-Western "synarchy" . . . the Empress Dowager, Li Hung-chang and Robert Hart formed a trinity in power," (Fairbank, 1954: 465).

<sup>9</sup> Ren Zhiyong (任智勇) would argue against this viewpoint as he points out that the commanding line of Superintendents constantly balanced the line of Commissioners before 1911. Please see, Ren Zhiyong, *Reinvestigate the Late Qing Customs Service: The Synarchic Focus* (晚清海關再研究：以二元體制為中心). Beijing: The People's University of China Press, 2012.

next theory – “impact-response theory,” which dominated the western academic understanding of modern China for more than three decades.<sup>10</sup> This theory, moreover, is based on the key collection of primary materials, *China's Response to the West: A Documentary Survey, 1839-1923* (1954), which presents the primary materials written by Chinese scholars and officials, stating their proposed responses and opportunities to western challenges.

These primary materials from *A Complete Account of the Management of Barbaric Affairs* allowed Fairbank's students at Harvard to jump out of the three groups of old China hands' (diplomats, missionaries and CMCS staff) perspectives and to examine modern China's issues from internal discussions. This bifocal perspective led Fairbank's students to see the positive sides of synarchy. Sometimes, their interpretations were even more positive than Fairbank's. For instance, Fairbank argued:

In this way the treaty system, which began in the 1840s partly as a modified form of the traditional institution of synarchy, steadily, increasingly, and inexorably became a source of “disintegration and demoralization” . . . which in the course of time undermined and destroyed the old Confucian order, including any possibility of permanent Sino-foreign administration of the Chinese state. Where the treaty system had begun by affecting mainly the Chinese economy, it ended by remaking Chinese political thought. This reinterpretation leads to the final conclusion that synarchy proved to be the Achilles' heel of the universal Confucian empire. (Fairbank, 1957: 231)

Obviously Fairbank realized the damage caused by the synarchic treaty system but his student, S. A. M. Adshead, argues that “of the various forms of European contact with Asia, synarchy was the most limited and self-restricting. The integrity and independence of the Asian state were left untouched; indeed, a frequent object of synarchy was to reinforce them” (Adshead, 210). The reason why Fairbank's protégés interpreted synarchy differently was probably that the Harvard School started to redevelop the two Fairbank theories (“synarchy” and “impact-response”) to the next influential theory – tradition-modernity. They generally argue that the western presence in China, e.g. capital, technicians, settlement/concession officers, investments, etc., accelerated, if not led, China's transition from tradition to modernity and they called this process “modernisation.”

The “tradition-modernity” plus “modernization” theory was further enhanced by *Harvard East Asian Monographs*. Considering the infrastructural

---

<sup>10</sup> It is noteworthy that during the period while Fairbank was shaping the West's understanding of China, Edwin O. Reschauer's studies about the history of Chinese and Japanese relations with America also played equally important role. They together wrote the two major textbooks on East Asia, namely *East Asia: The Great Tradition* and *East Asia: The Modern Transformation*.

development at the Tsingtao Custom House and the German Concession, John Schrecker argues that:

. . . the direction of the German impact was positive. Tsingtao, a tiny, isolated fishing village in 1897, had become a major port by the time the Germans left. It had an efficient administration and modern public services and schools. It also had up-to-date facilities for transportation, communication and banking. As a result, commercial activities flowered, and there was even some industrial growth. It was German capital, skills, personnel and international contracts which laid the foundation for this development. (Schrecker, 258)

Chi-ming Hou also assures that “foreign capital was largely responsible for the development of whatever economic modernization took place in China before 1937” (Hou, 130). Furthermore, “the often-held assumption that the traditional or indigenous sector of the Chinese economy (handicrafts, small mines, junks, etc.) suffered severe decline as a result of foreign economic intrusion lacks factual basis” (Hou, 218).

The theory of “modernisation” was the theme of all the researches of the Harvard School and it was so easily applicable to every corner of modern China. For instance, Fairbank argued that the CMCS “assisted China’s effort at modernization within the framework of the treaty system” (Fairbank *et al.*, 318). Adshead argued that “the modernization of the Chinese salt administration” (Adshead, 184) was done by Sir Richard Dane, who was a British colonial officer in India. Ramon Myers asserted that “there is not any evidence that peasant living standards before 1937 declined” (Myers, 124). In their eyes, without the foreign presence, modern China could not achieve the present level of prosperity and western-style civilization.

Starting from Fairbank, the Harvard School’s theoretical establishment in nineteenth-century China can be understood in three phases: 1) “first phase synarchy” explains the CMCS; 2) “second phase synarchy” plus “impact-response” explain modern Sino-foreign history; and 3) “tradition-modernity” plus “modernization” explain Chinese history. Although Fairbank’s verdict to the foreign presence to China was more neutral than his protégés, the Harvard School still successfully demonstrated the foreignness’ positive effects to China. But Chinese revolutionary Marxists found it difficult to accept the underlying implication behind the Harvard School’s theories. In their eyes, China’s backwardness was caused by the nineteenth and twentieth centuries’ western presence in China.

## China's Revolutionary Marxists' Counterargument

The Harvard School's theory of tradition-modernity, of course, provoked Chinese scholars' response, but it was not easy fight back. Tong Tekong (唐德剛 1920-2009, Professor of Modern Chinese History at Columbia University and New York City University) argued that "under the supervision of Morse's student, Fairbank, dozens of monographs [the *Harvard East Asian Monographs*] were written at only one university, Harvard. Regardless of these monographs' viewpoints, it is very unlikely to find a monograph written by Chinese scholars to match the level of the scholarship and methodology of these Harvard School monographs" (Tong, 39-40). However, China's "revolutionary Marxists" (Peck, 63 & 68) still found a way to challenge the Harvard School's interpretation. Disinterestedly speaking, these Marxists' works might not "match the level of the scholarship and methodology of these Harvard School monographs" but their determination and endeavor were equally important. And their impact did force the Harvard School, especially, Fairbank to respond.

Marxist Chinese scholars followed Fairbanks' historical methodology. The Harvard School studied the Chinese primary materials thoroughly and demonstrate the positive side of joint administration between China and the West; and the Marxist Chinese scholars then studied the foreign primary materials and tried to prove the negative side of the foreign presence in China. In order to challenge the Harvard School's theoretical foundation, the Marxist Chinese scholars decided to skip Fairbank's 'synarchy' or 'impact-response' theories and to go directly to the origins – the CMCS history. They carried out a full examination on the CMCS history. This attempt was illustrated by *Imperialism and the Chinese Maritime Customs* 《帝國主義與中國海關》(1957-1965).

The PRC Government "instructed the Directorate General of Customs" to set up the "Research Office" and collected 170,000 files from all Custom Houses' archives and the files consisted of IG circulars, semi-official circulars, despatches, orders as well as semi-official correspondence. The researchers "organized and translated these confidential documents" and disclosed "how imperialists invaded China" and "how foreign invaders used the Customs Service to intervene into and manipulate China's domestic and international affairs." These Marxist scholars used "their criminal records by themselves" in order to "help the Chinese people to have a clear idea how the imperialist-controlled CMCS and the imperialists in the CMCS operated in China" (*The People's Daily*, 10 July 1959).

The original plan of *Imperialism and the Chinese Maritime Customs* was to publish fifteen volumes but the first, second, third, eleventh and fourteenth vol-

umes were not published. Although the chief editors were Chen Hanshen (陳翰笙), Fan Wenlan (范文瀾), and Qian Jiaju (千家駒) from 1957-1965. In 1950s and 1960s Mainland China the academic field did not put their names on the books. After the Cultural Revolution, the Xinhua Bookstore reprinted these 10 volumes in 1983 and added one more volume in 1994. Thus, the current edition has eleven volumes.

In reply to the Marxist doctrines revealed in *Imperialism and the Chinese Maritime Customs*, Fairbank and the Harvard School realized that China's diplomatic materials from *A Complete Account of the Management of Barbaric Affairs* and *China's Response to the West* were not sufficient enough. They had to go back to the fundamental materials from the CMCS, which were the source for Chinese Marxists to challenge the Harvard School's theories. Hence, Fairbank learnt from Morse as he refocused his studies on the "central figure" – Hart. The Fairbank team worked with the last foreign IG of the CMCS, Lester Knox Little, to edit Hart's letters to Non-Resident Commissioner Campbell and published, *The IG in Peking* (1975). In the foreword, Fairbank stated the differentiation of the Harvard School's and the revolutionary Marxists' "bifocal perspectives." The former argued that "in the Victorian view of Robert Hart's day the treaty system in China stood proudly as a product of the beneficent spread of commerce and progress, bringing modern science and civilization to a heathen and backward land," but the latter insisted that "the treaty era stands out as a time of foreign privilege, imperialist exploitation, and Chinese suffering and humiliation" (Fairbank *et al.* xii).

However, Fairbank, as he always felt, expressed his doubts on the Harvard School's theories. "I rather doubt that 'modernization' can shake off the connotation of 'improvement'" because he believed that "a judgment on whether this whole process was on balance 'good' or 'bad' is about as feasible as a similar judgment concerning modern history in general." Scholars can only say that "this situation existed and developed; moral judgment concerning it can be only a personal and piecemeal matter" (Fairbank *et al.* xii-xiii). However, revolutionary Marxists might pay much more attention to the theories than the reflections raised by Fairbank himself. Hence, they usually came out with a mistaken conclusion that Fairbank argued that the West represented and brought the progress to China. Actually, Fairbank's understanding was rather different. James Peck explained that "the world civilization which is spreading around, beginning in and expanding from Europe and now expanding with us and others, found China to be the last remaining, separate, distinct, isolated country which had its own culture and hasn't joined up." Fairbank actually argued that the west was merely civilized by the force of modernization earlier than China. Peck con-

cluded that “I don’t think they were victimized by us or even by the British. I think they were victimized by circumstances of history” (Peck 61).

The theoretical debates between Marxists and the Harvard School was postponed from the 1950s-1970s due to the Cultural Revolution. But when China restored its peace, Marxists again challenged Fairbank, and interestingly they worked out their version of *The IG in Peking*. Chen Xiafei (陳霞飛) and Han Rongfang (韓榮芳) edited *Archives of China’s Imperial Maritime Customs* (1990) which contained all the Hart-Campbell correspondence.<sup>11</sup> In the preface, Chen criticized that Fairbank “expressed some ideas about China’s modernisation which we found hard to accept” and he also noted that “since the time of H. B. Morse . . . western scholars and studies [have approached] the modern history of China from a lopsided perspective, and that the professor’s assessment of Robert Hart remained much the same as Morse’s” (Chen & Han eds., ix).

Similar to most Marxists, Chen might misunderstand two aspects: 1) Morse was indeed Fairbank’s mentor and led Fairbank into the studies of the CMCS but Morse did not share Fairbank’s theoretical understandings of China as his *The International Relations of the Chinese Empire* provides very little theoretical analysis towards modern China; 2) Fairbank understood the limits of his theories and he never stopped criticizing his own theories. They might still have found Fairbank’s reflections unsatisfactory, if the Marxists had thoroughly studied Fairbank’s reflections. But the Marxists’ endeavor to work on the origins of the Harvard School’s theories was noteworthy – they jumped out of groundless political propaganda and focused on fundamental sources. *Imperialism and the Chinese Maritime Customs* can be interpreted as their first attempt to retrieve the power of theorizing modern China after 1949. Disinterestedly speaking, the sophistication and delegacy of the Marxists’ work, as Tong indicated, could not match the Harvard School’s monographs, but for Fairbank the Marxists’ works’ impact were still too important to neglect. Hence, Fairbank was forced to respond to the Marxists by editing *The IG in Peking*.

Compared to *Imperialism and the Chinese Maritime Customs*, the quality of the next major Chinese publication, viz. *Archives of China’s Imperial Maritime Customs*, was significantly higher and the Marxists deserve credit for their endeavor to edit such a big collection of primary materials which provides scholars around the world with a more complete picture of the CMCS. For the purposes of the current article, however, the most interesting aspect of both the Harvard School and Marxists reconstructions of the legacy of Robert Hart and

---

<sup>11</sup> *The IG in Peking* only contains the correspondence from Hart to Campbell but *Archives of China’s Imperial Maritime Customs* contains all the ones from Campbell and their telegrams.

the CMCS is that both parties clearly endeavored to theorize modern China from the very beginning of modern Chinese history.

### **The West's Response to Fairbank: China-centered Approach, Informal Empire and Institutional Breakthrough**

Leaving aside the theoretical debates among Fairbank and the Marxists, other Western scholars also found the Harvard School's 'synarchy', 'impact-response' and 'modernity/modernisation' theories unconvincing and felt that the implications of these theories indicate a sense of superiority and progressivism. The most prominent scholar is Joseph Esherick. Esherick shares Tong Tekong's viewpoint on the quality of the Harvard School monographs – "an extensive monographic literature, backed by thorough research and patient scholarship, has made the Harvard School the source of today's 'normative science' in the China field" (Esherick, 9). But Esherick went further than Tong, as Tong remained fairly reserved in his comments on the Harvard School monographs, and stated:

Imperialism came to China as an unwelcome intruder: pushing opium, Christianity and cotton yarn. The opium enhanced political corruption and moral decay; the Christianity threatened the value and the status of the gentry; and the yarn deprived handicraft spinners of their livelihood. Many suffered, a few were helped . . . imperialism contributed to the impoverishment of the Chinese peasantry. (Esherick 14)

However, the ultimate review of the Harvard school's theories was done by one of Fairbank's student, Paul Cohen and his *Discovering History in China* (1984). Cohen argues that "the *impact-response* and *tradition-modernity* approaches, and the *imperialism* approach were all heavily burdened with Western-centric assumptions; this burden of Western-centrism caused them to distort past Chinese reality to an excessive degree" (Cohen, x). Cohen describes his "China-centered approach" to modern China with 'four distinct characteristics' and the first is to "begin Chinese history in China rather than in the West and adopts, as far as humanly possible, internal (Chinese) rather than external (Western) criteria for determining what is historically significant in the Chinese past" (Cohen, 186). Cohen's words are unambiguous and had significant consequences for the scholarship on the CMCS. Indeed, when western scholars began to understand modern China from internal/Chinese criteria, the influence of the legacies of Hart and the CMCS in the theorizing of China started to decline.

In fact, while CMCS-centered research started to decline after Cohen's

'China-centered approach' came out, the influence of Hart and the CMCS still provides western scholars with a rich impetus for theorizing modern China. Among recent theories, the most influential one is Jürgen Osterhammel's "informal empire," which demonstrates how a foreign power avoided the implementation of formal empire means, e.g. military aggression and political annexation, but it still could achieve similar level of influence in China.

Osterhammel analyses the imperialists' "penetration" and lists 26 "counts" (Osterhammel 290-91) to define the foreign powers' imperial/colonial activities in twentieth-century China. Osterhammel is more ambitious than Fairbank as informal empire should be understood as "an ideal type of potentially universal applicability" but he is also aware that informal empire "cannot be directly 'applied' to reality" and it only "provides a guide and framework for detailed research" (Osterhammel 314). However, these 26 counts constructing "informal empire" are so comprehensive that every bit of foreign presence in modern China, either positive or negative, can easily be grounded in several of these counts. Only the most radical revolutionary Marxist, meanwhile, would argue that all aspects of the foreign presence invaded and damaged modern China's core interests.

Another convincing theory is Julia Strauss's "institutional breakthrough," which argues that Republican China aimed to set up a "model institution" by outsourcing this institution to foreign expertise and apply the practice of this model to other public sectors. By adapting "revolutionary breakthrough" (which particularly refers to a Leninist state's mass mobilizing programmes) (Jowitt 94-95) and researching the Chinese Directorate General of Salt Gabelle, institutional breakthrough means to "climb out of this morass of weakness" as this institution "begins to implement a vision of centrally led institution building and development while standing up to external pressure" (Strauss 335). The "good institutions" were to "standardize, simplify, bureaucratize and establish direct control over China's far-flung and heterogeneous salt works and taxation arrangements by replacing a centuries-old patchwork of indirect control" (Strauss 337).

Although the theoretical ground of 'institutional breakthrough' is the Salt Service and Sir Richard Dane instead of the CMCS and Hart, similarities between the Salt Service and Dane *vis-a-vis* the Customs Service and Hart are that 1) both Services were outsourced to British technocrats; 2) British personnel occupied over half of the posts; 3) both Services provided enormous and stable financial income for modern China; and 4) both Services' revenues were pledged for massive loans in twentieth century China. It is to be noted also that it was, in fact, Fairbank's interest in the CMCS which led to Adshead's research on the Salt Service, and the latter in turn seems to have inspired Strauss.

All these interpretations – *imperium in imperio*, Marxist doctrines, informal

Empire, synarchy, and impact-response theories – share a number of similar characteristics in that they focus on Sino-foreign joint administration between modern China and Westerners, and/or view the Western involvement as one of imperialism or commercial and cultural penetration. The differences are that Cantonisation, *imperium in imperio*, revolutionary Marxist doctrines and informal empire stress the negative side of foreign presence, whereas synarchy, tradition-modernity and institutional breakthrough tend to be more positive.

### Conclusion

The theorizing of modern China is bound up with modern China's interrelations with the West and with the personal memories and experiences of westerners in China. Cantonisation and *imperium in imperio* are deeply rooted in the CMCS staff's understanding of Sir Robert Hart and the role of CMCS in China. The evolution of first phase to second phase synarchy marks the transition from CMCS-rooted theory to a theory towards modern China. Together with second phase synarchy, impact-response and tradition-modernity, the three theories dominated the worlds' theoretical understandings of modern China. Esherick's and Cohen's theories mark the decline of the Harvard School's dominant position and of CMCS-rooted theories.

Although both Chinese and western scholars may find these theories partially correct or even completely incorrect, it has to be borne in mind that based on Chinese and foreign primary materials the Harvard School forged a series of very powerful theories for modern China instead of borrowing a western model and applying it to China. Compared to some Marxists who simply borrowed Leninist understandings of imperialism and applied imperialism to China outright, it is difficult to judge which party's theories were of more Chinese characteristics.

However, Morse and Fairbank's focus on China's primary materials, to some extent, forced Chinese scholars to pay more attention to China's primaries. Otherwise, these Chinese scholars could not argue against these westerners. Hence, T. F. Tsiang worked on *A Complete Account of the Management of Barbaric Affairs*, Chen Hansheng worked on the CMCS internal documents and Chen Xiafei reedited Hart-Campbell correspondence. In other words, whether they understood this consciously or not, all these scholars were more or less inspired by the legacies of Hart and the CMCS.

As is clear from the above, the CMCS and Hart's contributions, or destructions, to modern China have been an endless issue for academic debates.

Revolutionary Marxists were obsessed with the victim image of China and kept absorbing nutrition from modern Chinese history. They were particularly sensitive to the contributions of Hart and the CMCS as they were afraid that the monopoly of theorizing modern China would be taken by the Harvard School and they also worried that the victim image of China would be expunged by the Harvard School's theories. In order not to let the West dominate the forum of theorizing China, they invested a great amount of resources to compile the two gigantic sets of edited CMCS primary materials.

Fairbank was worried, too, and interestingly, shared the revolutionary Marxists' concerns, but from the opposite position – he was anxious whether the revolutionary Marxists' theorizing of modern China would expunge the contributions of Hart, Morse and the CMCS. This is reason why the theoretical debates then started. In view of the abundant resources of Harvard University and its high quality students, as well as the obstacles presented by political censorship and ideological control over academic research in Mainland China, it was very unlikely for the Chinese Marxists to pose a serious challenge to the Harvard school and produce work of the highest quality. However, while some western scholars sympathized with the Chinese historians and others debated them, there were some, such as Osterhammel, who went even further and proposed the new theory of "informal empire." He did so to a certain extent in order to challenge the contributions of the foreign presence in modern China.

Theories are based on happened events – in other words histories are the bed rock of theories. How historical research can serve theoretical constitution shedding light on a more concrete understanding of modern China becomes the core of debates. Only a rich and controversial historical source can stimulate continuous theoretical discussions. However, historians are usually not fully convinced by the theories generated from the CMCS and Hart as these theories only cover a particular set of facts. Although it is impossible for any historian to theorize the complete facts, the desire of which drives us to discover and interpret more facts.

In sum, theorizing modern China is a tool – an oversimplified microcosm to get a grasp of modern China's decline and rise in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and a pathway towards a better understanding of twenty-first century China's development and her unpredictable future. Theories and relevant adaptations, at least in the Arts and Humanities, different from the Natural and/or Social Sciences, can never be a final answer. They are rather a starting point for us to learn more about our subjects. This is where we begin, not where we end.

### Works Cited

- Adshead, S. A. M. *The Modernization of the Chinese Salt Administration, 1900-1920*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1970. Print.
- Chen, Xiafei, and Rongfang Han, eds. *Archives of China's Imperial Maritime Customs: Confidential Correspondence between Robert Hart and James Duncan Campbell, 1874-1907*. Beijing: Foreign Languages Press Beijing, 1990. Print.
- Cohen, Paul, and Merie Goldman, eds. *Fairbank Remembered*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1992. Print.
- Cohen, Paul. *Discovering History in China: American Historical Writing on the Recent Chinese Past*. 2<sup>nd</sup> edition. New York: Columbia UP, 1996. Print.
- Esherick, Joseph. "Harvard on China: The Apologetics of Imperialism." *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars* 4.19 (1972): 9-16. Print.
- Evans, Paul. *John Fairbank and the American Understanding of Modern China*. New York: Basil Blackwell, 1988. Print.
- Fairbank, John. *Trade and Diplomacy on the China Coast: The Opening of the Treaty Ports, 1842-54*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1954. Print.
- Fairbank, John, Edwin Reischauer and Albert Craig. *East Asia: The Modern Transformation*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1965. Print.
- Fairbank, John, Katherine Bruner, and Elizabeth Matheson, eds. *The IG in Peking: Letter of Robert Hart Chinese Maritime Customs 1868-1907*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1975. Print.
- Fairbank, John. *Chinese Thought and Institutions*. Chicago: Chicago UP, 1957. Print.
- Fairbank, John. *Chinabound: A Fifty-Year Memoir*. New York: Haper & Row, 1982. Print.
- Gong, Fengfei 宮峰飛, "Shanghai Daotai Wu Jiangzhang Shenshi Kaoding" 上海道台吳健彰身世考訂. *Contemporary Historical Studies* 3 (2015): 154-8. Print.
- Hou, Chi-ming, *Foreign Investment and Economic Development in China: 1840-1937*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1965. Print.
- Jowitt, Kenneth. *Revolutionary Breakthroughs and National Development: The Case of Romania*. Berkeley: California UP, 1971. Print.
- King, Paul. *In the Chinese Customs Service: A Personal Record of Forty-Seven Year*. London: T. Fisher Unwin Ltd., 1924. Print.
- Morse, Hosea Ballou. *The International Relations of the Chinese Empire: The Period of Submission, 1861-93*. London: Longmans, Green, 1918. Print.
- Morse, Hosea Ballou. *The Trade and Administration of the Chinese Empire*. Shanghai: Kelly and Walsh, Ltd., 1908. Print.
- Myers, Ramon. *The Chinese Peasant Economy, Agricultural Development in Hopei and Shantung, 1890-1949*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1970. Print.
- Osterhammel, Jürgen. "Semi-Colonialism and Informal Empire in Twentieth-Century China: Towards a framework of Analysis." Eds. Wolfgang Mommsen and Jürgen Osterhammel. *Imperialism and After: Continuities and Discontinuities*. Boston: Allen & Unwin, 1986. 290-314. Print.
- Peck, James. "The Roots of Rhetoric: The Professional Ideology of America's China Watchers." *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars* 11.1 (1969): 59-69. Print.
- Reischauer, Edwin, John Fairbank, *East Asian: The Great Tradition*. Boston: Houghton

- Mifflin, 1958. Print.
- Ren, Zhiyong, *Wanqing Haiguan zai Yanjiu: Yi Eryuan Tizhi Wei Zhongxin* 晚清海關再研究：以二元體制為中心. Beijing: The People's UP of China, 2012. Print.
- Schrecker, John. *Imperialism and Chinese Nationalism: Germany in Shantung*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1971. Print.
- Strauss, Julia. "The Evolution of Republican Government." *The China Quarterly* 150 (1997): 329-51. Print.
- Tong Tekong, "Waijiao Xuebu yu Lishi Zhuanxing" 外交學步與歷史轉型. Ed. Tong Tekong. *The Seven Decades of Late Qing* (晚清七十年). Taipei: Yuan-Liou Publishing Co., Ltd., 1998. Print.
- Wright, Stanley. *China's Struggle for Tariff Autonomy, 1843-1938*. Shanghai: Kelly and Walsh, Ltd., 1938. Print.
- Wright, Stanley. *Hart and the Chinese Customs*. Belfast: WM. Mullan & Son, 1950. Print.
- Zhang, Wenqin 章文欽. "Cong Fengjian Guanshang Dao Maiban Guanlao - Wu Jiangzhang Xilun" 從封建官商到買辦官僚—吳健彰析論. *Contemporary Historical Studies* (近代史研究) 5 (1989): 31-54. Print.

## 理論和歷史： 重構赫德爵士的影響與中國海關稅務司

### 摘要

許多有關於近代中國的理論源自於中國海關總稅務司赫德的歷史遺緒，這些理論包括：廣州化、國中之國、共同治理、衝擊回應、非正式帝國和機構突破等等。歷史上記載的赫德與中國海關，在中國和在西方，有不同的描述和記憶，導致了這些理論之間的辯論。重建中國海關和赫德的遺緒大大豐富了中國和西方學者詮釋現代中國的內涵，近代中國的理論化是一段漸進的過程，涉及不同學者的記憶、經驗和歷史。本文旨在分析過去中國海關的研究如何催生有關於近代中國的理論、這些理論之間的辯論、以及如何相互激盪出新理論。

**關鍵字：**國中之國、共治、非正式帝國、衝擊/迴響、體制突破