

A Customs officer in the treaty port world:

R.F.C. Hedgeland's photographs



(fig. 10)

Catherine Ladds

The Chinese Maritime Customs Service was a foreign-run and internationally-staffed institution, whose responsibilities grew far beyond its initial purpose of administering the duties on foreign trade, to encompass lighting the China coast, harbour maintenance, publishing reports on countless China-related topics, and even representing China at international exhibitions. Written records about the work and workforce of the Customs between 1854 and 1949 are plentiful. Over 52,000 such files are housed in the Second Historical Archive of China, Nanjing, alone. The reports and correspondence lodged in the archive tell us a great deal about the Service's guiding principles and ideologies, its everyday

business, and the Customs' contribution to the development of China's foreign relations. Yet photographs, in particular the photographic collection of a British Customs man, R.F.C. Hedgeland, offer us an alternative view, and sometimes a clearer picture, of the Customs world of work and the Sino-foreign environment it operated in.

Reginald Follett Codrington Hedgeland was born in Exeter, Devon on 18 December 1874. After being educated at St Paul's School, London, and Pembroke College, Oxford, he joined the Indoor Staff, the prestigious administrative branch of the Customs in 1897. China and the Customs was a somewhat unorthodox choice; one might have expected Hedgeland to join one of the more established imperial admin-



(fig. 11)

istrative services, such as the Indian Civil Service. But China held many attractions for a young Englishman in the late 19th century. In the popular British imagination, China spoke of adventure and the exotic yet also, increasingly, of professional opportunities. Over the century of its existence, almost 11,000 European and American staff from over 22 countries travelled to China to join the Customs, or else were recruited in China itself. They worked alongside over 11,000 Chinese employees. Hedgeland's Customs career was longer and more successful than those of most of his colleagues – he stayed for 32 years, retiring in 1930, having attained the senior rank of Commissioner – yet it was undistinguished by any spectacular achievements. What is unusual about Hedgeland is that from the moment he set foot on Chinese soil in 1898 until his retirement 32 years later, he documented his entire career with photographs.

Tennis matches and tea parties

It is difficult to identify who actually took the photographs in Hedgeland's collection. Some were undoubtedly taken by Hedgeland himself - he occasionally expressed an interest in photography in his letters - yet he also seems to have collected photographs from other amateur photographers in the Customs staff and occasionally purchased them from professional photographers. After he returned to Britain in 1930, Hedgeland's collection was compiled into three albums, now housed in the library of the School of Oriental and African Studies, London. There are no images of momentous events in China's modern history or of turning points in the history of Sino-foreign relations in this collection. As was typical of photographic souvenirs taken home to Britain from China, a couple of gruesome shots of executions are included, but Hedgeland's taste was on the whole more mundane. He preferred instead to record bunds, offices, colleagues, tennis matches and tea parties. The value of this collection, then, lies in what it can tell us about the different milieus in which the Customs Service operated, and, moreover, what it was like to work for this organisation.

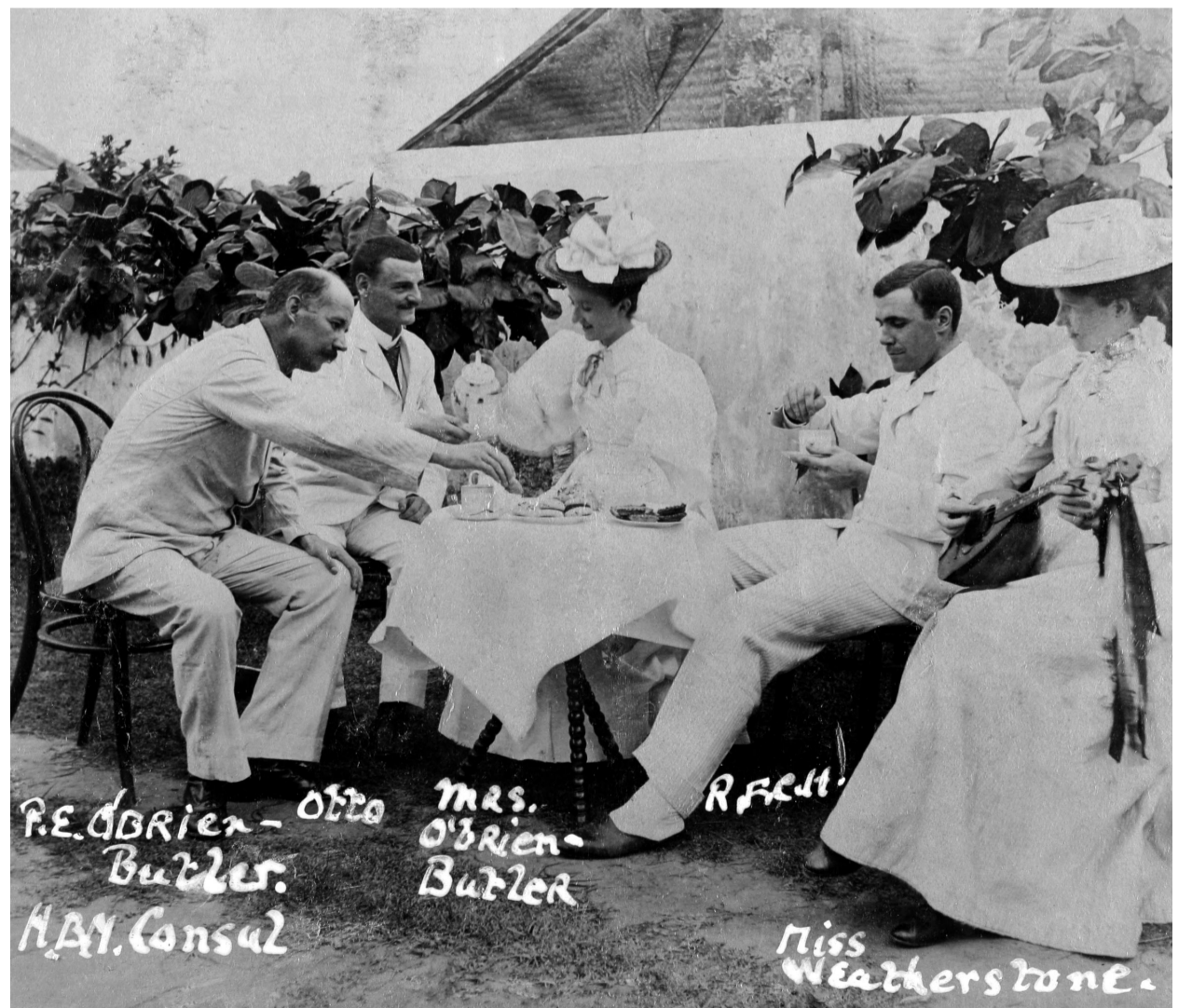
By the time that Hedgeland retired in 1930, there were Customs offices in almost 50 ports, stretching from the



(fig. 12)

commercial entrepôts of the eastern seaboard to China's furthest inland reaches. Within his first eight years of employment in the Customs, Hedgeland had served in sub-tropical Hainan (1898-99) in the south, Nanjing (1899-1903) on the Yangzi River, and the north-eastern port of Tianjin (1903-06). There then followed a move back to the south, first with a posting in the Portuguese colony of Macau (1906-09) and then in British Hong Kong (1909-11), before he embarked on his first home leave (1911-13). The variety of professional, social, commercial and environmental conditions which Customs employees were required to acclimatise to during their careers is immediately visible on a browse through Hedgeland's albums. The white suits, pith helmets and palm trees, which feature in snapshots of jaunts around Hainan and Macao, contrast sharply with his photographs of the snow-covered streets of Tianjin's British concession. Whilst the written record offers us a partial view of these diverse environments, Hedgeland's albums, which juxtapose shots of the colonial grandeur of buildings on the Peak in Hong Kong with uninspiring snaps of the Nanning bund, more directly convey a sense of just how far the Customs, and the foreign presence more generally, reached into China.

On returning from home leave in 1913, Hedgeland spent much of the remainder of his career consigned to isolated inland ports, with the exception of year-long stints in charge of the Shantou (1925-26) and Canton (1926-27) offices. One such port was Nanning, a posting viewed with trepidation in Customs circles. First opened to foreign trade in 1907, attempts to turn Nanning into a trading centre ultimately foundered. Nanning's many failings as a treaty port, and the failure of the Customs to effectively assert its control over trade in the area, are all too evident in Hedgeland's photographs of the crumbling bund, buildings submerged under 30 feet of water during the record floods of 1913, and mountains of confiscated opium. Furthermore, although a couple of prominent foreign firms, the Asiatic Petroleum Corporation and British American Tobacco, set up shop in Nanning, the resident foreign community was tiny. 'There is practically no society at Nanning, and there is no amusement here that one does not make for oneself', Hedgeland lamented in 1917.¹ Ever-resourceful, he gamely attempted to develop the social life of the port, and even harboured dreams of turning Nanning into a 'summer resort' for foreigners in the south.² However, his photographs of the makeshift golf



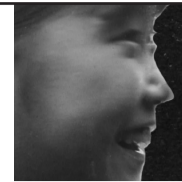
(fig. 13)

Notes

¹ Customs Service Archive, Second Historical Archive of China, Nanjing, (hereafter CSA), 679(1) 32517.

² 'Nanning Semi-Official, 1913-20,' semi-official no. 106, Hedgeland to I.G. Aglen, 30 August 1917.

³ CSA, 679(1) 32517, 'Nanning Semi-Official, 1913-20,' semi-official no. 89, Hedgeland to I.G. Aglen, 28 August 1915.



'clubhouse' – 'frolic-golf, but good fun', as Hedgeland described it – show that Nanning's social offerings were far removed from the cabarets and race meetings of Shanghai. His photographic record of life in Nanning (fig. 11), and in other remote postings such as Aihun (now Heihe City) on the Amur River, where he served between 1921 and 1926, illuminate an aspect of the foreign presence in China which is often overshadowed by the more glamorous story of foreign Shanghai. These images of cheerless landscapes, rickety Customs offices, and sparsely attended social gatherings in small port China, show how Customs employees, and those who worked for other foreign-run firms or organisations in China, often led monotonous and somewhat lonely lives in a series of dreary backwaters.⁴

The gaps in photograph collections, and what the photographer chooses *not* to record, are also significant. In Hedgeland's collection the absence of photographs documenting the tumultuous political events of the early decades of 20th century China suggests much about his mentality, and that of his fellow Customs officers. For the most part Hedgeland was stationed in quiet ports, yet he was on the scene during the anti-British strike and boycott of 1925 in Shantou and was Commissioner in Canton (1926-27) during an important phase in the Guomindang's rise to power. Yet, whereas Hedgeland's letters to the Inspectorate General diligently reported on political events in the area, his photographs betray a lack of personal curiosity in China's politics. Although they made much of their position as 'servants of the dragon throne', the majority of the foreign staff, with a handful of exceptions, exhibited little more than a cursory interest in China's development as a nation.⁵

Routine work and occasional dramas

Hedgeland fastidiously collected photographs of the various offices he worked in and the people he worked with, Chinese and foreign. As such, his albums form a rare visual archive of the routine work and occasional dramas which constituted the working world of the Customs, which does much to enhance our understanding of how the organisation operated at a local level. Moreover, these images also offer a candid glimpse of the social and professional relationships which coloured working for the Customs. Camaraderie is captured in, for example, an informal snap of junior Indoor Staff men in Nanjing relaxing after dinner in the Customs mess, yet the clearly demarcated social and professional boundaries which fractured the staff are also palpable. The vast cultural distance between the Chinese and foreign Indoor staffs is conspicuous on comparison of a group



(fig. 14)

portrait of the Chinese clerks at Tianjin in 1905, awkwardly assembled before the camera and clad in *changpao* robes, (fig. 10) and a portrait of Hedgeland and fellow Customs Assistant P.P.P.M. Kremèr attired in Western tweed suits and wielding walking sticks (fig. 12). The divisions which cross-hatched the Customs staff (figs. 14, 12), however, were not only based on race. Take, for example, Hedgeland's formally posed photographs of the Customs staff at the various ports he served in. The besuited foreign Indoor employees clustered in the centre were more or less indistinguishable in appearance from London office workers. Yet the rows of Outdoor Staff and Marine Department employees, the branches which performed the 'outdoor' and manual work of the Customs, were clearly distinguished by their uniforms – brass-buttoned jackets and naval-style caps for the Outdoor staff and Marine officers, and sailor suits emblazoned with the Customs insignia for lower ranking employees, such as boatmen. Uniforms were visual badges of status, and their role in demarcating Service hierarchies, which were arranged according to race, class and the particular type of work performed by each branch, is self-evident in these images.

The contradictions inherent in the Customs' position in China are also revealed in photographs. Although the Inspectorate General continually emphasised that this was a Chinese institution, photographs tell a somewhat different story. In these images we can see the vast Commissioner's 'bungalow' in Nanning (considered 'as good as anything... seen on the Peak at Hong Kong,' according to Hedgeland⁶), the



(fig. 15)

interiors of Customs quarters lavishly decorated with an array of European furnishings, and the Western-style vessels on which much of the Customs' work was carried out. Customs architecture, boats, and the American and European staff themselves appeared conspicuously foreign when placed against the backdrop of a small port such as Nanning.

This was, of course, also true of the foreign presence in China more broadly. There is nothing in Hedgeland's snapshots of tea parties with the British consul in Shantou and tennis matches in Hong Kong to suggest that they were taken in China rather than in England.

The pains taken by foreign communities (fig. 13) – and even by an officer in the Chinese Customs – to preserve European cultural practices, leisure pursuits, dress and even eating habits, and thereby maintain clear boundaries between foreign and Chinese society, are unambiguous in Hedgeland's collection. All this is, of course, hinted at or discussed in the written records of semi-colonial China. Yet only photographs can effectively show us these differences, distances and incongruities. Whereas, for example, successive Inspector Generals insisted that the foreign staff should consider themselves 'the countrymen' of their Chinese colleagues, formally posed staff pho-

tographs instead suggest the discomforts of proximity. Letters, diaries and so forth are much more selective about what they choose to reveal, yet in photographs everything deemed too trivial or unsuitable for the written record is often very plainly on view.

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³ CSA, 679(1) 32517, 'Nanning Semi-Official, 1913-20,' semi-official no. 75, Hedgeland to I.G. Aglen, 13 January 1914.

⁴ See Jeffrey Auerbach, 'Imperial Boredom and the Administration of Empire,' *Common Knowledge*, 11:2 (2005), 283-305, for a discussion of the boredom which permeated careers in colonial administration more generally.

⁵ Quote taken from the title of Charles Drage, *Servants of the Dragon Throne: Being the Lives of Edward and Cecil Bowra* (London, 1966). For exceptions see, for example, China consul, diplomat and short-lived Inspector General of the Customs in 1854, Sir Thomas Francis Wade, produced texts on the Chinese language. H.B. Morse, in the Customs 1874-1909, pursued a post-Customs career as an historian of China's trade and international relations.

⁶ CSA, 679(1) 32517, 'Nanning Semi-Official, 1913-20,' semi-official no. 92, 22 January 1916.