

## Introduction

The ‘foreign’ Customs service (China Maritime Customs, or CMC) has figured prominently into debates concerning China’s encounter with the West. One school of thought sees CMC as China’s first modern civil service—a corps of dedicated professionals, both foreign and Chinese, contributing to orderly trade relations, national cohesion, and peaceful modernization. Another school sees CMC as an instrument of the imperialist powers—a means of infiltrating a key branch of the Chinese government, enforcing unequal treaties and onerous indemnities, and controlling modern shipping in Chinese waters. Apart from the role of the Customs service itself, statistics produced by CMC find their way into debates concerning pre-socialist China’s international relations and public finance, and, to a lesser extent, into broader discussions of economic and social conditions.

Understandably, scholars have most often used Customs data to document trends in foreign trade and, in particular, the foreign trade of China as a whole. Appeals to these data in studies dealing with domestic trade and with local, rather than national, issues are less numerous. In fact, the *Returns* and *Reports* of the individual ports under CMC control are rich sources of local information. Data pertaining to the various ports can illuminate not just trade *per se*, but also—less directly—the contours of local productive activity and

the local impact of larger events and trends. Appeal to port and national data, or data from different ports, provides opportunities for setting local experience against a national backdrop or for comparing the economic experiences of different locales. Apart from the statistical series (the *Returns* and *Reports*), CMC produced about 400 other publications, some rich in local detail.

Although CMC data are potentially of great value in local as well as national studies, port-specific data require considerably more attention to detail than do national aggregates. The *Returns* for the various open ports have not been compiled in convenient form, as have the national statistical abstracts, in such publications as *China's Foreign Trade Statistics, 1864–1949*, by Hsiao Liang-lin, and its predecessor, *Statistics of China's Foreign Trade during the Last Sixty-Five Years*, by Yang Duanliu, Hou Houpei, and others. Appealing to the 'raw' data in the port *Returns* means grappling with inconsistencies in statistical practice over time and among ports, with changes in coverage, with variations in the format of the *Returns* themselves—in short, with pitfalls far more numerous, and deeper, than those encountered in the national compilations.

This book is concerned with (1) making sense of port-specific statistics recovered from CMC publications (primarily the annual and quarterly *Returns* of individual ports); (2) building, from such statistics, time series pertaining to regions of interest, where a 'region' includes multiple ports; and (3) using time series to throw light upon questions concerning regional economic development. The specific case considered, by way of example, is that of tea in Fujian. This case has already attracted considerable attention, most notably in the work of Robert Gardella, whose *Harvesting Mountains* examines the development of the Fujian tea industry during the Qing and Republican periods. While Gardella uses CMC statistics, he does not attempt any systematic compilation of port-specific data drawn directly from the *Returns*. Chen Ciyu also devotes a substantial portion of *Jindai Zhongguo chaye de fazhan yu shijie shichang* [*The development of modern China's tea industry and the world market*] to the case of Fujian, but provides only a small sampling of the relevant data. The exploration of statistics pertaining to Fujian's tea trade, in Part II below, might well be viewed as an elaboration and, at some points, correction of work already undertaken by Gardella and Chen.

Data pertaining to tea in Fujian are of interest not only as a statistical footnote to earlier work on the subject, but also as an illustration of key problems widely encountered in using the port-specific (and also commodity-specific) data found in CMC publications and in deriving *regional* indicators from them. Fujian encompasses several ports under the purview of Maritime Customs—and the list of such ports changes over time. Similarly, 'tea' includes several distinct commodities, as enumerated in the Customs *Returns*—and, again, the list of such commodities changes over time. And because ports in Fujian were among the first at which Maritime Customhouses opened, the statistical record concerning tea in (pre-socialist) Fujian spans 80-odd years,

presenting the full range of problems caused by changes in definitions and coverage over time.

The remainder of this book progresses from the larger and more general to the smaller and more specific. The case of tea in Fujian cannot be understood in isolation—that is, without some understanding of CMC’s responsibilities, organization, and practices. Chapter 1 provides a brief history of China Maritime Customs, with special attention to the changing scope of its responsibilities. Chapter 2 then considers the statistical record produced by CMC, laying out essential definitions and conventions and explaining how each port gathered and recorded trade data and how CMC’s Statistical Department aggregated these port-specific data into national totals. Chapter 3 concludes Part I by summarizing pitfalls in the use of CMC statistics. The two chapters of Part II focus upon CMC statistics pertaining to tea at Fujian ports. Chapter 4 concerns primarily the statistics themselves: What sorts of data are available? Where? For which years? What sorts of gaps, inconsistencies, and biases are inherent in these data? Chapter 5 explores both the statistical record and the trade history revealed by that record, constructing time series for the Fujian ports and for the export trade of Fujian as a whole.

A number of ‘boxes’ supplement the text, providing additional detail and making detours into tangential topics. Sections and subsections of the main text—as well as boxes, tables, and figures (maps and graphs)—are numbered, and are referenced and cross-referenced throughout. A substantial portion of Part II is presented in digital form on an accompanying CD, the contents of which are summarized in an appendix.

Each chapter ends with a short section concerning sources. Files on the CD provide more detailed information concerning sources of Customs statistics, with year-by-year references to specific tables in the various Customs documents. A list at the end of the book consolidates all sources mentioned in the main text, boxes, and tables, and in files on the CD.

Customs Release, 1860s

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Source: S. Wells Williams, *The Chinese Commercial Guide*.