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HOPES UNREALISED:

The minor British treaty ports of Wenzhou and Jiangmen

Robert Nield

A dissertation submitted to the University of Bristol
in accordance with the requirements for the award of the degree of
Master of Philosophy in History in the Faculty of Arts

School of Humanities

September 2018

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Abstract

This dissertation is a study of colonial port cities in the context of China's former treaty ports. It addresses the question why so many British-sponsored treaty ports in China failed as centres of British commercial activity. My research focuses on two case studies: Wenzhou, opened in 1877 as one of the first treaty ports that was not the result of *force majeure*; and Jiangmen, the last to be opened in China proper, twenty-seven years later. Very little scholarly attention has been paid to these two, or indeed to any of the lesser treaty ports. My work is a step towards redressing that deficiency, and argues that the study of smaller, unsuccessful treaty ports changes our understanding of colonial expansion and interaction with indigenous systems in ways that concentration on the larger ports does not.

My research develops four central arguments: that mercantile considerations regarding the opening of treaty ports could be misplaced or over-ridden; that practical difficulties could frustrate potentially profitable endeavour; that treaty-port status benefited Chinese interests, in some instances more than foreign ones; and that the treaty ports were not homogeneous. Challenging the claims made by many historians, my key findings are: that even smaller ports were capable of frustrating colonial and imperial aims; that not all commercial and infrastructural change in colonial port cities was attributable to the colonisers; and that superior Western technology could be adapted by local interests in pursuit of their own ambitions.

Using archival sources and other contemporary records, this thesis demonstrates that the study of small and unsuccessful ports, an area hitherto neglected by scholars, augments literature that is too often concerned only with large and successful ventures. My findings challenge the conclusions drawn from such studies, and demonstrate that general theories do not always apply to specific cases.

298 words

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This has been a remarkable two-year journey, the outcome of which has only been possible thanks to the support of a number of remarkable people. To each of them I offer my sincere thanks.

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In late 2015 I approached Robert Bickers, saying that I would like to add to what I had already achieved by undertaking a programme of supervised study. I suggested that I would benefit from some academic discipline. Robert delivered. And I have learned a tremendous amount, not only about my chosen subject, but also about how to analyse it in totally new (to me) ways, and how to present the results of my work. I could not have asked for a more experienced, helpful, and supportive lead supervisor for my project. In Julio Decker, I was blessed with having a second supervisor who brought different insights to my work, always with a gentle yet persuasive manner.

I must also thank the other members of Robert Bickers' China Post-Graduate Research Group who, apart from my infrequent personal appearances in Bristol, always welcomed me warmly as a face on a computer screen during our Skype tutorials.

Over the course of fifteen years, I have visited more than 50 former treaty ports in China, on each visit learning more about them and the system that gave rise to them. Nearly all of these visits have been made in the inspiring, relaxed and always pleasant company of my long-standing friend and ace photographer Nick Kitto. I am not sure who was leading whom, but I know that together we both got far more out of these excursions than either one of us would have done individually.

Last, and most of all, I must thank my wife, Janet. She is my biggest fan and most loyal supporter, and has put up, patiently and with great understanding, with the words 'treaty port' being mentioned in our house many times a day for more years than either of us care to remember.

Author's Declaration

I declare that the work in this dissertation was carried out in accordance with the requirements of the University's Regulations and Code of Practice for Research Degree Programmes and that it has not been submitted for any other academic award. Except where indicated by specific reference in the text, the work is my own work. Work done in collaboration with, or with the assistance of, others is indicated as such. Any views expressed in the dissertation are those of the author.

Signed:

.....

Date: 13 September 2018

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Glossary of terms

bund:	from a Hindi word for artificial embankment
comprador:	from Portuguese: a Chinese agent employed by foreign merchants to handle local transactions
concession:	a tract of land at a treaty port leased by a foreign government and sub-let to foreign merchants
farming:	a system whereby an individual or group of individuals would pay a fixed sum to the taxing authority, in return for which they could keep whatever tax they themselves collected
godown:	from a Malay word for warehouse
hulk:	the hull of a decommissioned vessel used by foreign trading companies as a floating warehouse
<i>lijin</i> :	inland transit tax on the carriage of goods
Maritime Customs:	the foreign-managed customs service established in 1854 in Shanghai, later expanded to all treaty ports
open city:	a Chinese port or city opened unilaterally by the Chinese government for foreign trade and residence
outport:	a term generally applied to all lesser treaty ports, particularly by those in the larger ones
port-of-call:	river stations where passengers and goods could be shipped and off-loaded; no permanent foreign presence was allowed
settlement:	a tract of land at a treaty port designated for foreign occupation where foreign occupants entered into separate leases with the individual Chinese owners
sphere of influence:	areas of China, informally designated, over which foreign powers strove to exercise commercial control and political influence
tariff duty:	duty payable on imports and exports, set by treaty initially at 5%
transit-pass:	introduced in 1858 as a means of shielding foreign imports and exports from <i>lijin</i> in return for the payment of an additional 2½% duty
treaty port:	a town, city or port opened by foreign treaty in which treaty powers could establish consulates and their merchants could reside and trade, and where customs duties were levied in accordance with treaty rates
Zongli Yamen:	also known as Tsungli Yamen: established after the Second Opium War as a Chinese government department through which foreign affairs could be managed

Maps and illustrations

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HOPES UNREALISED¹: The minor British treaty ports of Wenzhou and Jiangmen

At 10 o'clock this morning the Acting Commissioner of Customs personally hoisted the Chinese ensign on the Customs flagstaff, a guard of honour from the revenue steamer *Fei-hoo* presenting arms; the red ensign and the Chinese dragon flag fluttered from two houseboats, the temporary head-quarters of H.B.M. Consul and the Commissioner of Customs respectively, while three guns boomed forth from the revenue steamer. The ceremony over, the genial Commissioner of Customs invited all the foreigners present to his houseboat, where a bumper was drunk to the health of the new treaty port.

Thus was the Port of Kongmoon formally opened to trade.²

Introduction

The report above described the opening ceremony of Jiangmen (Kongmoon) on 7 March 1904, the third British treaty port in China's Pearl River Delta. Two weeks earlier 'hurried preparations' were reportedly being made at the other two, Guangzhou (Canton) and Sanshui (Samshui), 60 kilometres north, by merchants intending to establish a Jiangmen branch.³ Guangzhou was the original base of British trade in China, a treaty port since 1842. Sanshui, 40 kilometres to Guangzhou's west, became a treaty port in 1897.⁴ The report closed with the observation: 'The weather is cold and dull ...'

Not only the weather was dull. Despite the 'hurried preparations', foreign trade, to which Jiangmen had been opened, never materialised there. Why was this? Jiangmen brought the number of British treaty ports in China to twenty-six, indicating the extent of Britain's experience in the country. Had all the others been successful commercial ventures, leaving Jiangmen an exception? Far from it. Many of them had already been abject failures as centres of British trade. Why was that? This is the question I address in this dissertation. Accounts of the treaty-port system in China have considered the questions

¹ Alfred Novion, Wenzhou Customs Commissioner, noted in his Decennial Report for 1882-91: 'The hopes expressed at the opening of the port have not been realised' (*Maritime Customs Decennial Reports 1882-91* (Shanghai: Inspector General of Customs, 1893), 388 (hereafter '*Customs Decennial*'). This sentiment could have applied to any number of China's less successful treaty ports.

² *Hong Kong Weekly Press*, 12 March 1904, 7.

³ *Hong Kong Telegraph*, 27 February 1904, 5. See map, Chapter Two, page 55.

⁴ 1897 Burmah Agreement, Special Article. The same treaty also designated Jianggen (Kongkun Market) as a treaty port, but as this place was an insignificant village on the opposite side of the river to Sanshui, the two are usually taken to be the same place.

when, how, where, and what: when the respective treaties arose; how those agreements came about; where the resulting treaty ports were located; and what those entities were.⁵ Why so many of them failed has received little attention.

The establishment of port cities by Western powers was a key feature of colonial global expansion. Some, like Singapore, were founded afresh. Others, Bombay for example, were taken over and expanded. In China, because of the relative weakness of the Qing government in the face of nineteenth-century Western encroachments, foreign powers were able to force significant inroads in pursuit of their commercial and other aims. At the height of the 1840–1943 treaty-port era in China, over a hundred cities, towns, and even villages had formally been opened for foreign residence and business.⁶ However, a review of the literature reveals that insufficient attention has been paid so far to the smaller treaty ports: the ones with no bright lights to attract historians and other commentators, the ones that failed to achieve their intended objectives. It is understandable that scholarly studies of the treaty-port era, how it came about, and what we can learn from it, dwell on the success stories, particularly Shanghai. Yet excluding the smaller ports ignores three-quarters of the total number. In 1904, twenty-six of the thirty-seven ports under Maritime Customs' supervision each contributed less than 2% of the total value of trade; in 1914, the figures were 38 and 47 respectively.⁷ In this dissertation I demonstrate that studying the unsuccessful members of the network changes our understanding of the creation of treaty ports, and shows that they resulted from conditions that were more complex, confused and incoherent than is usually recognised.

I define a treaty port as 'successful' if the commercial expectations that caused it to be opened were met: principally, the establishment there of a foreign trading community.

⁵ Some treaty ports incorporated a foreign 'concession', whereby the foreign government leased an area of land and sub-let it to foreign lessees. Others had a 'settlement', where individual foreign tenants leased their sites directly from the Chinese owners. Others, more loosely arranged, had neither a formal concession nor a defined settlement area.

⁶ 49 treaty ports were created, and 59 other places were opened unilaterally by the Chinese state. There were in addition two colonies, five leased territories and a number of consular and other stations. Informal arrangements allowed residence at at least 25 other places. For a full listing, see Robert Nield, *China's Foreign Places: The Foreign Presence in China in the Treaty Port Era, 1840–1943* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2015), xxxi–xxxv.

⁷ *Customs Decennial 1902–11*, 328–30; and *Customs Decennial 1912–21*, 424–6.

Those that underperformed I refer to as ‘failures’, notwithstanding that many of them succeeded as places of indigenous business. Bickers and Jackson observed that in the treaty ports there was more failure than success, and that the China coast was ‘a shore of disappointment’; but for illustration they used examples of personal failure and disappointment among foreign treaty-port residents, rather than ports themselves.⁸ My study of structural failure changes our understanding of this disappointment. To do this, I analyse the commercial failure of British efforts in two case-study ports: Wenzhou (Wenchow) and Jiangmen. In terms of China’s foreign trade for 1904 and 1914, these two combined contributed 0.6% and 0.9% respectively.⁹ In my Conclusion, I address the extent to which two examples are representative of all smaller and unsuccessful treaty ports. Nevertheless, my objective in examining Wenzhou and Jiangmen is to develop four arguments relating to the British treaty-port experience that have hitherto not come together in treaty-port scholarship:

1. Although British policy was influenced heavily by mercantile interests, that influence could be misplaced, or over-ridden by non-commercial considerations.
2. Practical difficulties on the ground could negate commercial advantages that British merchants might otherwise have pursued.
3. The designation of a place as a treaty port engendered infrastructural and other facilities which could be appropriated by indigenous interests.
4. ‘The treaty ports’ were not a homogeneous collection of spaces of thriving Western commercial enterprise.

It must first be recognised that China’s treaty ports were representations of foreign powers’ colonial ambitions. Although, with very few exceptions, the powers’ presence in China was not strictly of a colonial nature, the forces that drove it were similar to those

⁸ Robert Bickers and Isabella Jackson, ‘Introduction: Law, Land and Power: Treaty Ports and Concessions in Modern China’, in Robert Bickers and Isabella Jackson (eds.), *Treaty Ports in Modern China: Law, Land and Power* (London: Routledge, 2016), 6.

⁹ Jiangmen was opened as a treaty port in 1904. Although Wenzhou was opened in 1877, I have selected these two years for the purpose of comparability.

that drove colonial expansion elsewhere. I therefore start with an examination of what those forces were. I then use that analysis to assess Britain's experience in China, before looking at the two ports in detail.

Colonial powers and port cities

Rhoads Murphey argued that colonial powers coming to Asia did not create the port cities that served their needs; they simply adapted existing commercial systems.¹⁰ The consequent onset of global trade engendered a new form of imperialism, one that had commerce as its aim rather than military conquest. It is in this context that British interests sought to include in their global network places such as Wenzhou and Jiangmen. Port cities served many other functions, such as platforms for spreading cultural and religious influence, but for my purpose those I outline here are the most relevant. And none would have developed without the initial desire to trade.

Bases for trade

Trade enticed seafaring Europeans to Asia, and coastal harbours were their first points of contact. For 300 years, the Western presence in Asia comprised such marginal footholds. Larger ships and greater trade volumes demanded physically more convenient, sheltered locations: ports. Murphey defined a harbour as simply a place where a ship can shelter, whereas a port is 'an economic concept, a centre of land-sea exchange'.¹¹ A port city is therefore 'more than just a city that happens to be on a shoreline'.¹² Economic advances in nineteenth-century Europe generated demand for Asian commodities: sugar, tea, minerals, and cheap textiles. Port cities became the focus of the resulting rivalry among European powers, and bases for commercial exploitation of plantations and other commodities in the hinterland.¹³ European trading posts became bridgeheads from which power and control could spread inland, by force if necessary.

¹⁰ Rhoads Murphey, 'On the Evolution of the Port City', in Frank Broeze (ed.), *Brides of the Sea: Port Cities of Asia from the 16th–20th Centuries* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1989), 234.

¹¹ Murphey, 'Evolution of the Port City', 231.

¹² Frank Broeze, 'Studying the Asian Port City', in Broeze (ed.), *Brides of the Sea*, 29.

¹³ McPherson, 'Port Cities as Nodal Points of Change: The Indian Ocean, 1890s–1920', in Leila T. Fawaz, C. A. Bayly and Robert Ilbert (eds.), *Modernity and Culture: From the Mediterranean to the Indian Ocean* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 81; Murphey, 'Traditionalism and Colonialism: Changing Urban Roles in Asia', *Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 29, No. 1 (November 1969), 75.

Colonial bridgeheads

Notwithstanding Darwin's argument that imperialism has been the historic norm, Europeans were largely attracted to Asia by trade, not empire-building.¹⁴ By the mid-nineteenth century, the British Empire had become an exemplar of the 'free-trade imperialism' promoted by successive British governments.¹⁵ This rather loose structure, to which scholars have attributed the term 'informal empire', allowed Shanghai and port cities in Argentina and Egypt to rank alongside imperial possessions such as Cape Town, Karachi and Calcutta as nodes within Britain's expression of empire.¹⁶ Commercial opportunities, in the informal empire as in the formal, attracted businessmen and merchants, creating local employment through the development of ports and railways.¹⁷ Foreign businesses wielded significant power and influence. The additional power implicit in the presence of the Royal Navy was an often-sought comfort in the port cities of Britain's informal empire, as it was in the formal, and suggested a security that attracted local businessmen to relocate there.¹⁸ Thus, the bridgeheads became leading urban centres in an expanding geostrategic and infrastructural network.

Geostrategic and infrastructural functions

Some British treaty ports in China had their genesis in hubris and a desire to block competitors' ambitions; I will show that this was the case with Jiangmen. Political considerations drove other elements of Britain's presence in China. Weihai (Weihaiwei), was leased in 1898 in response to a shifting balance of power in the north-east. Although it became an important naval base, a symbol of Britain's power and influence, defence was but one concern for Britain in maintaining its global network of port cities. Both military and commercial vessels on the imperial sea-lanes needed facilities for docking, provisioning and, from the mid-nineteenth century, coaling. Hong Kong, ceded to Britain in 1842, served this purpose for the new treaty ports.

¹⁴ John Darwin, *Unfinished Empire: The Global Expansion of Britain* (London: Allen Lane, 2012), 7.

¹⁵ P.J. Cain and A.G. Hopkins, 'Gentlemanly Capitalism and British Expansion Overseas I. The Old Colonial System, 1688–1850', *Economic History Review*, Vol. 39, No. 4 (November 1986), 522.

¹⁶ I explore the debate on the definition of 'informal empire' in greater detail in the Literature Review on pages 14–5.

¹⁷ Ronald E. Robinson, 'Introduction: Railway Imperialism' and 'Conclusion: Railways and Informal Empire', 4, in Clarence B. Davis, Kenneth E. Wilburn, Jr. (eds.) and Ronald E. Robinson, *Railway Imperialism* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1991).

¹⁸ McPherson, 'Port Cities', 85; C.A. Bayly, *The Birth of the Modern World, 1780–1914: Global Connections and Comparisons* (Malden: Blackwell, 2004), 187.

Of the functions I have suggested for colonial port cities, none would be valid in the British context without the first: trade. Gallagher and Robinson argued that Britain's imperial policy was 'trade with informal control if possible; trade with rule when necessary'. The next section will question the extent to which their assertion held true in respect of Britain's dealings with China.¹⁹

British interest in China

Britain's interest in China was expressed chiefly through the activities of its merchants. Military action in the mid-nineteenth century, prompted initially by the demands of free-trade proponents, led to Britain dominating China's foreign trade. Subsequent British government policy towards China was influenced heavily by commercial priorities. It was only when its dominance was challenged by other powers, with different agendas, that Britain was obliged to change its stance. Each of these factors is important to understanding the roles played by Wenzhou and Jiangmen.

In the early nineteenth century, British merchants in Guangzhou urged their government to open China to foreign trade. Despite complaints about the restrictions operating in Guangzhou, foreigners were making money there. More open ports, so they believed, would mean more profits.²⁰ Following lobbying by the China traders and their agents in London, and canvassing in the Guangzhou English-language press, the 1842 Nanjing Treaty opened five coastal ports.²¹ Having secured a convincing military victory over China, some contemporary commentators argued that Britain should have demanded opening the whole country.²² For these and a variety of other reasons, British merchants

¹⁹ John Gallagher and Ronald Robinson, 'The Imperialism of Free Trade', *Economic History Review*, New Series, Vol. 6, No. 1 (1953), 13. See also Jürgen Osterhammel, 'Britain and China, 1842–1914', in Andrew Porter (ed.), *The Oxford History of the British Empire: Volume III, The Nineteenth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, [1999] 2009), 146–69.

²⁰ The sentiments of the British merchants in Guangzhou were epitomised by the Guangzhou newspaper the *Canton Register*, which called, on 30 September 1834, for 'free trade to every port of China' (quoted in Chen Song-chuan, *Merchants of War and Peace: British Knowledge of China in the Making of the Opium War* [Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2017], 25).

²¹ The five were Fuzhou (Foochow), Guangzhou, Ningbo (Ningpo), Shanghai and Xiamen (Amoy).

²² R.M. Martin, 'Minute on the British Position and Prospects in China' (Hong Kong, 19 April 1845), in Rhoads Murphey (ed.), *Nineteenth-Century China: Five Imperialist Perspectives* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1972), 50–1.

in China were dissatisfied with the gains wrought by the treaty.²³

The Second Opium War (1856–60) opened eleven more ports, but still British mercantile interests were dissatisfied; they wanted access to China's millions of customers.²⁴ More ports, including Wenzhou, were opened by the 1876 Chefoo Convention, although by this time the use of superior force had been replaced by a more cautious consideration of China's development prospects; the Foreign Office had become unwilling to weaken the authority of Beijing, as this would have jeopardised British merchants' dominant position. In the 1870s the British Empire accounted for 80% of China's foreign trade.²⁵ However, So argued that the treaty ports never accounted for more than 10% of China's gross national product.²⁶ British trading interests therefore represented perhaps 80% of 10% of China's economy. Yet British merchants remained confident more ports would lead to more business.²⁷

Contrary opinion reached London from British consuls in China.²⁸ They argued that China had for centuries been economically self-sufficient, and that there was no demand for imports in the quantities British merchants anticipated. Besides, Chinese consumers were unwilling to buy foreign items that were dearer and less suitable than indigenous equivalents.²⁹ Moreover, by the 1870s, foreign imports were increasingly handled by Chinese merchants through their own, more efficient networks. Research by Wang indicated that the number of treaty ports had no bearing on the level of British trade; except at Hong Kong and Shanghai, this was largely in Chinese hands.³⁰ Foreigners became agents rather than principals. Yet treaty ports continued to be created: eleven by Britain alone between 1870 and 1897, a period during which British exports to China

²³ J.Y. Wong, *Deadly Dreams: Opium, Imperialism, and the Arrow War (1856–1860) in China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 263.

²⁴ Nathan Albert Pelcovits, *Old China Hands and the Foreign Office* (New York: American Institute of Pacific Relations, [1948] 2012), 2.

²⁵ L.K. Young, *British Policy in China, 1895–1902* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970), 5.

²⁶ Billy K.L. So, 'Modern China's Treaty Port Economy in Institutional Perspective: An Introductory Essay', in Billy K.L. So and Ramon H. Myers (eds.), *The Treaty Port Economy in Modern China: Empirical Studies of Institutional Change and Economic Performance* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 6.

²⁷ Wong, *Deadly Dreams*, 263.

²⁸ For example, Guangzhou Consul Byron Brenan reported: 'The importance of opening new ports is frequently over-estimated.' (*Foreign Office Annual Series. Diplomatic and Consular Reports on Trade and Finance for Canton, 1897*, 8) (hereafter, for example, '*FO Canton 1897*').

²⁹ Osterhammel, 'Britain and China', 162.

³⁰ Jerry L.S. Wang, 'The Profitability of Anglo-Chinese Trade, 1861–1913', *Business History*, Vol. 35, No. 3 (1993), 39–65.

decreased from £9 million to £8 million.³¹

This change saw treaty ports becoming nodes in the transportation network, rather than points of access for foreign traders.³² Given their continuing domination of shipping and its related services, additions to the network would still benefit foreign interests although, as I will show, little came from the opening of Wenzhou and Jiangmen. The question remains: why were new, unsuccessful treaty ports created into the 1900s? For the answer, we must revisit the development of Britain's China policy.

The development of Britain's China policy

With the First Opium War (1839–42) still being fought, Foreign Secretary Lord Aberdeen instructed Henry Pottinger, responsible for the conduct of hostilities: 'A secure and well regulated trade is all we desire ... [we] demand nothing that we shall not willingly see enjoyed by the subjects of all other States.'³³ By 1870 there had been a subtle change. Foreign Secretary Lord Clarendon wrote: 'You cannot too strongly point out that British interests in China are strictly commercial, or, at all events, only so far political as they may be for the protection of commerce.'³⁴

A further shift in emphasis is apparent in an 1896 speech on the empire and British trade in general by Colonial Secretary Joseph Chamberlain: 'We offer in all those markets over which our flag floats the same opportunities ... that we offer to our own subjects, and upon the same terms.' By the time he made this speech, France had opened seven treaty ports and Japan three, but the floating of the British flag over the other twenty-four was not only a matter of national prestige, but also an indication of Britain's commitment to open trade, a principle that made Britain stand out among its rivals.³⁵ Chamberlain continued: 'In that policy we stand alone, because all other nations, as fast as they acquire new territory ... seek at once to secure the monopoly for their own products by

³¹ Pelcovits, *Old China Hands*, 103.

³² Anne Reinhardt, 'Treaty Ports as Shipping Infrastructure', in Bickers and Jackson (eds.), *Treaty Ports*, 102.

³³ Aberdeen to Pottinger, 4 November 1841 (The National Archives [hereafter 'TNA'], FO 17/53, 145).

³⁴ Clarendon to Thomas Wade, British Chargé d'Affaires, Beijing, 7 April 1870 (TNA, FO 228/487, 142).

³⁵ I am not counting the eleven treaty ports opened by Russia on its contiguous border with China. Given their remoteness from the principal fields of foreign commerce in China, it is moot whether or not the declared openness of these places would ever have been tested by merchants other than Russian or Chinese.

preferential and artificial methods.’³⁶

This was evidenced when Britain’s rivals obtained, in 1898, leases of Chinese territory. These leased entities were established along different lines to the British government’s understanding of treaty ports as facilitator rather than actor in channelling trade. On 6 March 1898 Germany leased Jiaozhou (Kiaochow). Initially a navy base, significant government expenditure was incurred to create a German showpiece to rival Hong Kong.³⁷ By 1904 there was a large military and naval population, a government that employed hundreds of Germans, and about 50 businesses, mostly German. Scores more Germans were engaged in building the Shandong Railway.³⁸ Military and railway priorities also underlay Russia’s lease of Lüshun (Port Arthur) and Dalianwan on 27 March, with a similar heavy investment in facilities and people, although by 1904 the businesses there included German, Japanese, American and Danish.³⁹ In the south, France leased Zhanjiang (Kwangchowwan) on 22 April, ostensibly as a coaling station.⁴⁰ A few years later French intentions became clear: there were eleven colonial government departments employing dozens of Frenchmen, a garrison of 4,000 soldiers, but only seven merchants, all French.⁴¹

These developments were emblematic of the changing international balance of power. France and Russia had formed a diplomatic and military alliance in 1894.⁴² Furthermore, these two powers and Germany coerced Japan to surrender some of the territory it had annexed after the Sino-Japanese War (1894–5); Japan’s defeat of China was a significant indicator of a changing power structure. The early years of the new century saw Britain forming alliances with Japan (1902) and France (1904), agreements that indicated

³⁶ Joseph Chamberlain, ‘British Trade and the Expansion of the Empire’, speech to the Birmingham Chamber of Commerce, 13 November 1896 (*Foreign & Colonial Speeches by the Right Hon. Joseph Chamberlain, M.P.* [London: George Routledge & Sons, 1897], 144).

³⁷ The level of expense was a controversial issue among some German politicians. See Klaus Mühlhahn, ‘Mapping Colonial Space: The Planning and Building of Qingdao by German Colonial Authorities, 1897–1914’, in Laura Victoir and Victor Zatsopine (eds.), *Harbin to Hanoi: The Colonial Built Environment in Asia, 1840 to 1940* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2013), 103.

³⁸ *Chronicle and Directory for China etc. 1904* (Hong Kong: The Hong Kong Daily Press, 1904), 201–8 (hereafter, for example, ‘C&D 1904’).

³⁹ C&D 1904, 183–8.

⁴⁰ D.K. Fieldhouse, *Economics and Empire, 1830–1914* (London: Macmillan, [1973] 1984), 425.

⁴¹ C&D 1904, 361–2; Anon, *The Threatened Decline and Fall of Great Britain in China: A Review of the Present Political Situation in China* (Shanghai: China Gazette, 1903), 21.

⁴² T.G. Otte, ‘The Boxer Uprising and British Foreign Policy’, in Robert Bickers and R.G. Tiedemann (eds.), *The Boxers, China, and the World* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007), 157.

Britain's diminishing global dominance; the protracted Boer War (1899–1902) had been a salutary demonstration of this. Following its defeat by Japan, and the encroachments by the Western powers, it was anticipated that the Chinese Empire would collapse. Britain and America supported the concept of China's 'open door', while the other powers waited to develop their spheres of influence into something more concrete.⁴³

British diplomats concentrated on supporting the Chinese state by helping to reform its legal and financial systems, and introducing modernisation in the form of railways and other capital projects. The goal was a 'fiscal and administrative revolution', hopefully under British tutelage.⁴⁴ The 1902 Mackay Treaty, which *inter alia* brought about the opening of Jiangmen, was a major step in that direction, introducing national coinage and laws relating to companies and trademarks.⁴⁵ It was the prospects of the business, prestige and influence to be gained through partaking in China's modernisation that made British interests realise that there was no point in continuing to open treaty ports. The priorities of the 1840s and 1850s, to create as many points of contact as possible, had by the 1900s been replaced by a more holistic approach to accessing China's markets.

The foregoing section has suggested why colonial powers created port cities, and how this reflected in Britain's dealings with China. I have also examined the role of treaty ports, how their significance altered in the light of the foreign powers' changing priorities, and how these priorities were shaped by the opposing forces of competition and cooperation. In order to determine how my research changes conclusions drawn in existing scholarship, I now turn to a review of the literature that is related to my arguments.

Literature review

My study sits at the intersection of historiographical strands. It is a study of colonial port cities, and the role treaty ports played in the Chinese economy. It incorporates imperialism, both the seeking of formal control and the exertion of informal economic

⁴³ Contemporary studies of the expected collapse of the empire include: Alexis Krausse, *China in Decay: The Story of a Disappearing Empire* (London: Chapman & Hall, [1898] 1900); and Lord Charles Beresford, *The Break-up of China* (London: Harper & Brothers, 1900).

⁴⁴ Pelcovits, *Old China Hands*, 263.

⁴⁵ See Chapter Two, pages 62–3, for more on the Mackay Treaty.

influence, and Britain's China policy in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In all these fields there has been intense debate, and it is ongoing; but, as I will show, it is lacking regarding the concept of failure.

Colonial port cities

Scholarship by Darwin, Cain and Hopkins, and Porter, on the growth and dynamics of imperial power coalesces on the important role played by port cities and their supporting infrastructure. Although Darwin challenged some aspects of Cain and Hopkins' thesis, he and Porter emphasised the role of free trade in the British example.⁴⁶ Colonial port cities are presented by all these scholars as agents of commercial expansion and imperial control. By studying the smaller treaty ports we can see examples where these aims were not met.

Murphey gave a concise overview of how colonial port cities evolved in Asia. He argued that they were the focus of all important commercial and infrastructural changes taking place in each Asian country, and that it was outsiders who initiated them.⁴⁷ I will demonstrate that in Wenzhou and Jiangmen those changes were brought about by Chinese agency rather than foreign intervention.

Of particular relevance to my research is Cain and Hopkins' observation that 'successive generations of China-watchers' were disappointed with the poor returns from the China trade.⁴⁸ Analysing that disappointment only at a macro-economic level, they contextualised it by arguing that treaty ports were intended to provide a cheap and self-financing means of entering the China market. This did not happen at Wenzhou or Jiangmen.

⁴⁶ Darwin, *Unfinished Empire*, 154–5 (in the context of commercial success depending on two-way trade) and 396 (emphasising the importance of free trade); P.J. Cain and A.G. Hopkins, *British Imperialism, 1688–2015* (London: Routledge, 2016), 394 (specifically in relation to China); John Darwin, *The Empire Project: The Rise and Fall of the British World-System, 1830–1970* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 76 (regarding the Royal Navy's global presence); Bernard Porter, *The Lion's Share: A History of British Imperialism, 1850 to the Present* (Harlow: Pearson, [1975] 2012), 12–3 (in the context of trade and informal empire); and John Darwin, 'Imperialism and the Victorians: The Dynamics of Territorial Expansion', *English Historical Review*, Vol. 112, No. 447 (June 1997), 616–7 (for his challenge to Cain and Hopkins' argument).

⁴⁷ Rhoads Murphey, *The Outsiders* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1977), 18–22.

⁴⁸ Cain and Hopkins, *British Imperialism*, 394.

Murphey questioned why the treaty ports did not have more of a positive effect on China's economy and modernisation. Although recognising the far-reaching industrialisation and Chinese political developments that took place in the treaty ports, he maintained that their effect was largely limited to the ports themselves. Ignoring successes such as Dalian, Guangzhou, Hankou (Hankow), Shanghai and Tianjin (Tientsin), Murphey argued that treaty ports remained isolated enclaves of foreign activity, with minimal effect on the hinterland, and were destined ultimately to fail.⁴⁹ Cohen added that, given the internal unrest that demanded the Chinese government's attention in the late nineteenth century, the 'nettling behaviour of small enclaves of Westerners' was unlikely to have had any major effect.⁵⁰ Murphey cited the rise, from the 1860s, of Chinese merchants as distributors of Western imports, but neglected to observe that a number of treaty ports thereby became enclaves of Chinese activity, rather than foreign, with an increasing effect on the hinterland.⁵¹ This was the case with both Wenzhou and Jiangmen and has been argued, although he mentioned neither place specifically, by Rawski.⁵²

Feuerwerker and Riskin also suggested that the tenacity of the indigenous economy and Chinese ability to compete with foreigners meant that foreign elements in the treaty ports had little effect beyond their boundaries.⁵³ Hao argued that this tenacity was encouraged by the stable conditions pertaining at most treaty ports; although he called the treaty-port system a 'means of imperialistic encroachment', he recognised that the relative security of the ports enabled Chinese entrepreneurs to keep their wealth, thereby encouraging indigenous economic activity.⁵⁴ Osterhammel added to the argument with his analysis of how 'market resistance' constrained foreigners' ability to develop the

⁴⁹ Murphey, *The Outsiders*, 1–11.

⁵⁰ Paul A. Cohen, *Discovering History in China: American Historical Writing on the Recent Chinese Past* (New York: Columbia University Press, [1984] 2010), 16.

⁵¹ Murphey, *The Outsiders*, 103–6.

⁵² Thomas G. Rawski, 'Chinese Dominance of Treaty Port Commerce and its Implications, 1860–1875', *Explorations in Economic History*, Vol. 7 (1970), 451–73.

⁵³ Albert Feuerwerker, 'Characteristics of the Chinese Economic Model Specific to the Chinese Environment', in Robert Dernberger (ed.), *China's Development Experience in Comparative Perspective* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980), 289; Carl Riskin, 'Surplus and Stagnation in Modern China', in Dwight H. Perkins (ed.), *China's Modern Economy in Historical Perspective* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1975), 83.

⁵⁴ Hao Yen-ping, *The Comprador in Nineteenth-Century China: Bridge between East and West* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1970), 3.

China market.⁵⁵ Studying failed, smaller treaty ports such as Wenzhou and Jiangmen enables us to reappraise these historians' various arguments and observations by demonstrating that their very status as treaty ports assisted Chinese entrepreneurs in developing their own market.

None of the studies mentioned makes particular reference to smaller ports. Brunero recently observed that despite the focus of treaty-port historians on Shanghai, scholarship is turning towards the smaller ports; but she then used Hankou as an illustration. Hankou was not small; its trade was third and fourth largest (out of 37 and 47) in 1904 and 1914 respectively.⁵⁶ Clearly, more needs to be done to recognise the contribution that can be made by smaller places to our knowledge of treaty-port China.

Regarding the concept of failure, I have identified only three studies of commercial failure of specific ports. Although one was not in China, each shows what can be learned by looking through general principles to specific scenarios. First, in his analysis of the Malaysian port of Penang, McPherson observed that the commercial hopes for the port were dashed by a change in political circumstances; as I demonstrate in Chapter Two, Jiangmen suffered a similar fate. Second, Otte argued that as Britain's lease of Weihai was a political expediency, British commerce was destined never to take root; again, there are similarities here with the case of Jiangmen. Third, Bickers suggested that the opening by the Chinese government of Nanning in 1907 was an attempt to foil French ambitions and to boost Beijing's customs revenue rather than a response to real commercial potential; both my case-study ports similarly lacked convincing commercial rationale.⁵⁷

Individual ports, other than the larger and more influential ones, are given little room in

⁵⁵ Jürgen Osterhammel, 'Semi-Colonialism and Informal Empire in Twentieth-Century China: Towards a Framework of Analysis', in Wolfgang J. Mommsen and Jürgen Osterhammel (eds.) *Imperialism and After: Continuities and Discontinuities* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1986), 290–314.

⁵⁶ Donna Brunero, "Ponies, Amahs and All That ...": Family Lives in China's Treaty Ports', in Donna Brunero and Stephanie Villalta Puig (eds.), *Life in Treaty Port China and Japan* (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 24–5. Data taken from *Customs Decennial 1902–11*, 328–30; and *Customs Decennial 1912–21*, 424–6.

⁵⁷ Penang: Kenneth McPherson, 'Penang 1786–1832: A Promise Unfulfilled', in Frank Broeze (ed.), *Gateways of Asia* (London: Kegan Paul International, 1997), 109–26. Weihai: T.G. Otte, *The China Question: Great Power Rivalry and British Isolation, 1894–1905* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 128–31. Nanning: Robert Bickers, 'Good Work for China in Every Possible Direction: The Foreign Inspectorate of the Chinese Maritime Customs, 1854–1950', in Bryna Goodman and David S.G. Goodman (eds.), *Twentieth-Century Colonialism and China: Localities, the Everyday, and the World* (London: Routledge, 2012), 25–36.

literature relating to colonialism. Nevertheless, I turn now to scholarship on imperialism and informal empire to assess its impact on the arguments upon which this dissertation is founded.

Imperialism and informal empire

Britain's penetration of China was facilitated by superior technology; Europeans equated this to 'civilisation', thereby underlying a mentality of general superiority.⁵⁸ Headrick argued that it was not just the possession of technology that enabled Western imperial expansion, but the ability to adapt it readily to alien environments.⁵⁹ However, my studies show a corollary not revealed by a Eurocentric approach, and therefore overlooked by Headrick: the 'aliens' themselves were skilled in adapting foreign achievements for their own benefit, as in Wenzhou and Jiangmen.

Eurocentrism also features in the degree to which people outside government circles in London took notice of their empire, a question that is debated among historians. MacKenzie and Cannadine argued that the Victorian empire was a thread running through the lives of every Briton, at home and abroad. Conversely, Darwin and Porter argued that only the upper and middle classes identified with the process of empire-building.⁶⁰ I suggest that the existence of minor and distant imperial experiments would have been unknown at the metropole beyond the administrators immediately responsible for them. Cases such as Wenzhou and Jiangmen would go largely unnoticed, either through distraction by the bigger picture (Mackenzie and Cannadine), or lack of interest (Darwin and Porter).

However, the foreign presence in China was largely of a quasi-imperial nature; the treaty ports did not form part of formal empire. In 1953, Gallagher and Robinson introduced the

⁵⁸ Michael Adas, *Machines as the Measure of Men: Science, Technology, and Ideologies of Western Dominance* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), 198; and Cain and Hopkins, 'Gentlemanly Capitalism', 522.

⁵⁹ Daniel R. Headrick, *Power over Peoples: Technology, Environments, and Western Imperialism, 1400 to the Present* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010).

⁶⁰ John M. MacKenzie, *Propaganda and Empire: The Manipulation of British Public Opinion, 1880-1960* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, [1984] 2003); David Cannadine, *Ornamentalism: How the British saw their Empire* (London: Allen Lane, 2001); Darwin, *Unfinished Empire*, 292; Bernard Porter, *The Absent-Minded Imperialists: What the British Really Thought about their Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

concept of Britain having 'informal dependencies'.⁶¹ Since then, the definition of 'informal empire' has been contested among historians. Darwin argued that it is a term 'whose utility has made it indispensable', whereas Stoler dismissed it as an 'unhelpful euphemism'.⁶² An overly-scientific attempt was made by Osterhammel; he defined ten basic features of informal empire, then admitted his definition was 'fairly restrictive'.⁶³ Meanings attributed to the term include 'dominion', 'paramountcy', and 'sphere of influence'; also 'free-trade imperialism', a concept dismissed by Dean as an oxymoron.⁶⁴ Dean argued that subordination is a necessary component of informal empire and that, given China's non-acceptance of this aspect in its relationship with Britain, China was not part of Britain's informal empire. He contrasted China with Argentina where, according to Porter, 'both sides accepted the rules'.⁶⁵

Potter analysed in detail Gallagher and Robinson's contribution to the distinction between formal and informal empire. However, Potter's definition of the latter is somewhat harsh when applied to China: 'notionally independent territories [that are] so thoroughly dominated in economic terms that they enjoy little real sovereignty'.⁶⁶ As I noted above, China's economy was not dominated by foreign powers. Furthermore, the Chinese government retained sovereignty over substantially all of its territory. Darwin comes closest to a definition that coalesces with my own observations: 'a commercial-diplomatic regime fashioned to the circumstances of a particular region'.⁶⁷ It is the manner in which that regime was fashioned in China that is important to my study. Despite scholars' debates about the characteristics of informal empire, I suggest that Britain's larger Chinese treaty ports displayed a number of imperial features: demarcated spaces for business and residence; political coercion; the occasional presence of British troops and warships; and legal protection in the form of extraterritoriality. I therefore argue that the larger treaty ports did form part of Britain's informal empire.

⁶¹ Gallagher and Robinson, 'Imperialism of Free Trade', 8.

⁶² Darwin, 'Imperialism and the Victorians', 617; A.L. Stoler, 'On Degrees of Imperial Sovereignty', *Public Culture*, Vol. 18, No. 1 (Winter 2006), 136.

⁶³ Osterhammel, 'Semi-Colonialism', 298.

⁶⁴ Britten Dean, 'British Informal Empire: The Case of China', *Journal of Commonwealth and Comparative Politics*, Vol. 14, No. 1 (Jan 1976), 64-5.

⁶⁵ Dean, 'British Informal Empire', 65; Porter, *The Lion's Share*, 17.

⁶⁶ Simon J. Potter, *British Imperial History* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 21-9 and 128.

⁶⁷ Darwin, 'Imperialism and the Victorians', 617.

Whether formal or informal, foreign imperial activity in China is revealed by scholarship as lacking a definable strategy. Potter argued that the empire as a whole developed ‘in fits and starts’, and Goodman and Goodman described twentieth-century colonialism in China as a ‘piecemeal agglomeration’ of ‘peripheral intrusions’.⁶⁸ This description applies well to Wenzhou and Jiangmen, and many other British treaty ports in China, warranting a review of literature covering Britain’s foreign policy.

British policy towards China

As stated above, Gallagher and Robinson argued that Britain’s imperial policy was to assume rule over its trading posts only when necessary to protect that trade.⁶⁹ Darwin questioned whether that approach was adopted by choice or through necessity.⁷⁰ Indeed, apart from the colony of Hong Kong and the leased territory of Weihai, only Shanghai and the handful of concessions in other ports provided any semblance of formal rule. The common denominator and principal thrust of Britain’s interest in China was trade, but there was a limit to the extent this could be used as a basis for even informal imperial expansion. Cain and Hopkins suggested this was due to a mixture of economic constraints and public policy choices.⁷¹ That they did not develop this theory at an individual port level leaves it open to analysis in the context of Wenzhou and Jiangmen. Regarding public policy and the sometimes-difficult relationship between British traders in China and the Foreign Office in London, Pelcovits observed that the merchants were more optimistic than their government about China’s trade potential.⁷² This was the case with Wenzhou and Jiangmen.

An understanding of Britain’s policy gives insights as to why some treaty ports were commercially unsuccessful: a weak commercial case, such as Weihai, could easily be overridden by political priorities.⁷³ Britain made use of the treaty-port system, into the

⁶⁸ Simon J. Potter, ‘Empire, Cultures and Identities in Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Britain’, *History Compass*, Vol. 5, No. 1 (2007), 55; Bryna Goodman and David S.G. Goodman, ‘Introduction: Colonialism and China’, in Goodman and Goodman (eds.), *Twentieth-Century Colonialism*, 1–2.

⁶⁹ Gallagher and Robinson, ‘Imperialism of Free Trade’, 13.

⁷⁰ Darwin, ‘Imperialism and the Victorians’, 614 and 617.

⁷¹ Cain and Hopkins, *British Imperialism*, 394.

⁷² Pelcovits, *Old China Hands*.

⁷³ Scholarship, spanning more than a century, in this regard includes: A.J. Sargent, *Anglo-Chinese Commerce and Diplomacy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, [1907] 2016); D.C.M. Platt, *Finance, Trade, and Politics in British Foreign Policy, 1815–1914* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968); L.K. Young, *British Policy in China*,

early 1900s, to pursue other aims and its focus on trade cannot be divorced from politics. Kent argued that many Britons in the mid-nineteenth century believed that since British interests in China were commercial, not territorial, they were compatible with those of the Qing government.⁷⁴ Bickers even suggested that the Chinese Maritime Customs service was an active agent in the treaty-port process, with Robert Hart, as Inspector-General, striving for China 'to become part of the world'.⁷⁵ Cassel observed that in 1860, and again in 1900, Britain and the other powers had the chance to topple China's government but refrained from doing so, preferring to maintain the treaty-port system and its trade.⁷⁶ Fieldhouse argued that this dual focus, and preventing rival powers from usurping its leading position, drove Britain's China policy during the years crucial to my study, especially in light of the anticipated collapse of the Chinese Empire.⁷⁷ As the leading foreign presence in China during those years, Britain was open to challenge from any of the other powers. Anglo-French rivalry is particularly relevant here. Literature covering Anglo-French relations, particularly observations by Otte, points out that they almost deteriorated into conflict in 1898 over competing imperial claims in Africa, the so-called 'Fashoda Incident'.⁷⁸

The foregoing review shows that the literature is rich in all areas related to my research. However, it also reveals a number of inadequacies. For example, when theories articulated for informal empire are applied to China they lose clarity; China also comprised zones of formal empire, often with very diffuse practical distinctions between the two. Furthermore, in the various arguments relating to the definition of informal

1895–1902 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970); Porter, *The Lion's Share*; E.W. Edwards, *British Diplomacy and Finance in China, 1895–1914* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987); and Otte, *The China Question*.

⁷⁴ Stacie Kent, 'Problems of Circulation in the Treaty Port System', in Bickers and Jackson (eds.), *Treaty Ports*, 78.

⁷⁵ Robert Bickers, *The Scramble for China: Foreign Devils in the Qing Empire, 1832–1914* (London: Allen Lane, 2011), 197–204.

⁷⁶ Pär Cassel, 'Extraterritoriality in China: What we know and what we don't know', in Bickers and Jackson (eds.), *Treaty Ports*, 24.

⁷⁷ Fieldhouse, *Economics and Empire*, 415.

⁷⁸ T.G. Otte, 'From "War-in-sight" to Nearly War: Anglo-French Relations in the Age of High Imperialism, 1875–1898', *Diplomacy and Statecraft*, Vol. 17 (2006), 693–714. Other sources I have consulted include: P.J.V. Rolo, *Entente Cordiale: The Origins and Negotiation of the Anglo-French Agreements of 8 April 1904* (London: Macmillan, 1969); P.M.H. Bell, *France and Britain 1900–1940: Entente and Estrangement* (London: Longman, 1996); Alan Sharp and Glyn Stone (eds.), *Anglo-French Relations in the Twentieth Century: Rivalry and Cooperation* (London: Routledge, 2000); Antoine Capet (ed.), *Britain, France and the Entente Cordiale Since 1904* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006); and Glyn Stone and T.G. Otte (eds.), *Anglo-French Relations since the Late Eighteenth Century* (London: Routledge, 2008).

empire, no scholar has separated the larger treaty ports from the smaller ones. I argue that the larger ports formed part of Britain's informal empire; my research demonstrates clearly that Wenzhou and Jiangmen did not. No economic constraints or public policy arguments explain the creation of these two; they, and many others, were simply unfortunate choices. In general, very few historians have addressed the smaller ports, but there are areas where examining unsuccessful ventures can change our understanding of treaty ports as a whole. Another inadequacy is the Eurocentric bias that can be seen in assertions that it was outsiders who initiated changes within the treaty ports, and that those changes had no effect beyond the ports' boundaries; there is insufficient recognition that treaty ports fostered Chinese business.

Most importantly, no historian has questioned why so many British treaty ports failed. This is what this dissertation aims to do. I now turn to outline how I will do this, and what the consequences are for our current understanding of the history of Chinese treaty ports.

Research objective

My objective is to provide a new understanding of why so many British treaty ports failed as centres of British commerce. I will do this by studying the performance of two examples, and developing four arguments: that the mercantile influence that drove British policy could be misplaced or over-ridden; that practical difficulties could thwart British merchants' efforts; that treaty-port status facilitated Chinese business; and that treaty ports were not homogeneous.

Mercantile influence could be misplaced or over-ridden

Official British policy was influenced heavily by mercantile interests, even though their expectations could be unrealistic; in China, British merchants imagined a market of hundreds of millions of customers. This market was a myth. In 1852, a lengthy report by William Mitchell, Assistant Magistrate in Hong Kong and former Xiamen (Amoy) consul, on Britain's commercial potential in China was radical in its pessimism. Among Mitchell's forthright comments was that British merchants 'seem to have all gone mad' regarding the size of the China market, and that they had 'failed and failed conspicuously' in getting their goods to that market, a clear criticism of merchants' misplaced optimism. The report

was shelved by its sponsor, Hong Kong Governor Samuel Bonham.⁷⁹ When it came to light in 1858, Karl Marx criticised in the press the ‘high-flown anticipations’ that had driven Britain’s efforts.⁸⁰ Even in 1858, Mitchell’s report should have acted as a warning to the British government regarding British commercial prospects in China. Considering the lacklustre performance of many treaty ports, and merchants’ continuing anticipation of a vast Chinese market, surprisingly few scholars have referred to this report.⁸¹

More widely acknowledged is that China was but a small market for Britain.⁸² Reflecting that British interest in China was always secondary to India, Cain and Hopkins suggested that British policy lacked a strategic aspect as ‘China was not on the route to anywhere of importance’.⁸³ My study addresses the apparent inconsistency between this and the continued opening of more treaty ports. Even if not on the route to anywhere important, itself a questionable view, China was a theatre of intense inter-power rivalry. Preoccupation with being outdistanced by rivals led to rationality being overlooked. I demonstrate that Jiangmen’s opening in 1904 was largely a result of Anglo-French competition, a factor that has been given little attention elsewhere.

Practical difficulties could negate commercial advantages

An early inhibitor of foreign efforts to develop Wenzhou was a sudden change in the *lijin* system. This local transit duty has been studied widely, although not at an individual port level.⁸⁴ As Chapter One argues, other factors contributed to Wenzhou’s lack of success but *lijin* was one that was very damaging, and worthy of detailed analysis.

Jiangmen provides an example of the effect the foreign customs regulations had on efforts to capitalise on treaty-port advantages and privileges. At a macro level these regulations too have been studied and analysed by scholars; but, again, insufficient attention has been

⁷⁹ W.H. Mitchell’s report to Bonham, 15 March 1852, included in Commissioner Lord Elgin to Foreign Secretary Lord Clarendon, 31 March 1858 (TNA, FO 17/287).

⁸⁰ *New-York Daily Tribune*, 3 December 1859, 8. Marx quoted at length from Mitchell’s report.

⁸¹ Notable exceptions are: Pelcovits, *Old China Hands*, 15–7; Wong, *Deadly Dreams*, 451; and David Steeds and Ian Nish, *China, Japan and 19th Century Britain* (Dublin: Irish University Press, 1977), 59–61.

⁸² Bickers, ‘Good Work for China’, 36; Cain and Hopkins, *British Imperialism*, 394; and Darwin, *Empire Project*, 122.

⁸³ Cain and Hopkins, *British Imperialism*, 406.

⁸⁴ See Pelcovits, *Old China Hands*, 105; and He Wenkai, *Paths toward the Modern Fiscal State: England, Japan and China* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013), 155–75.

paid to their effect at a port level.⁸⁵ My study of Jiangmen indicates that regardless of the seeming rationality of the regulations themselves, they were counter-productive as they only served to frustrate business activity.

Treaty ports stimulated indigenous business

Treaty ports acted as bridgeheads for foreign merchants seeking to market their goods.⁸⁶ However, Wenzhou, Jiangmen and many others also served Chinese merchants by introducing foreign methods to indigenous networks. Since the Macartney Embassy of 1792–4, Qing officials had been concerned that foreign incursions would divert Chinese subjects' loyalty.⁸⁷ Their fears were vindicated when enterprising Chinese merchants used the treaty-port system increasingly to their own advantage. Thus, the foreign presence in China was generally a collaborative enterprise, even if, as Bickers argued, the collaborators were unequal partners.⁸⁸ Research by Hao developed aspects of this relationship, in particular the role of the comprador and the emergence of Chinese entrepreneurs, capable of adapting foreign methods.⁸⁹ My study demonstrates that in Wenzhou and Jiangmen there was virtually no foreign presence, hence no opportunity to 'fill a vacuum'.⁹⁰ Instead, Chinese merchants were able to combine the benefits of treaty-port status with existing, efficient distribution systems.

That status usually attracted foreign technology; technological superiority was one of the drivers of Western incursions into China, initially shipping and telegraphy, with foreign merchants often acting as managing agents. In the smaller ports, the agencies were handled by Chinese. The advent of steam transportation between treaty ports enabled Chinese merchants in time to dominate the distribution of key commodities, on a lower

⁸⁵ See, for example, Hans van de Ven, *Breaking with the Past: The Maritime Customs Service and the Global Origins of Modernity in China* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014).

⁸⁶ Darwin, 'Imperialism and the Victorians', 629.

⁸⁷ Robert Bickers and Christian Henriot, 'Introduction', in Robert Bickers and Christian Henriot (eds.), *New Frontiers: Imperialism's New Communities in East Asia, 1842–1953* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), 4.

⁸⁸ Robert Bickers, *Out of China: How the Chinese Ended the Era of Western Domination* (London: Allen Lane, 2017), xxxvii.

⁸⁹ Hao Yen-ping, *The Comprador, and The Commercial Revolution in Nineteenth-Century China: The Rise of Sino-Western Mercantile Capitalism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 107.

⁹⁰ The concept of foreigners filling a vacuum in the absence of indigenous abilities and infrastructure was introduced by Rhoads Murphey in *The Treaty Ports and China's Modernization: What Went Wrong?* (Ann Arbor: Michigan University Press, 1970), 15.

cost base than that of the foreigners.⁹¹ The steam network was an intrinsic part of the treaty-port system. Between 1870 and 1900 new treaty ports were often chosen not for their trade potential, but for the role they could play in extending the shipping network; fourteen coastal and riverine ports were opened in this period, including Wenzhou. That foreign-sponsored treaty ports became successful as centres of Chinese business suggests that it was not just the outsiders, as argued by Murphey, who had agency in their development, giving nuance to the idea of a port's 'success' or 'failure'.

Treaty ports were not homogeneous

References to 'the treaty ports' as a convenient short-hand implying homogeneity appear in leading works on the subject, when perhaps what is meant is 'the treaty-port system'.⁹² So and Myers recognised there was 'often a great disparity between ... the various treaty ports', but their book then focused on the larger ports.⁹³ Some treaty ports were extremely large centres of both foreign and Chinese business. The dominance of the larger ports can be seen by looking again at the value of treaty-port trade in 1904, when Jiangmen achieved that status, and 1914. The largest 10% of the ports contributed approximately 50% of the total value of trade in both years, while the smallest 10% accounted for around 0.2%.⁹⁴ Within the lists for the two years (37 ports in 1904, and 47 in 1914) Shanghai dominates, accounting for over 25% of treaty-port trade in both years, whereas Wenzhou and Jiangmen combined, as stated above, represent less than 1%.⁹⁵ That these small places appeared alongside the larger ones in published lists of China's open ports encourages assumptions of homogeneity.⁹⁶

There were indeed a number of similarities between the ports; Bickers and Jackson painted an informative picture of the establishment and development of an archetypal, yet fictional, port, suggesting the process was to an extent formulaic.⁹⁷ The basis of my

⁹¹ Reinhardt, 'Treaty Ports as Shipping Infrastructure', in Bickers and Jackson (eds.), *Treaty Ports*, 105.

⁹² For example: 'The treaty ports grew very rapidly ...' (Murphey, *The Outsiders*, 104). Murphey also stated categorically: 'With the single and very late exception of Tsingtao, all of the Chinese treaty ports arose beside the walls of pre-existing major Chinese trade centers' (*Outsiders*, 134). These statements might well apply to the larger ports, but not to the host of smaller ones.

⁹³ So, 'Modern China', 4.

⁹⁴ Data taken from *Customs Decennial 1902-11*, 328-30, and *Customs Decennial 1912-21*, 424-6.

⁹⁵ Ports included in these reports include some open cities (not strictly treaty ports) and customs stations and exclude treaty ports on the Sino-Russian border.

⁹⁶ For example, *The China Year Book 1913* (London: George Routledge & Sons, 1913), 103.

⁹⁷ Bickers and Jackson, 'Introduction', 1-10.

study is not to refute this, but to demonstrate that there were also significant dissimilarities, not only in size but also in function. The assertions by Darwin, Cain and Hopkins, and Porter, referred to above, that colonial port cities were agents of commercial expansion and imperial control does not hold true for the majority of China's treaty ports.

Methodology

To demonstrate this, I will proceed as follows. For each of the two ports that I focus on, I will examine why it was selected as a treaty port, why it was supposed it would succeed, and why it failed. First, I need to outline why I chose Wenzhou and Jiangmen as case-studies.

Wenzhou is a prime example of absence of forethought on the part of British decision-makers, despite having had ample time. In 1854, Wenzhou was being targeted by the British government as a potential treaty port.⁹⁸ Fifteen years later, the opening of the port was again promoted actively by British Minister in Beijing Rutherford Alcock.⁹⁹ Hence, by the time it was eventually opened, in 1877, it had been on Britain's agenda for 23 years. Yet its performance as a treaty port was dismal. My research shows that optimism regarding Wenzhou's trade prospects, on the part of an overly-confident and poorly-advised British government, was unfounded. Its brief interlude as a treaty port has left virtually no trace. Yet it became the site of successful Chinese business activity, enabled by its treaty-port status.

I chose Jiangmen as an example of commercial considerations being overridden by geostrategic priorities. Similar to Wenzhou, Jiangmen illustrates a degree of unfounded optimism regarding its selection as a treaty port. However, whatever commercial arguments there may have been were given less priority than fears regarding French ambitions in south-west China. Nearby Sanshui had been a treaty port since 1897, but had underperformed every expectation. Yet the official rationale was that Jiangmen

⁹⁸ Clarendon to Superintendent of British Trade in China John Bowring, 13 February 1854 (TNA, FO 17/210, 63).

⁹⁹ 28 October 1869, Alcock to Clarendon, in *China No. 1 (1870): Despatch from Sir Rutherford Alcock respecting a Supplementary Convention to the Treaty of Tien-tsin signed by him on October 23, 1869*, 3.

would succeed where Sanshui had failed. I demonstrate this hope not only to be groundless, but also to have been cast aside following a change in the British government's strategic priorities. That Jiangmen was the last of 26 treaty ports opened by Britain in China proper also allows us to judge whether that long experience was used to best effect.¹⁰⁰

The following chapters reveal that each port followed a different trajectory, not least in terms of the British presence. Treaty-port status was not dependent on the presence of a foreign consulate, but remained until formally revoked by another treaty or by unilateral action by the Chinese state.¹⁰¹ Despite its singular lack of success as a centre of British trade, a British consul was stationed at Wenzhou for 25 years, from 1877 to 1902, latterly in a purpose-built consulate. Conversely, the consulate at Jiangmen lasted barely a year, from 1904 to 1905. The closure of both establishments reflected not only the lack of British business at the respective ports, but also a retrenchment of Britain's consular presence generally in China during the early twentieth century.¹⁰²

Fortunately, British consuls were required to submit annual reports to London; these have formed vital primary sources in my research, as have contemporary newspapers and Customs reports. I have also examined official government papers which, although published at the time, may not have been available to the writers of the primary sources. In order to assess any inconsistency between actual official policy and published reports, I have studied formerly confidential British consular correspondence and cabinet papers; these contain many candid comments and observations that put the more visible commercial activities into a different light. Letters in the archives of Jardine, Matheson & Co. have given a valuable insight to their Wenzhou operation.

These materials have provided me with a rich pool of information, enabling me to ask questions about the intentions and perceptions of the actors concerned, and their reactions and frustrations when their plans were not fulfilled. Quantitative data from

¹⁰⁰ Two more treaty ports were opened in Tibet later in 1904.

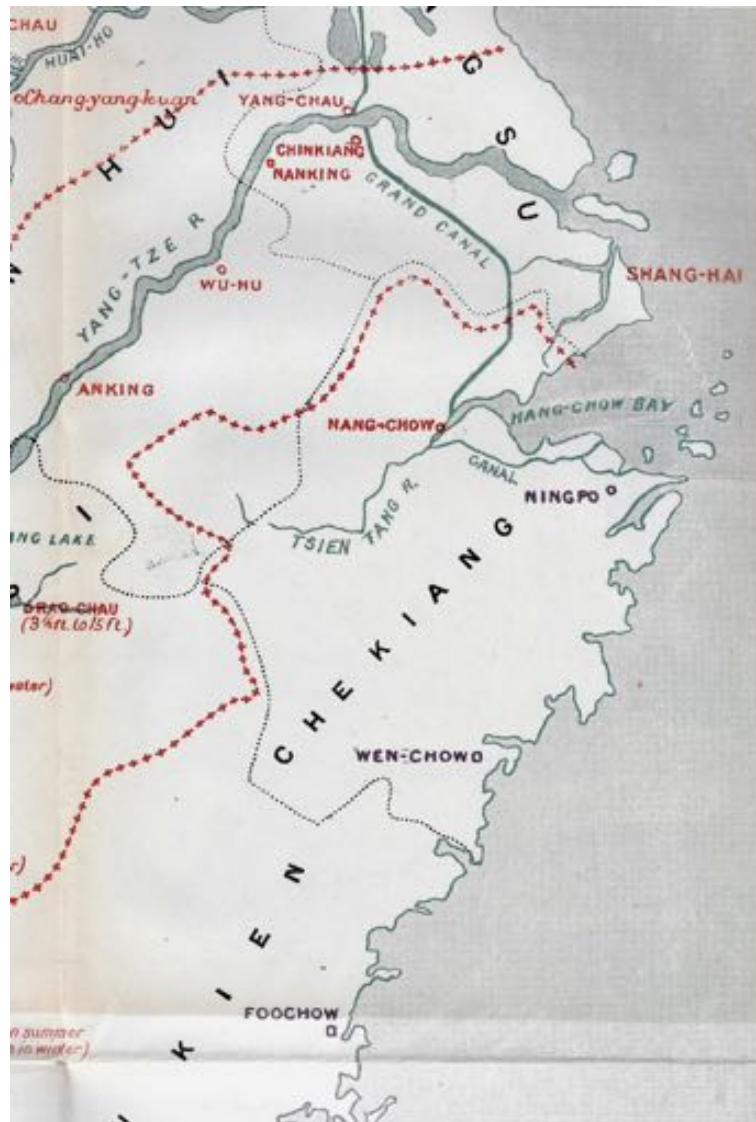
¹⁰¹ In 1868, however, the Zongli Yamen, China's *de facto* Foreign Ministry, indicated to Alcock that the presence of a consulate at a treaty port was a *sine qua non* (7 December 1868, Alcock to Foreign Secretary Lord Stanley [*China No. 5 (1871): Correspondence respecting the Revision of the Treaty of Tientsin*], 255).

¹⁰² P.D. Coates lists 46 British consulates in China at various times in *The China Consuls: British Consular Officers, 1843–1943* (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1988), 489–90.

Customs and other sources have helped me to interpret what was recorded in their letters and reports. Unfortunately, I was only able to use the records of one side of the relationship: the British merchants, officials, and commentators. Thus, I have had to reconstruct as much as I can the views, intentions, hopes and reactions of the Chinese parties involved. Access to Chinese sources would have given additional authority to my work, but my study is one of the British experience, albeit in a Chinese environment.

Chapter One is devoted to Wenzhou, the study of which develops all four arguments detailed above: its selection was based on misplaced mercantile influence; local taxation inhibited British merchants' efforts; certain of its privileges were appropriated by indigenous interests; and it demonstrates treaty ports were not homogeneous. Chapter Two shows that these four apply also to Jiangmen, although in this case commercial arguments were over-ridden by geostrategic considerations. In both chapters I examine what determined the selection of the two places and by whom they were selected. I also identify the criteria by which their performance was measured once they were opened. As I explain further in the Conclusion, I believe these two ports can be taken as representative of all smaller ports where the hopes expressed at the time of their opening were unrealised.

Chapter One: Wenzhou



Map showing Wenzhou (Wen-chow) in Zhejiang (Chekiang) province, mid-way between Fuzhou (Foochow) to the south and Ningbo (Ningpo) to the north. Further north are Hangzhou (Hang-chow) and Shanghai. (Source: Beresford, *The Break-up of China*)

Introduction

A smart, three-storey brick structure stands today next to a small ferry pier on an island in the middle of the Ou River in the city of Wenzhou, on China's east coast. A sign identifies the building as the 'Jiangxin Island International Mansion. Since 1894'. It was indeed built in 1894, but it is not obvious that its function then was a British consulate. Described by an early visitor as 'tall', 'prosaic', and 'remarkable for the East', this was, to my knowledge,

the only three-storey consular building erected by the British in China.¹ However, this should not imply that Wenzhou was a place of importance for British interests. On the contrary, as a treaty port Wenzhou consistently failed to live up to expectations. Having pressed for its opening for many years, British merchants took no serious steps to establish a presence there. Wenzhou's foreign commerce was even inferior to that of nearby Ningbo (Ningpo), itself eclipsed owing to its proximity to Shanghai. In this respect, Wenzhou found itself in the shadow of a shadow.

Wenzhou came to British attention, as a potential addition to Britain's global network of port cities, in the mid-nineteenth century. It was flourishing. Founded in the fourth century, by the thirteenth Wenzhou was the site of one of China's seven Superintendencies of Merchant Shipping.² During the Ming dynasty the city was the main trading centre of Zhejiang province. Its fertile plain and surrounding hills enabled Wenzhou to export to other parts of China oranges, bamboo, timber and, particularly, tea. Some of China's best tea came from near Wenzhou, the only port permitted to export it.³ But in 1861, Taiping rebels overran much of Wenzhou's hinterland and threatened the port. To prevent the valuable commodity falling into rebel hands, Wenzhou's tea exports were diverted north to Ningbo and Shanghai, where the British presence ensured a degree of security, and south to Fuzhou (Foochow), which remained outside rebel control. Buildings, temples and ceremonial archways testified to its former wealth, but Wenzhou, like many cities affected by the Taiping rebellion, never recovered its prosperity or status.

Wenzhou became a treaty port in 1876 and was formally opened on 1 April 1877. By that time, treaty ports had evolved to become nodes in a coastal and riverine shipping network, and here was one being opened at the behest of Britain, the leading foreign power in China. Its success should have been assured. Yet, despite British interest having been expressed repeatedly over the previous 23 years, as a site of foreign commerce Wenzhou never developed. Rankings of the volume of trade of China's treaty ports

¹ Millicent Mary McClatchie, *In Varying Scenes and Climes*, unpublished journal, 1895-9 (Hong Kong Public Records Office, Record Number HKMS 127), 88.

² These were government agencies that kept a register of foreign vessels and captains, inspected their cargoes, and collected import and export duties (John King Fairbank, *Trade and Diplomacy on the China Coast: The Opening of the Treaty Ports, 1842-1854* [Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1953], 46).

³ *Hong Kong Daily Press*, 17 March 1876, 2.

include Wenzhou near the bottom.⁴ Neither of the two popular early-twentieth-century guides to China mentioned Wenzhou.⁵ Apart from my own survey of China's former treaty ports, recent literature on treaty-port history contains little about the commercial aspects of any of the minor treaty ports. Rare exceptions include: Stevens' account of Zhenjiang (Chinkiang); my own study of Qiongzhou (Kiungchow); and Villalta Puig's brief description of the climate and health issues that faced Wenzhou, Jiujiang (Kiukiang) and Wuhu. Shantou (Swatow) only featured as background to personal reminiscences. Yichang (Ichang) received tangential mention in the context of early steam navigation of the Yangzi, while Beihai (Pakhoi) has received no literary attention, scholarly or otherwise.⁶ All of these smaller ports, falling outside any perceivable British strategy regarding China, are exemplars of Goodman and Goodman's concept of 'piecemeal agglomeration' of 'peripheral intrusions'.⁷

Wenzhou does feature in consular and missionary accounts of China. Despite its disappointing commercial performance, a British consulate was retained there from 1877 to 1907.⁸ The consuls' main occupation at Wenzhou was handling matters relating to occasional riots and anti-foreign demonstrations; there being few other foreigners to antagonise, these were usually against missionaries, active in Wenzhou since 1867.⁹ William Soothill, a member of the United Methodist Church Mission, worked there from 1882 to 1911 and published an account of his experiences.¹⁰ The most serious riot, in

⁴ For example: *Reports on Trade at the Treaty Ports for the Year 1879* ranks Wenzhou as 17th of the 19 ports listed (Shanghai: Inspector General of Customs, 1880, 5); in the *Report for the Year 1903 on the Foreign Trade of China*, Wenzhou is 28th out of 32 (London: His Majesty's Stationery Office, 1904, 60).

⁵ Arnold Wright (ed.), *Twentieth-Century Impressions of Hong Kong, Shanghai and Other Treaty Ports of China* (London: Lloyd's Greater Britain Publishing Co, 1908); Carl Crow, *The Travelers' Handbook for China (Including Hongkong)* (Shanghai: Carl Crow, 1921).

⁶ Nield, *China's Foreign Places*. Zhenjiang: Keith Stevens, 'The Yangzi Port of Zhenjiang down the Centuries', *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society, Hong Kong Branch*, Vol. 42 (2003), 255–321. Qiongzhou: Robert Nield, 'China's Southernmost Treaty Port', *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society, Hong Kong Branch*, Vol. 52 (2012), 63–76. Wenzhou, Jiujiang, Wuhu: Stephanie Villalta Puig, 'Treaty Ports and the Medical Geography of China: Imperial Maritime Customs Service Approaches to China and Disease', in Brunero and Villalta Puig (eds.), *Life in Treaty Port China*, 116–24. Shantou: Paul King, *In the Chinese Customs Service: A Personal Record of Forty-Four Years* (London: Heath Cranton, [1924] 1930), 21–43. Yichang: Archibald John Little, *Through the Yang-tse Gorges or Trade and Travel in Western China* (London: Sampson Low, Marston, Searle & Rivington 1888).

⁷ Goodman and Goodman, 'Introduction', 1–2. See also Introduction, page 16.

⁸ Lo Hui-min and Helen Bryant, *British Diplomatic and Consular Establishments in China: 1793-1949 – II: Consular Establishments 1843-1949* (Taipei: SMC Publishing Inc, 1988), 538.

⁹ Milton T. Stauffer (ed.), *The Christian Occupation of China*, (Shanghai: China Continuation Committee, 1922), lxxx.

¹⁰ William E. Soothill, *A Mission in China* (Edinburgh: Oliphant, Anderson & Ferrier, 1907; London: Forgotten Books, 2018).

October 1884, destroyed all foreign property in the city except the British consulate, safe on its island.¹¹

Wenzhou served none of the purposes outlined in the Introduction for colonial port cities. What, therefore, can be gained by studying a small, insignificant place that was already in decline when it became a treaty port? That British investment in such a venture failed to produce the desired results challenges Gallagher and Robinson's thesis of 'trade with informal control if possible; trade with rule when necessary'.¹² In China, British interests were faced repeatedly with being able to neither control informally nor rule formally in order to achieve their trading ambitions, resulting often with the frustration of those ambitions. Studying the failure of Wenzhou supports the arguments detailed in the Introduction, providing an understanding that may be applied more broadly in two principal respects. First, we gain an insight into how the selection of a treaty port could be made by decision-makers possessed of poor knowledge of China and its commercial networks; this reveals aspects of the application of British ambitions to practical realities that would not be seen by examining only larger, successful ports. Second, Wenzhou shows how those networks functioned in a treaty-port environment, and how their reaction to the foreign intrusion amounted to an appropriation of treaty-port privileges. In developing these arguments, this chapter is divided into two main sections.

The first shows that, despite the long period of its consideration, little effective research was conducted on Wenzhou's prospects. I chart the creation of British expectations regarding Wenzhou over a generation prior to 1876. Robert Hart, Inspector-General of the Chinese Maritime Customs, was enthusiastic that this port, and many others, should be opened to foreign trade; Hart believed 'the more points of contact along the coast the better', a principle supported by some within the British Legation in Beijing.¹³ Much reference was made, prior to its opening, to Wenzhou's former commercial importance

¹¹ Wenzhou Consul Edward Parker to Sir Harry Parkes, British Minister, Beijing, 6 October 1884 (TNA, FO 17/961).

¹² Gallagher and Robinson, 'Imperialism of Free Trade', 13. See also Introduction, page 6.

¹³ Hart to Alcock, 3 July 1868 [Ian Nish [ed.] *British Documents on Foreign Affairs: Reports and Papers from the Foreign Office Confidential Print. Part I, Series E, Asia, 1860–1914, Volume 20: China's Rehabilitation and Treaty Revision, 1866–1869* [Frederick: University Publications of America, 1989–95], 277). Foreign Office files contain an undated and unattributed memorandum from 1884 stating that Wenzhou had achieved its purpose of being a point of contact 'by means of which foreign imports can be placed directly in the hands of Chinese consumers' (TNA, FO 228/782, 44).

but, as I demonstrate, the prospect of that status not being regained was overlooked. Moreover, I reveal a number of contradictions within official British correspondence regarding the claimed attraction of Wenzhou. Despite these, there is no evidence of a reassessment of the port's potential by any of its promoters, be they British merchants in Hong Kong or Shanghai, British officials in London or Beijing, or Hart and the Chinese Customs. This section therefore addresses the first of the arguments set out in the Introduction: although British policy was influenced heavily by mercantile interests, that influence was sometimes misplaced.

The second section analyses how Wenzhou fared as a treaty port, and the disappointment that arose, almost as soon as it was opened, as none of the British expectations was fulfilled. This presents us with a paradox. Whereas a reassessment of Wenzhou's potential for foreign trade before it was opened could have led to its not becoming a treaty port, no amount of subsequent reappraisal could have resulted in its closure; this could only be brought about by a new treaty, or unilateral action by the Chinese state. In the absence of any foreign trading presence, therefore, whatever treaty-port privileges flowed to Wenzhou were open to appropriation by local interests; this is the third of the arguments this dissertation develops. In this sense, Wenzhou became an example of a treaty port working not necessarily against foreign interests but not exactly for them. I therefore explore the factors contributing to that result: the port's economic activity at the time it opened; British attempts to establish a presence; reactions by Chinese merchants in neighbouring cities; and the growth of Chinese shipping operations.

The key to understanding why no British merchants came to the port is the lack of adequate research beforehand, during the many years in which interest was being expressed and expectations created. Therefore, I start by examining how those expectations evolved.

British interest in Wenzhou: expectations

In this section I plot the development of British expectations during the 23 years prior to Wenzhou's opening, and the illegal trade that was done there by foreign merchants

during that period. I also detail numerous negative developments that should have served to check those expectations.

By the time Wenzhou became a treaty port, it had already lost its tea-exporting business to Ningbo and Fuzhou, treaty ports since 1842. Neither was successful in its early years. In 1851 Samuel Bonham, Superintendent of British Trade in China, made a formal application to the Chinese government to exchange them for Hangzhou (Hangchow), Suzhou (Soochow) and Zhenjiang; the request was refused.¹⁴ Fuzhou's prospects soon improved owing, ironically, to the Taiping rebels. Tea from Fuzhou's hinterland had traditionally been transported overland to either Wenzhou, Shanghai or Guangzhou. The disruption to these routes caused by rebel activity prompted American firm Russell & Co., in 1855, to purchase tea at source and export it direct from Fuzhou. The business grew and exports soared.¹⁵

Wenzhou first came to official British attention during the negotiations for revising the 1842 Nanjing Treaty.¹⁶ In February 1854, Foreign Secretary Lord Clarendon instructed his chief representative in China to seek the opening of 'the large and populous cities' on the Zhejiang coast, meaning Hangzhou, already refused, and Wenzhou.¹⁷ Negotiations soon foundered, and were then overshadowed by the outbreak of the Second Opium War. Besides, by that time Fuzhou had usurped Wenzhou's role as a tea-port, although there were other exports that attracted foreign ships. In 1859, seventeen foreign vessels were at Maozhuling, Wenzhou's lower anchorage, illegally carrying salt to other Chinese ports.¹⁸

¹⁴ Fairbank, *Trade and Diplomacy*, 379.

¹⁵ Sabrina Fairchild, 'Fuzhou and Global Empires: Understanding the Treaty Ports of Modern China, 1850–1937' (unpublished PhD thesis, University of Bristol, December 2015), 86–138.

¹⁶ Although the 1842 Nanjing Treaty did not provide for scheduled revision, the American 1844 Wangxia Treaty allowed for revision after twelve years. By application of the most-favoured-nation principle, Britain was able to negotiate revisions to its treaty in 1854.

¹⁷ Clarendon to Bowring, 13 February 1854 (TNA, FO 17/210, 63). Clarendon did not specify the cities, but Hosea Ballou Morse has argued that they must have been Hangzhou and Wenzhou (*The International Relations of the Chinese Empire* [Shanghai: Kelly & Walsh, 1910], I 414).

¹⁸ *Customs Decennial 1882–91*, 387, recorded the vessels' presence; Britten Dean identified that they were carrying salt (*China and Great Britain: The Diplomacy of Commercial Relations 1860–1864* [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1974], 86).

The vessels in question were engaged in what was known as the coasting trade: carrying goods, usually Chinese-owned, along China's coast.¹⁹ Chinese merchants saw advantages in foreign ships: they were faster, hence less vulnerable to piracy and weather, and their cargoes could be insured. Moreover, foreign-flagged vessels enjoyed extraterritorial privileges. Foreign owners were ready to meet the demand. However, foreign ships were only permitted to ply between treaty ports, hence the illegality referred to above. In mid-1863, four foreign captains and their vessels, each chartered by Chinese, were seized at Maozhuling by Fuzhou Customs staff for trading at an unopened port.²⁰ In a letter to Shanghai Consul Walter Medhurst, the influential Shanghai General Chamber of Commerce deplored the taking away of business from foreign shipowners, something they wanted reversed. Being a British-dominated body, representing all foreign traders in Shanghai, the Chamber naturally failed to attach any significance to the other side of the activity: the assumption, or resumption, of that business by Chinese merchants, a process not capable of reversal. This loss of British business in the vicinity of Wenzhou was an opportunity to reassess the port's prospects, yet the Chamber was confident a trade in foreign goods 'would doubtless spring up' there if it were opened to foreign vessels.²¹

The Shanghai Chamber's comments formed part of the voluminous response to an exercise commenced in 1867 by Sir Rutherford Alcock, British Minister, Beijing, soliciting input for scheduled revisions to the 1858 Tianjin Treaty. Most responses demonstrated it was not the treaty that caused concern, but its application.²² Accordingly, they dealt principally with matters relating to import and export duty. Nevertheless, a number of respondents proposed that Wenzhou be opened. For example, British merchants at Xiamen reported the former considerable trade with Wenzhou would revive 'and vastly increase' should the port be opened. The Shanghai Chamber added that there was 'no question' Wenzhou should be first on any list of new treaty ports, considering its

¹⁹ Stanley F. Wright, *China's Struggle for Tariff Autonomy: 1843-1938* (Shanghai: Kelly & Walsh, 1938), 185-98; Fairbank, *Trade and Diplomacy*, 313-4; Hao, *Commercial Revolution*, 259-67.

²⁰ W.A. Pickering, *Pioneering in Formosa: Recollections of Adventures among Mandarins, Wreckers & Head-Hunting Savages* (London: Hurst and Blackett, 1898), 11.

²¹ Shanghai General Chamber of Commerce to Shanghai Consul Walter Medhurst, 1 February 1869 (*China No. 5 [1871]*, 287-90).

²² Alexander Michie, *The Englishman in China during the Victorian Era* (Edinburgh: William Blackwood & Sons, 1900), II 210-22.

proximity to the tea-growing regions.²³ The resulting treaty, signed by Alcock and ratified by the Chinese government in 1869, named Wenzhou as a treaty port.²⁴ In his memorandum submitting the treaty to London for ratification, Alcock noted ‘an entire concurrence of opinion’ regarding the commercial value of Wenzhou. He included as footnotes comments given, at Alcock’s request, by Hart, who described Wenzhou as ‘the port of a comparatively populous and wealthy country [that would] take many foreign commodities’.²⁵ However, a deputation of more than thirty London-based China traders, unhappy with many of the treaty’s provisions, in particular the implication that Britain and China recognised each other on the basis of equality, persuaded Clarendon not to support it.²⁶ Consequently, Alcock’s treaty was not ratified, and Wenzhou remained closed.

Had Wenzhou been opened in 1869, it is doubtful that the tea-exporting business would have returned there. Ningbo did not have much to surrender, operating as a proxy for Shanghai, by then the dominant foreign trading city in China. Fuzhou, conversely, was booming; the 21 foreign firms established there by 1867, almost all trading in tea, would be unlikely to disrupt their businesses by removing to another port.²⁷ Was there, therefore, another motivation for opening Wenzhou? I suggested in the Introduction that Britain did not always have trade as the rationale for opening treaty ports in China, and earlier in this chapter that Wenzhou is an example of a treaty port that fell outside any perceivable British strategy regarding China. Was Wenzhou’s selection, therefore, part of some wider British purpose?

An examination of the Alcock correspondence reveals a relevant recurring theme. Pirates were menacing coastal shipping, damaging China’s economy. In a note to the Zongli Yamen, China’s *de facto* foreign ministry, Alcock stated that the opening of new ports ‘would seem to be more in the interest of the Chinese revenue than of the foreign

²³ British Merchants at Amoy to Consul William Pedder, 8 February 1869 (*China No. 5 [1871]*, 300); Shanghai General Chamber of Commerce to Medhurst, 1 February 1869 (*China No. 12 [1869]: Correspondence with the Chamber of Commerce at Shanghai respecting the Revision of the Treaty of Tientsin*, 1).

²⁴ 1869 Alcock Treaty, Art. VI.

²⁵ *China No. 1 (1870)*, 3 and 7.

²⁶ *The Times*, 1 March 1870, 9; Bickers, *Scramble for China*, 251.

²⁷ *Reports on Trade at the Treaty Ports in China for the Year 1867* (Shanghai: Inspector General of Customs, 1868), 62.

merchant'.²⁸ He explained that the opening of Wenzhou would serve not only the extension of trade, but would also 'tend materially to the suppression of piracy'.²⁹ Alcock's abortive treaty, in addition to taking the bold step of treating the Chinese and British states as equals, was the first to have been drafted as a result of patient negotiation and analysis, rather than *force majeure*. Nevertheless, it seems unlikely that he would have proposed the opening of a port simply to serve Chinese concerns. Moreover, as no interest was shown in Wenzhou by Britain's imperial rivals, the opening of the port cannot be seen as contributing to any geostrategic or imperial purpose. We are therefore left with the conclusion that Wenzhou was indeed seen as an attractive commercial proposition for British merchants, with tea its greatest potential business.

This conclusion is supported by contemporary commentary. London's *Globe* newspaper announced Wenzhou was 'likely to prove an important place of trade and, not impossibly, a formidable rival to Foochow'. The chairman of the Hong Kong Chamber of Commerce said that he would 'rejoice' to see Wenzhou opened.³⁰ Alcock himself wrote to Baron von Rehfues, his Prussian counterpart, that opening Wenzhou 'is equivalent to subsidizing a line of steamers between Foochow and Shanghai'.³¹ This comment would prove to be unfortunate. Besides, with Wenzhou remaining unopened, such confidence became irrelevant. Moreover, the Alcock, and previous, correspondence contains certain contradictions regarding the attractiveness of Wenzhou as a treaty port. These contradictions, of which I highlight three, have previously been given insufficient attention, so I expand on them here.

First, it appeared to be generally accepted that the diversion of Wenzhou's tea exports to Fuzhou was a process capable of reversal. Yet, unsurprisingly, in their memorial to Alcock the British merchants at Fuzhou made no recommendation for Wenzhou to be opened.³²

²⁸ Alcock to the Zongli Yamen, 8 September 1868 (*China No. 5 [1871]*, 226).

²⁹ Note on the Third Meeting of the Commission, 21 April 1868 (*China No. 5 [1871]*, 196). A Mixed (meaning British and Chinese) Commission, of which Alcock and Hart were members, had been established in January 1868 at Alcock's suggestion 'to devise means for securing a more prompt redress of commercial grievances, and giving increased facilities to trade' (Alcock to Stanley, 22 January 1868 (*China No. 5 [1871]*, 100).

³⁰ *The Globe*, 11 March 1869, 4; Hong Kong Chamber of Commerce to Clarendon, 21 January 1870 (*China No. 6 [1870]: Further Memorials respecting the China Treaty Revision Convention*, 14).

³¹ Alcock to Baron von Rehfues, Prussian Minister, Beijing, and doyen of the diplomatic community, 20 October 1869 (*China No. 5 [1871]*, 424).

³² Mercantile Community at Foochow to Alcock, 14 September 1867 (*China No. 5 [1871]*, 65–7).

The second contradiction arises from a submission by the British merchants at Ningbo to Alcock in 1868, which noted that Wenzhou was one of the chief markets to which foreign goods went from their port. They overlooked that this was through the hands of Chinese traders and likely to remain so, thereby bringing no obvious benefit to any British merchant who might establish himself in Wenzhou.³³ Third, the reference by the Xiamen merchants in 1869 to the potential for 'vast' trade was qualified by the admission that their records were 'incomplete', and that Alcock should seek corroboration from merchants at Ningbo and Fuzhou.³⁴ Any one of these contradictions could have prompted a reconsideration of the wisdom of promoting Wenzhou, but none was made. Besides, the project had support in high places.

It is inevitable that opinions, if repeated frequently, become perceived as facts, gaining further credibility if offered by people in authority. For example, Alcock's suggestion to Rehfues in 1869 that the opening of Wenzhou would be 'equivalent to subsidising a line of steamers' was but one example of Alcock repeating practically verbatim, but without acknowledgement, comments made to him by Hart.³⁵ Another was Alcock's description to Rehfues of Wenzhou being in a 'comparatively wealthy and populous' district; Hart had already written to Alcock that Wenzhou served a 'comparatively populous and wealthy' part of the country, even though the port was already in decline.³⁶ Alcock did not, however, follow Hart regarding the number of ports to be opened. The two men worked closely together on Alcock's proposed treaty, which called for the opening of only two new ports: Wenzhou and Wuhu. Hart had provided a list of ten.³⁷ As mentioned, Hart saw the benefit of treaty ports as points of contact, although from about this time the primary function of a treaty port was becoming a link in a broadening transport network extending beyond servicing foreign trade.³⁸ Despite the contradictions I have identified, Wenzhou remained on the agenda of British interests, finally becoming a treaty port

³³ British Merchants of Ningpo to Consul William Fittock, 22 April 1868 (*China No. 5 [1871]*, 155); *Customs Decennial 1882-91*, 390.

³⁴ British Merchants at Amoy to Pedder, 8 February 1869 (*China No. 5 [1871]*, 300).

³⁵ Hart to Alcock, 6 December 1868 (Nish, *British Documents*, 305).

³⁶ Alcock to Rehfues, 20 October 1869 (*China No. 5 [1871]*, 424; *China No. 1 [1870]*, 7).

³⁷ Hart to Alcock, 6 December 1868 (Nish, *British Documents*, 303-4). Of the ten suggested by Hart, six would in time be opened either as treaty ports, or ports-of-call on the Yangzi. Hart promoted a similar list, including Wenzhou, during his input to the Chefoo Convention negotiations (Memorandum by Hart, 23 January 1876 [TNA, FO 17/724]).

³⁸ Reinhardt, 'Treaty Ports', 102.

under the 1876 Chefoo Convention. The catalyst for that treaty was the death of Raymond Margary, a British consular agent, in south-west China, although the chief British negotiator, Sir Thomas Wade, British Minister, Beijing, insisted on including commercial matters in the treaty; he saw the opening of more ports as the best means of avoiding misunderstandings between the foreign powers and China.³⁹

The surviving archival record has not enabled me to identify who, precisely, determined that Wenzhou be opened as a treaty port; it had been on the British agenda for so long that the original rationale appears to have been lost sight of. What is clear is that there was no reassessment of Wenzhou's potential since it was first considered as a possible treaty port in 1854, despite many indications that to have done so would have been wise. Let us now see how Wenzhou fared.



A view of Jiangxin Island from the city, c. 1878. The British Consulate would be built on the shore below the right-hand (east) pagoda. (Source: Harvard-Yenching Library of Harvard College Library, Harvard University)

³⁹ Wade to Prince of Kung, 7 June 1876 (TNA, FO 17/725).

Wenzhou as a treaty port: British disappointments

Murphey questioned why the treaty ports did not have more of a positive effect on China's economy and modernisation, arguing that they remained 'enclave economies' with little influence beyond their own boundaries.⁴⁰ This was not the case with Wenzhou. Never having a foreign economy, enclave or otherwise, Wenzhou challenges Murphey's hypothesis; its very status served to benefit Chinese mercantile interests. Once opened as a treaty port, Wenzhou proved to be a profitable site for Chinese shipping operations. This amounted to an appropriation of privileges that were usually a foreign preserve. I will develop this argument by considering four aspects of Wenzhou's experience as a treaty port. First, an examination of its commercial activity at the time it was opened shows that it was a market difficult for foreigners to exploit. Second, analysis of foreign attempts to establish business at Wenzhou reveals that there was no 'vacuum waiting to be filled'.⁴¹ Third, actions taken by Chinese merchants in neighbouring cities and provinces to safeguard their interests left Wenzhou merchants in a relatively weak position, less attractive as partners for foreign business. Finally, I show how the provision of a regular shipping service by a Chinese operator effectively sealed the fate of Wenzhou as a potential site of British mercantile activity. Each one of these factors contributed to the others, and they, together with the lack of adequate prior research, combined to ensure the failure of Wenzhou as a British treaty port. I will examine first the business being conducted in the port at the time it was opened to foreign trade.

Commercial activity in the new treaty port

During negotiations for the Chefoo Convention, Hart described Wenzhou as 'the only coast port of importance not yet open'.⁴² The city was a distribution centre for bamboo, oranges, wooden poles, and opium, all for domestic consumption. Of interest to foreign merchants were tea, iron ore, and alum.⁴³ Tea was still being exported although, for reasons already given, in quantities insignificant compared to shipments from Fuzhou; in

⁴⁰ Murphey, *The Outsiders*, 1–11; Hao, *The Comprador*, 106–12. See also Introduction, page 12.

⁴¹ Murphey's concept of foreigners filling a vacuum in the absence of indigenous efforts was discussed in the Introduction, page 20.

⁴² Hart to Wade, 10 June 1876 (TNA, FO 17/725).

⁴³ Alum is a dye fixative used in the textile and ceramics industries and was mined in significant quantities at Pingyang, 40 kilometres south of Wenzhou.

1877 Wenzhou exported 17 tons, compared to Fuzhou's 37,000.⁴⁴ Iron ore was plentiful in the hills near Wenzhou, but there was an official prohibition on extracting it.⁴⁵ Alum had been shipped, illegally, by foreign vessels prior to Wenzhou's opening, until stopped by the Customs; by 1877, twelve thousand tons annually were carried by junk from the source, south of Wenzhou, direct to Ningbo for export.⁴⁶

Assisting in the treaty negotiations, William Mayers recorded it was 'by no means clear to [him] that Wenchow would be greatly worth opening'.⁴⁷ The *China Mail* had already derided the port as 'a place which might, at some undecided period, be developed in the interest of commerce'.⁴⁸ But the first official British report, in December 1876 by Pelham Warren, 31-year-old consular assistant at Ningbo with only nine years' experience in the China service, was positive. Warren, impressed by the 'flourishing' appearance of the city, reported Wenzhou merchants' confidence that, on the opening of the port, 'a very considerable trade will be established', especially in tea. He also noted iron-ore and alum mines, the latter having an 'inexhaustible supply'.⁴⁹

A more comprehensive study was made two months later by Arthur Davenport. Instructed by Wade, Davenport arrived on 7 February 1877 on a fact-finding visit. Aged 40, he was Acting-Consul, Shanghai, with 20 years' experience in China. His report described Wenzhou as a wealthy city, although he remarked it 'has never been ... of any great commercial importance' and was 'noted for its exceptional tranquillity rather than its commercial prosperity'; he arrived a few days before Chinese New Year, a time when much of the country would have been tranquil from a business standpoint. Indeed, he was 'much struck with the scarcity of vessels' on the river. Davenport reported that the tea from Wenzhou district 'will certainly be shipped' from the port once it was opened, and he reported both iron-ore and alum were available in 'an unlimited supply'. He noted that foreign goods had been brought by junk from Ningbo to Wenzhou for many years by

⁴⁴ *Reports on Trade, 1879*, 49.

⁴⁵ I have been unable to ascertain why this prohibition was in place, but observance of the principles of *feng shui* was often behind such restrictions.

⁴⁶ Shanghai Acting-Consul Arthur Davenport to Hugh Fraser, British Chargé d'Affaires, Beijing, 1 March 1877 (TNA, FO 228/592).

⁴⁷ Report of a meeting with the Ministers of the Zongli Yamen, 11 Jun 1876 (TNA, FO 17/725). William Mayers, formerly of the consular service, had been Chinese Secretary of the British Legation since 1872.

⁴⁸ *China Mail*, 16 March 1876, 3.

⁴⁹ Warren to Ningbo Consul William Cooper, 20 January 1877 (TNA, FO 17/1306).

'native dealers' for distribution in the interior, adding that the rates of *lijin* were 'comparatively light'. Concluding that few British merchants were likely to come to Wenzhou, Davenport nevertheless noted 'certain foreigners of considerable experience' had bought property at Maozhuling.⁵⁰

This report, from a more experienced man, contains a number of incongruities and warning signs. That Wenzhou had never been of great commercial importance contradicts another observation he made that the city was 'the entrepôt for an extensive, wealthy and populous district'. Further, Davenport appears not to have questioned why, given Wenzhou's entrepôt status, there were so few boats in the river; was it because of the coming festivities, or did it signify a generally depressed trade? He was certain tea exports would be diverted from Fuzhou, but had he consulted the tea merchants there? He was also confident the prohibition against iron-ore mining would be removed once the port was open, but why had it been imposed? The alum was currently shipped by junk from a port that, not being open to foreign trade, was inaccessible to steamers; would it have been practical to divert the product to Wenzhou for reshipment? He also appeared sure the foreign goods brought by junk from Ningbo by 'native dealers' could be transported by foreign steamers, otherwise what would be the point of opening Wenzhou as a treaty port? As for the experienced foreign merchants who had acquired sites at the lower anchorage, had he consulted them about Wenzhou's prospects? These questions remain unanswerable, but there is enough in Davenport's report to throw doubt on Wenzhou's attraction as a treaty port. Indeed, had he been able to make his survey a couple of years earlier, Wenzhou might not have been selected. Both reports, Warren's and Davenport's, demonstrate that it was not only merchants' optimism that could be misplaced. By contrast, the first consular report from Wuhu, opened at the same time as Wenzhou, was very cautious about that port's prospects.⁵¹

Notwithstanding, the opening of a Maritime Custom House on 1 April 1877 marked Wenzhou's beginning as a treaty port. A British consulate followed ten days later, with Chaloner Alabaster from Xiamen as acting-consul.⁵²

⁵⁰ Davenport to Fraser, 1 March 1877 (TNA, FO 228/592, 17). The 'foreigners of considerable experience', although not named by Davenport, were Jardine, Matheson & Co.; see pages 39 and 41.

⁵¹ Wuhu Consul Byron Brennan to Fraser, 10 April 1877 (TNA, FO 228/599, 5-8).

⁵² *China Mail*, 3 May 1877, 3.

Establishing a British presence

Alabaster first addressed the location of a British concession. Warren had reported 'beyond all comparison' the best location was Maozhuling; Hugh Fraser, British Chargé d'Affaires, Beijing, disagreed, preferring somewhere closer to the city.⁵³ Davenport had then signed an agreement with the local authority for a site outside the city's east gate; this choice was also criticised by the Legation. Alabaster, of similar age and experience to Davenport, inspected Davenport's site, accompanied by Jardine Matheson partner William Paterson, and concluded the expense of draining and raising it was prohibitive.⁵⁴ Instead, Alabaster chose a narrow plot between the city wall and the river, and signed another agreement. He, too, was later criticised, by Foreign Secretary Lord Derby, for exceeding his authority.⁵⁵ Three sites had been identified, two of which had been encapsulated in formal agreements, evidence of a lack of understanding of Wenzhou and its prospects. When Warren returned as Wenzhou Consul, he took no steps to develop a concession, pending the creation of a demand for one. The demand never came.

Twelve foreign residents were listed for Wenzhou in 1878: Warren, five Customs staff, three pilots, two missionaries, and a doctor; Jardines, Davenport's merchants of 'considerable experience', had by that time already left.⁵⁶ Their steamer, *Conquest*, was the first foreign vessel to visit, on 15 April 1877.⁵⁷ Thereafter, *Conquest* called every three weeks, carrying passengers and miscellaneous cargo, on a round trip from Shanghai via Ningbo. Jardines placed an agent at Wenzhou, John Wilson, charged with ensuring *Conquest* paid its way, and selling the small amount of goods the company imported on its own account. Wilson was told the Wenzhou branch was 'an experiment', its survival depending on his finding remunerative exports.⁵⁸ He tested the market for Wenzhou's iron ore, but his superiors found they could not exploit it profitably. Jardines also considered shipping alum, sending samples to Tianjin for assessment.⁵⁹ Then, a few months into the life of the new treaty port, all trade stopped; foreign and domestic.

⁵³ Fraser to Foreign Secretary Lord Derby 12 March 1877 (TNA, FO 17/1306).

⁵⁴ Alabaster to Fraser, 20 April 1877 (TNA, FO 228/598, 8); Alabaster to Fraser, 1 May 1877 (TNA, FO 228/598, 10).

⁵⁵ Derby to Fraser, 29 August 1877 (TNA, FO 228/583, 104).

⁵⁶ *C&D 1879*, 292.

⁵⁷ Alabaster to Fraser, 14 April 1877 (TNA, FO 228/598, 8); Warren to Fraser, 4 August 1877 (TNA, FO 228/598, 109).

⁵⁸ F.B. Johnson, Shanghai, to Wilson, 17 May 1877 (JM Archives, C42/3, 46–50 and 58–9).

⁵⁹ Jardine Matheson Shanghai to Wilson, 6 June 1877 (JM Archives, D3/1/7).



An 1877 map of Wenzhou (rotated to maximise size). The red markers at the top show concession sites considered by Davenport; those to the left show sites considered by Alabaster. Jiangxin Island can be seen to the north of the city. Maozhuling is 14 kilometres downstream, beyond the top edge of the map. (Source: TNA, MPKK 51)

The cause was the replacement in August 1877 of Davenport's 'comparatively light' rates of *lijin* by a much more demanding regime. No figures are available, but Warren described the published rates as 'most exorbitant'. The treaty-port press decried the related regulations as 'ludicrous in the extreme'; for example, the *lijin* collector gave himself the right to search foreign and Chinese merchants' premises and examine their books, looking for evidence of evasion.⁶⁰ The offending regulations were later withdrawn, following protests to Beijing, but irreparable damage had been done to the treaty port's prospects. In October *Conquest*, running at a loss, was withdrawn from the route and sold. The accidental sinking in July 1878 of a hulk, *en route* to be a base for Jardines' operations, brought an end to the company's experiment.⁶¹ The firm's 'somewhat sudden' departure was seen as a major blow to the young port's prospects.⁶²

Despite this unpromising start, Warren's 1877 Commercial Report for Wenzhou remained optimistic.⁶³ Matching Davenport's earlier assessment, Warren concurred that Wenzhou was 'the natural outlet' for the tea exported through Fuzhou, and that it was 'on tea that the future prosperity of the Port depends'. He added that Wenzhou would supplant Fuzhou and Ningbo as the district's supplier of foreign goods. However, concluding that 'as soon as business improves somewhat' Wenzhou would prosper once more, Warren underestimated three negative indications: the impact of *lijin*, the decreased junk trade, and a lack of competition among local and foreign merchants.

Although Wenzhou's published *lijin* rates had returned to reasonable levels, there were still related problems; these are analysed further below. As for local commercial traffic on the river, Warren reported that Wenzhou had previously hosted a large junk trade but, echoing Davenport's observation, he noted that the number of junks was 'singularly small'. The reason he gave was the failure of many of the merchants who had formerly traded with Xiamen, Shantou, Taiwan, and Singapore. There remained in Wenzhou, Warren said, few merchants of any standing. The significance of the resulting lack of mercantile capital will also be seen below. With the determination of the newly-promoted

⁶⁰ Report on Foreign Trade for 1877, Pelham Warren, 5 March 1878 (TNA, FO 17/790, 105–6); *Hong Kong Daily Press*, 6 September 1877, 2.

⁶¹ J. Bell Irving, Shanghai, to Paterson, Fuzhou, 29 July 1878 (JM Archives, C42/3, 195–7).

⁶² *Hong Kong Daily Press*, 15 August 1878, 2.

⁶³ *China No. 7 (1878): Commercial Reports by Her Majesty's Consuls in China, 1877*, 164–85.

appointee to show his port in as positive a light as possible, despite the negative aspects just noted, Warren's report was of an overall optimistic flavour. However, in forwarding it to London Fraser, in Beijing, questioned Warren's enthusiasm for Wenzhou's advantages.⁶⁴

That such doubts were being expressed only a few months after the port's opening underlines the inadequate prior research. Warren's Commercial Report for 1878, the treaty port's first full year of operation, was less optimistic than the previous year's. Noting that 'what little trade there is ... is entirely in native hands', he stated that local merchants were unable to extend the scope of their activities without foreign capital, and that foreign merchants were unlikely to come without regular steam communication with other ports.⁶⁵

At about this time, a change was taking place in the activities of foreign businesses in China. Rather than trading on their own account, major firms like Jardines were moving towards services such as shipping.⁶⁶ Foreign shipowners, wanting to capitalise on their technological advantage, were equally keen to win Chinese business as foreign; the first part of this chapter showed Chinese merchants were chartering foreign ships. By 1874 half the tonnage carried by foreign steamers in Chinese waters was between treaty ports and for Chinese principals: the coasting trade.⁶⁷ Indeed, the very provision of this service by their shipping subsidiaries caused a stagnation of the firms' own distribution business; Jardines' dual focus caused their efforts at Wenzhou to be unsuccessful.⁶⁸ Reinhardt showed that increasing the number of treaty ports, such as happened with the 1858 Tianjin Treaty, did not result in a corresponding increase in foreign business.⁶⁹ Rather, new ports tended to enhance opportunities for Chinese merchants to sell, and in turn ship, foreign goods more cheaply and efficiently than their foreign competitors. Completing the circular nature of this phenomenon, Hao suggested that the treaty ports'

⁶⁴ Fraser to Derby, 5 November 1877 (*China No. 7 [1878]*, 164).

⁶⁵ Warren to Wade, 17 March 1879, enclosing the Trade Report for 1878 (TNA, FO 228/637).

⁶⁶ Cain and Hopkins, *British Imperialism*, 395.

⁶⁷ Liu Kwang-ching, *Anglo-American Steamship Rivalry in China: 1862-1874* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1962), 155.

⁶⁸ Rawski, 'Chinese Dominance', 461.

⁶⁹ Reinhardt, 'Navigating Imperialism in China: Steamship, Semicolony, and Nation, 1860-1937' (unpublished PhD thesis, Princeton University, June 2002), 55.

relative security, physical and fiscal, engendered the rise of a 'merchant-business class' able to take advantage of the attractions of foreign shipping.⁷⁰

Into this evolving scenario, two other foreign vessel operators tried to establish a link between Wenzhou and nearby ports. As I show below, neither was successful. They claimed that a lack of foreign merchants at the port made their efforts unremunerative, whereas foreign merchants who may have been interested in Wenzhou complained of the lack of a regular shipping service. It was a stalemate that showed no sign of solution. Furthermore, the relatively weak standing of local merchants, evidenced by their lack of capital, was a factor of which prospective foreign investors in Wenzhou soon became aware. Operating necessarily on a small scale, Wenzhou merchants required only lower-grade imports, yet still demanded generous credit terms. As for exports, the foreigner would have had to engage an agent to travel to individual producers and buy small quantities from each, paying in advance.⁷¹ During their brief time at Wenzhou, Jardines were unable to find any viable exports to balance even their limited imports.

Few other foreign firms attempted a presence at Wenzhou. In 1877 H.B. Meyer, a German from Ningbo, did some business obtaining transit-passes for Chinese, but by 1878 he had gone.⁷² In 1879, the large Ningbo trading firm of Davidson & Co. opened a branch; it lasted three months.⁷³ For four years in the 1890s the Spanish firm Malcampo & Co. from Xiamen imported kerosene on one of its own steamers.⁷⁴ There were no other foreign businesses until the arrival of the oil companies in the 1910s.

Between the late 1870s and the 1910s, the foreign population of Wenzhou comprised only consular and Customs people, and missionaries. A picture of what life was like for them is given by the *North-China Herald*. In the treaty port's early years, the newspaper contained an almost weekly report, from a correspondent styling herself 'Spes',

⁷⁰ Reinhardt, 'Treaty Ports', 105; Hao, *Commercial Revolution*, 356.

⁷¹ *FO Wenchow 1892*, 2; G.C. Allen and Audrey G. Donnithorne, *Western Enterprise in Far Eastern Economic Development: China and Japan* (London: Routledge, [1954] 2003), 32.

⁷² John Wilson to F.B. Johnson (Shanghai), 4 October 1877 (JM Archives, B7/50). See also Eichi Motono, *Conflict and Cooperation in Sino-British Business, 1860-1911: The Impact of the Pro-British Commercial Network in Shanghai* (London: Macmillan, 2000), 35-54.

⁷³ Warren to Wade, 8 August 1879 (TNA, FO 228/637, 126).

⁷⁴ Wenzhou Consul Robert Mansfield to Sir Nicholas O'Connor, British Minister, Beijing, 24 February 1894 (TNA, FO 228/1167, 16).

concerning the weather, or the prospects for the coming shooting season.⁷⁵ 'Spes' likened Wenzhou to a prison when she reported that for six weeks there had been only one mail delivery, and no Shanghai newspapers.⁷⁶ Moving forward twenty years the correspondent had changed, the frequency had become monthly or less but, apart from recording the occasional riot already mentioned, the content of the reports from Wenzhou remained parochial: 'Nothing of interest has transpired here of late. It has been impossible. Too much rain.'⁷⁷ A correspondent referred to Wenzhou as 'the Cinderella of the Treaty Ports', a status evident when, on the occasion of Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee in June 1897, the tiny but loyal British community was unable to send a congratulatory message owing to the absence of a telegraph connection.⁷⁸ This isolation underlines the arguments in the Introduction regarding the extent to which people 'at home' were interested in such remote sites of Britain's global presence as Wenzhou.⁷⁹

As I argued in the first part of this chapter, the treaty port's shortcomings could so easily have been foreseen, had there been a reassessment of its potential during the many years it was on British merchants' agenda. Not only was there no vacuum waiting to be filled by foreign initiative, but Chinese businessmen in neighbouring cities and provinces were taking steps to safeguard their own interests, making Wenzhou's commercial environment challenging for local merchants also.

Protectionist strategies practiced in neighbouring cities

Historians have given insufficient attention to the agency of Chinese merchants in the development of minor treaty ports. Wenzhou provides an example where this can be studied. Wenzhou lay between the commercial centres of Ningbo and Fuzhou. Not wanting to see their business threatened by a resurgent neighbour, the merchants of both places adopted practices to contain any ambitions Wenzhou's merchants may have had. Furthermore, they were able to use the *lijin* system to help them achieve their aims. The

⁷⁵ 'Spes' being the name of the Roman Goddess of Hope, I assume the correspondent was female and therefore a missionary, albeit of a somewhat different religious persuasion.

⁷⁶ *North-China Herald*, 29 November 1877, 501.

⁷⁷ *North-China Herald*, 2 April 1897, 588.

⁷⁸ *North-China Herald*, 11 September 1896, 430; McClatchie, *In Varying Scenes*, 156. The telegraph first appeared in China in the 1870s.

⁷⁹ See Introduction, page 14.

result was a weakening of the standing of the Wenzhou merchant, and the lessening of his ability to partner with foreigners.

Prior to Shanghai becoming a treaty port in 1842, Ningbo had been the more important centre. As a prefectural city, it had higher status than Shanghai. Its merchants, engaged in trade with Siam and Japan, as well as along the China coast, were more experienced and successful. From the eighteenth century, however, Ningbo merchants were drawn to the greater opportunities Shanghai offered, contributing to that city's rise to dominance. From at least 1736, powerful Ningbo guilds were active in Shanghai, engaged in banking, shipping, and other businesses.⁸⁰ Hence, while Wenzhou was historically the trading centre of Zhejiang, enterprising businessmen from Ningbo took the lead in exploiting the possibilities of Shanghai.

Notwithstanding their new focus, the Ningbo merchants kept a strong interest in their home city. At the time Wenzhou was opened, Ningbo had been a treaty port for 35 years, and its merchants were wary of being usurped by the newcomer. To their advantage, through their Shanghai endeavours they had capital, something lacking in Wenzhou. In time, Ningbo merchants would become dominant in Wenzhou too, but for the moment they were more concerned with limiting Wenzhou's opportunities to progress. For this they adopted two principal strategies. First, their capital enabled them to offer to customers periods of credit beyond the resources of merchants in Wenzhou. The result can be seen in the otherwise anomalous situation whereby Quzhou (Chuchow), for example, a prefectural city upstream from Wenzhou, continued to draw its foreign goods requirements from Ningbo, five times further away than Wenzhou.⁸¹

Second, the Ningbo men were able to use their money to create guilds, as they had done in Shanghai. One operated at the port from which alum was shipped, making diversion of the product to Wenzhou even less likely.⁸² Of more immediate consequence was the guild

⁸⁰ Linda Cooke Johnson, *Shanghai: From Market Town to Treaty Port, 1074–1858* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), 128. See also James W. Hayes, 'Fertile and Fortunate: Shanghai before the Treaty Port Era', *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society, Hong Kong Branch*, Vol. 48 (2008), 175–203; and Hao, *The Comprador*, 175 and 189.

⁸¹ *FO Wenchow 1888*, 5–6.

⁸² Report on the Trade of Wenchow during the Year 1883 (TNA, FO 851/3); *Hong Kong Daily Press*, 21 August 1884, 2.

formed in mid-1877, prompted by the opening of Wenzhou, to farm Ningbo's *lijin*. In return for a lump-sum payment to the appropriate authorities, the guild was empowered to collect, and keep, duty on the movement of goods entering and leaving Ningbo. The guild could set its own rates.⁸³ The revised published rates of the new Wenzhou *lijin* office were equal to those in Ningbo, but the farming of *lijin* in Ningbo meant the actual rates paid could be up to 40% less.⁸⁴ Hence, goods arriving in Wenzhou would be more expensive than those imported to Ningbo. Lacking capital, the Wenzhou merchants could not respond with a farm of their own. The system continued, to Wenzhou's detriment, for many years, another reason why places such as Quzhou continued to be served by Ningbo.⁸⁵

Fuzhou did not have a *lijin* farm. Instead, Wenzhou became the target of restrictive measures taken by the *lijin* authorities themselves to protect Fuzhou's vital tea business. Almost as soon as Wenzhou was opened, the Fujian authorities announced a heavy tax on tea crossing into Zhejiang.⁸⁶ When attempts were made to evade this imposition, *lijin* was levied at the place of production rather than *en route*.⁸⁷ Furthermore, a mechanism operated in Fujian that was supportive of the tea-growers: purchase contracts were issued in advance, and silver payments were sent up-country under official protection.⁸⁸ Wenzhou merchants could not compete with such a smooth and efficient organisation.

While these protectionist strategies were aimed principally at the indigenous merchants of Wenzhou, they had the inevitable effect of making the port less attractive for foreign businessmen. However, the principal concern of the latter was the continued absence of a regular steamer service. When one did appear, it was from an unexpected and, to them, unwelcome quarter.

⁸³ For more on *lijin* farming, see He, *Paths toward the Modern Fiscal State*, 155–75.

⁸⁴ Report on Foreign Trade at Wenchow during the year ending 31st December, 1877 (*China No. 7 [1878]*, 180).

⁸⁵ The practice was reported as continuing until at least 1893 (Consul John Tratman to O'Connor, 10 July 1893 [TNA, FO 228/1127, 34]).

⁸⁶ *North-China Herald*, 25 October 1877, 369.

⁸⁷ Wenzhou Acting-Consul Edward Parker to Parkes, 14 September 1883 (TNA, FO 228/709, 10); *FO Wenchow 1888*, 4.

⁸⁸ *China No. 4 (1884): Commercial Reports by HM Consuls in China, 1883, Part II*, 160. See also Hao, *Commercial Revolution*, 95 and 138–62; and Fairchild, 'Fuzhou and Global Empires', 111–5.

Privileges appropriated – or given away?

Wenzhou's experience challenges many historians' observations regarding the dominance of foreign commercial activity in the treaty ports. Against the background of Wenzhou's lacklustre economy, an absence of foreign merchants, intra-regional protectionism, and the workings of the *lijin* system, one business thrived. The China Merchants Steam Navigation Company had been established in 1873 as the first enterprise under the Qing state's 'official supervision and merchant management' system.⁸⁹ The company had the declared intention of competing with foreign steamship operators, even if this entailed making a loss.⁹⁰ Far from being an arm of the Qing government, China Merchants operated under the 'efficient and aggressive' management of Chinese merchant-shareholders.⁹¹ Furthermore, its profitability was greatly assisted by government support, under the 'official supervision' element of its structure; it received interest-free loans, tax concessions, and was awarded a monopoly in the carrying of tribute rice, for which higher-than-market freights were paid. This monopoly amounted to an official subsidy from the Chinese state and the company's foreign competitors saw it as such.⁹² This brings us back to Alcock's optimistic statement in 1869 that opening Wenzhou would be 'equivalent to subsidizing a line of steamers'; naturally, he did not have in mind the line would be a Chinese one.⁹³ Yet this is what happened in late 1878, and it was very profitable.

It is here we can see Chinese interests appropriating one of Wenzhou's key treaty-port privileges: had Wenzhou not been opened as a treaty port, Chinese steamers would not have been permitted to go there. Government favouritism did not extend to the regulatory environment; Chinese steamships had to follow the same rules as applied to foreign operators, meaning, at that time, they could only trade between treaty ports. This anomaly arose because if Chinese steamships were allowed to go to other home ports,

⁸⁹ Albert Feuerwerker, *China's Early Industrialization: Sheng Hsuan-huai (1844–1916) and Mandarin Enterprise* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, [1958] 1968), 8–12.

⁹⁰ Liu Kwang-ching: 'Steamship Enterprise in Nineteenth-Century China', *Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 18, No. 4 (August 1959), 437; and 'British-Chinese Steamship Rivalry in China, 1873–85', in C.D. Cowan (ed.), *The Economic Development of China and Japan: Studies in Economic History and Political Economy* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1964), 52.

⁹¹ Hao, *Commercial Revolution*, 202; Bickers and Henriot, 'Introduction', 4.

⁹² Feuerwerker, *China's Early Industrialization*, 168.

⁹³ See page 33, note 31. See also Edward LeFevour, *Western Enterprise in Late Ch'ing China: A Selective Survey of Jardine, Matheson & Company's Operations, 1842–1895* (Cambridge: East Asian Research Center, Harvard University, 1970), 49.

Western operators would have demanded the same privilege. But why was China Merchants the only company to serve Wenzhou on a regular basis?

Wenzhou Consul Alexander Hosie reported in 1888 that it seemed ‘almost incredible’ that there was, after almost ten years, no competition for China Merchants’ high freight rates; the rate from Wenzhou to Shanghai was fully half that from Shanghai to London.⁹⁴ Two years later, Hosie went to Shanghai to discuss the issue with the major British shipping companies; they said they were unwilling to do anything likely to ‘give umbrage’ to the Chinese line.⁹⁵ This reveals an aspect of the China shipping market that explains why it was so easy for Wenzhou’s privileges to be appropriated, even given away. Butterfield & Swire and China Merchants had been undercutting each other aggressively for the Yangzi carrying trade. In 1877 they formed a cartel agreement covering price-fixing and route-sharing. In 1882, the other major operator, Jardines, joined the common pooling arrangement, one term of which was that neither foreign company would operate to Wenzhou. The agreement lapsed in 1890, the time of Hosie’s visit to Shanghai, and there followed a period of ‘squabblings and bickerings’ between the erstwhile collaborators before a new equilibrium was established; this still gave the Chinese line a monopoly regarding Wenzhou.⁹⁶

The fact that Wenzhou was agreed by the foreign companies to be ‘off limits’ suggests its low level of attraction compared to other prospects. That it was the Chinese company that was awarded a monopoly on routes to and from Wenzhou contrasts with the foreign-centric analysis by Reinhardt, in which she argued that it was the major British shipowners that used their dominant position to undermine emerging Chinese companies.⁹⁷ In Wenzhou the opposite occurred. Here we see a peculiar outcome of the doctrine of free trade, of which Britain was such a strong supporter, and one that is often overlooked: the shipping companies were free to conclude their own arrangements, and

⁹⁴ *FO Wenchow 1888*, 2. China Merchants’ monopoly, and the ‘exorbitant rates’ the company charged, were still being noted in Wenzhou’s Trade Reports as late as 1907, almost 30 years after the monopoly started (Ningbo Acting-Consul Leslie Barr to Sir John Jordan, British Minister, Beijing, 25 June 1908 [TNA, FO 228/1696, 146]).

⁹⁵ *FO Wenchow 1890*, 2.

⁹⁶ See Sheila Marriner and Francis E. Hyde, in *The Senior, John Samuel Swire 1825–98: Management in Far Eastern Shipping Trades* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1967) 66–90.

⁹⁷ Reinhardt, ‘Treaty Ports’, 102.

these worked to the detriment of local free trade at Wenzhou. In the environment of fierce competition that existed in the China shipping market, to pursue pure free-trade principles would not have been the most rational or cost-effective approach; shippers argued that only with pooling arrangements were they able to operate at all, and that without them customers would have no access to shipping services.

Nevertheless, smaller foreign operators, not party to the cartel, occasionally took an interest in Wenzhou. In 1888, an independently-owned steamer started a service carrying oranges to Fuzhou. China Merchants responded by reducing its freight rates to such a low level that the smaller company, unable to compete, withdrew after only three trips.⁹⁸ In 1893, the Chinese company adopted obstructive and intimidatory tactics when Malcampo introduced its service from Xiamen.⁹⁹

Thus, China Merchants' monopoly at Wenzhou continued, as did its profits. In 1883, the company built the port's first godowns and bund. It had a reputation for looking after its customers in other ways, such as giving rebates, prompting competitors to do likewise.¹⁰⁰ Internal practices also differed from those of the foreign companies: its branch managers were usually shareholders; they were allowed to keep a percentage of the branch income, giving them a keen personal interest in the business.¹⁰¹ Even without inter-company pooling arrangements, such features of China Merchants' business practices made the company hard to dislodge. In demonstrating the company's competitive edge, founded on practices and privileges unavailable to its foreign peers, my study shows China Merchants to be a driving force in the 'Chinese commercial nationalism' argument proposed by Hao.¹⁰²

In time, restrictions on steamers trading only between treaty ports were lifted. From the 1890s, the Chinese government encouraged the creation of more Chinese steamship companies, an example of what Motono argued was Chinese themselves 'promoting a

⁹⁸ *FO Wenchow 1888*, 1.

⁹⁹ Tratman to O'Connor, 10 July 1893 (TNA, FO 228/1127, 36).

¹⁰⁰ Trade Report for the Year 1883 (TNA, FO 17/961, 170); Liu, 'British-Chinese', 56; Liu, *Anglo-American*, 44; Hao, *Commercial Revolution*, 203.

¹⁰¹ Feuerwerker, *China's Early Industrialisation*, 107.

¹⁰² Hao, *Commercial Revolution*, 166.

Western impact on China'.¹⁰³ By the 1920s, eighteen shipping companies were represented at Wenzhou, giving plenty of competition to China Merchants. None was foreign.¹⁰⁴ Throughout its life as a treaty port Wenzhou's privileges, foreign enjoyment of which was the rationale for its existence, were exercised almost exclusively by Chinese interests.

Conclusion

In the introduction to this chapter, I suggested two areas where our understanding of British treaty ports in China is altered by studying Wenzhou. First, we see how the important step of opening a treaty port could be based on inadequate knowledge of the country and its commercial networks; this develops the first of my arguments, that the mercantile influence guiding British policy was sometimes misplaced. Second, I demonstrate how Chinese networks functioned in a treaty-port environment, and how they responded to the foreign intrusion; this supports my third argument, that treaty-port privileges could be appropriated by Chinese interests. The experience of Wenzhou as a treaty port also supports my second argument, that practical difficulties could frustrate foreign efforts; and my fourth, that the treaty ports were not homogeneous.

Clearly, Wenzhou did not meet the hopes and expectations held by its promoters at the time it became a treaty port. Although the rationale for Wenzhou's selection was its commercial potential, belief in that potential was misplaced; there is no evidence that Wenzhou's perceived attractions were verified by any arm of the British state, in whose name the port was opened. The first detailed assessment by a British official, Consul Davenport in early 1877, some months after the treaty was signed, revealed many indications that the port was not destined to succeed. Davenport's observations could easily have been arrived at by any similarly-experienced official investigating the port's potential prior to its selection. But no such investigation was made. Although some British consuls travelled far into China, assessing commercial as well as other prospects, there is no record of any having visited Wenzhou.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰³ Motono, *Conflict and Cooperation*, 167.

¹⁰⁴ *Customs Decennial 1922-31*, 101.

¹⁰⁵ See Chapter Two, page 60 for examples of various missions into south-west China.

Consequently, and like so many of the lesser treaty ports, Wenzhou fell victim to the vagaries of trial and error. Once Wenzhou's lack of potential became apparent there was clearly a case for closing the British presence. The role of consul, never an onerous one, was often filled by men noted for their lack of application.¹⁰⁶ *The China Mail* reported in 1898 that 'it is somewhat difficult to assign any reason for keeping the port open'.¹⁰⁷ However, as explained in the Introduction, actual closure was not possible; Britain's only option was to withdraw its consulate. This was done in 1907 following a review of the cost of the British consular establishment in China.¹⁰⁸ It was at this point that Wenzhou ceased to be part of Britain's informal empire. Arguably, it never had been, apart from being a name on maps, directories and shipping schedules.

Was Wenzhou successful in any other way? As I have argued, the function of treaty ports changed. From early in the second half of the nineteenth century, they ceased to be places where foreign mercantile activity was necessarily expected to take place. They became more important as nodes in China's infrastructural network, hence portals through which foreign goods could pass to Chinese customers. Rawski argued that between 1860 and 1875 (and I would extend this period to include later years), the commercial development of treaty ports illustrated 'the capacity of a Chinese business community, operating in a Chinese fashion, to prosper and expand'.¹⁰⁹ This is where the study of Wenzhou allows us to challenge Murphey's argument that colonial port cities were spaces where outsiders brought commercial and infrastructural change to indigenous economies.¹¹⁰ Outsiders gave Wenzhou its treaty-port status, but it was Chinese interests that benefited from that status. Wenzhou also provides a corollary to Headrick's argument regarding Westerners' ability to adapt their technology to alien environments; here it was Chinese interests that adapted Western technology to their own ends.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁶ Coates, *China Consuls*, 243–8.

¹⁰⁷ *China Mail*, 4 February 1898, 3.

¹⁰⁸ There had been a number of such reviews in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, one of the most rigorous being that by Reginald Tower, Secretary at the British Legation, Beijing, in 1901 (Report on His Majesty's Consular Establishments in China [1901], [TNA, FO 228/1369, 8]).

¹⁰⁹ Rawski, 'Chinese Dominance', 469.

¹¹⁰ Murphey, *The Outsiders*, 18–22.

¹¹¹ Headrick, *Power over Peoples*.

There have been many studies of how foreign influences in China in the nineteenth century gave rise to a peculiar breed of Sino-Western commercial capitalism, a process Hao described as a 'commercial revolution'. For example, studies by Liu and Reinhardt concentrated on the development of shipping on the Yangzi. Although that river was, and remains, of great significance to China's economy, this chapter's contribution is to identify similarities that apply more broadly, including to Wenzhou: the function of treaty ports; the impact of *lijin*; and commercial competition, both between foreign operators and with Chinese companies. Moreover, whereas Reinhardt's approach was to focus on the transportation network based in the larger treaty ports, which she said 'could not be separated from the politics of semi-colonialism', mine has been to reach up from one of the less significant ports, searching for an association with that network. I identified that association in the context of the effect the shipping cartels had on the peripheral ports. No 'politics of semi-colonialism' prevailed at Wenzhou.¹¹² Hence, Wenzhou did not fit Reinhardt's mould, nor that of many other treaty-port scholars. Instead, Wenzhou met all the requirements set by Darwin, Cain and Hopkins, Porter, Murphey and others for colonial port cities, with the important distinction that it was not colonial; it was Chinese.

This chapter has shown that Wenzhou contributed to the development of China's commercial revolution. No aspect of Britain's aims in China was served by its existence. The last report we have of the size of the British population of Wenzhou is from 1939, when there were eleven, one fewer than the first report, sixty-one years earlier.¹¹³ The only reminder today of Wenzhou's former status as a British treaty port is the smart, three-storey building on an island in the river.

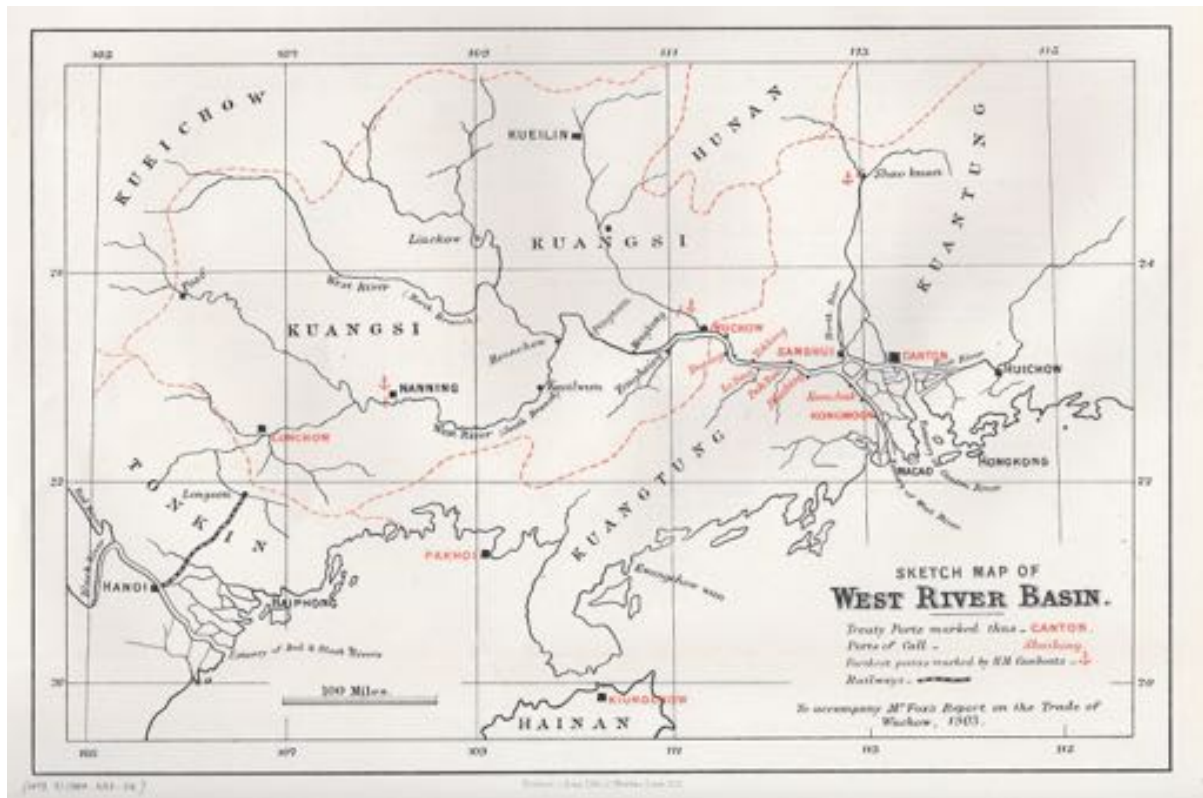
¹¹² Reinhardt, 'Treaty Ports', 102.

¹¹³ House of Commons Sitting 3 July 1939 (Hansard, Fifth Series, Volume 349, Page 889, Column 1080). Although it is not recorded whether or not the eleven were missionaries, it can be concluded that they were; what is recorded is that they chose to remain, in the face of Japanese advances in south China.



The former Wenzhou British Consulate building as it looks today; the building to the left housed the servants' quarters. (Source: Nicholas Kitto)

Chapter Two: Jiangmen



Map showing the principal places mentioned in this chapter: Jiangmen (Kongmoon), Sanshui (Samshui), Wuzhou (Wuchow), Nanning, Longzhou (Lungchow), Beihai (Pakhoi) and Qiongzhou (Kiungchow). (Source: *FO Wuchow 1903*)

Introduction

This dissertation started with an account of the opening of Jiangmen as a treaty port on 7 March 1904, complete with a guard of honour, flags, and a three-gun salute. The third British treaty port to be opened on southern China's West River, Jiangmen's lack of success equalled that of the other two. That this should be so reveals aspects of the British experience in China that have hitherto been neglected in scholarly literature. The opening of Jiangmen was a result of the complex, confused and incoherent conditions suggested in the Introduction. In this chapter, I detail the functions the port was expected to fulfil, and how those expectations were not met. I also analyse what the port did become: a successful Chinese shipping and railway centre.

Although the two ports were opened in very different circumstances, the study of Jiangmen, like Wenzhou, develops all four of the arguments established in the Introduction. First, Jiangmen's opening reflected British fears of French advances in south-west China, rather than proven commercial potential. Second, treaty-port status necessitated regulations that were so complex as to make profitable activity well-nigh impossible for British merchants. Third, that status nevertheless having been established, its foreign-initiated facilities were appropriated by local interests. Fourth, the experience of Jiangmen demonstrates that the treaty ports were not homogeneous. Jiangmen's importance grew as a site of Chinese commercial enterprise, countering Murphey's argument that it was foreigners who initiated infrastructural changes in colonial port cities. Studying Jiangmen provides greater understanding of the gulf between colonial ambition and practical on-the-spot reality. Despite sixty years' experience in the selection and commercial exploitation of treaty ports in China, and many more years of establishing and operating port cities elsewhere, British expectations regarding Jiangmen were ill-founded and misguided.

Until the mid-nineteenth century, Jiangmen was an important local distribution centre, serving both West and North rivers. Tobacco was a major industry, as were manufacturing grass-cloth and fans. Timber, bricks and bamboo furniture were exported. Jiangmen's rich agricultural hinterland made it 'the garden and farm of Hong Kong', where its eggs, fruit and vegetables found a ready market.¹ Jiangmen was also a port from which large numbers of emigrants left to pursue work opportunities overseas. However, since the designation of Guangzhou as a treaty port in 1842, Jiangmen's role had been diminishing. The creation of more treaty ports in south China, Qiongzhou in 1858 and Beihai in 1876, decreased further Jiangmen's trade and general welfare.² Nevertheless, foreign observers still noted optimistically the junks crowding the creek on which Jiangmen sat.³ British merchants anticipated at Jiangmen a thriving settlement of British import-export businesses and related commercial institutions.

¹ *Customs Decennial 1892-01*, 257.

² Information about Jiangmen's early economic activity is taken from: Acting-Consul Everard Fraser, Guangzhou, to Claude MacDonald, British Minister, Beijing, 14 May 1897 (TNA, CO 129/279, 305); *FO Wuchow 1897*, 9; *Customs Decennial 1892-01*, 257; 1904 Trade Report for Kongmoon, 2 (SOAS, MS 285232); and *Customs Decennial 1902-11*, 177.

³ *C&D 1906*, 841-2. See also the map, showing the river and the creek, on page 78.

Neither of the notable early-twentieth-century guides to China and the treaty ports mentions Jiangmen.⁴ It appeared briefly in Coates' survey of the British consular service in China, where he described it as 'an utter failure'. Lay gave a short, sentimental account of his time there with the Customs service in the early 1920s. My own survey of China's former treaty ports provided an overview of Jiangmen's history and development.⁵ Questions such as Jiangmen's place in Britain's China policy have been neglected by scholars. As for the practicalities of trading on the West River, there has only been one comprehensive study, and that focused on Chinese activity.⁶ Yet, as I will show, studying Jiangmen changes our understanding of those two areas: British policy and navigational practicalities. In this chapter I have added to the literature the voice of Jiangmen, hitherto silent.

I suggested in the Introduction a number of functions that a port city could be expected to fulfil for a colonial power: a commercial base; a bridgehead for territorial influence; or the satisfaction of some imperial geostrategic or infrastructural purpose. For Britain, Jiangmen met none of these expectations. Despite having been founded in response to a perceived French threat, Jiangmen did not become a base for the projection of British power. Furthermore, no foreign merchants witnessed the port's opening in 1904.⁷ A few came, and left, between 1904 and 1907. Only in 1912 did the first resident British merchant appear; for the next 30 years, there were never more than three, representing at most two British companies.⁸ The British consulate, the only official foreign presence to be established at Jiangmen, opened in 1904 and closed in 1905, never having moved off its houseboat accommodation. The absence of a mercantile or consular presence in turn ensured Jiangmen's failure both as a bridgehead, from which Britain could exercise power and influence in the south-west, and as a node in the British imperial network.

⁴ Wright (ed.), *Twentieth Century Impressions*; Crow, *Travelers' Handbook*.

⁵ Coates, *China Consuls*, 389; Arthur Croall Hyde Lay, *Four Generations in China, Japan and Korea* (London: Oliver & Boyd, 1952), 38–42; Nield, *China's Foreign Places*, 146–7.

⁶ Henry Sze Hang Choi, *The Remarkable Hybrid Maritime World of Hong Kong and the West River Region in the Late Qing Period* (Leiden: Brill, 2017).

⁷ *Hong Kong Weekly Press*, 12 March 1904, 7; Customs Commissioner Frederick Maze to Hart, 8 March 1904 (SOAS, MS 285232), 6.

⁸ Data taken from *C&D* for the years 1913 to 1940.

Notwithstanding, this chapter develops two main themes, namely Britain's geostrategic ambitions, and the practical difficulties facing foreign trade on the West River, and examines the part played by Jiangmen in each. For the first section, I have drawn on studies of Anglo-French relations and railway imperialism, contemporary newspapers, and British Foreign Office and other government papers.⁹ Studying the treaty-port experience of Jiangmen provides scope for understanding the transient effect of geostrategic ambition at a local level. Britain had established a sphere of influence over the West River following fears that the trade of south-west China would be diverted by French interests into their Indo-China colonies. The extent of British influence can be seen in the map on page 55, which shows the furthest points to which British gunboats navigated up two of the West River's tributaries, whereas Anglo-Chinese negotiations only encompassed the West River itself. However, as I demonstrate, other events at that time served to defuse Anglo-French animosity. Given Britain's commercial success and dominance in China to date, by the late nineteenth century the British government had a misplaced confidence in the success of projects such as Jiangmen. The port's opening was a reaction to a rapidly changing political situation, one that was soon supplanted as Britain's strategic priorities shifted elsewhere. Reflecting the limited extent to which people 'at home' even considered small imperial forays, as argued in the Introduction, Jiangmen was forgotten.¹⁰ This, I believe, is key to understanding why Jiangmen failed as a treaty port.

The second section, dealing with the practical difficulties of using the long-awaited concession for foreigners to navigate on the West River, includes analysis of the complicated and fluid regulations governing that activity, and of the impact thereon of contemporary Chinese commercial practices. For the former, I have studied the various and sometimes contradictory sets of rules issued during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; the complexity of these alone goes a long way to explaining the difficulties faced by foreigners on the river. For an understanding of the latter, I have

⁹ See the Introduction, page 17 and note 78 for sources on Anglo-French rivalry. Scholarship on railway imperialism relating to China includes: Koji Hirata, 'Sino-British Relations in Railway Construction: State, Imperialism and Local Elites, 1905-1911', in Bickers and Howlett (eds.), *Britain and China*, 130-47; Edwards, *British Diplomacy*, 30-52; and Peter Lowe, *Britain in the Far East: A Survey from 1819 to the Present* (London: Longman, 1981), 64-6. For a global commentary see Clarence B. Davis, Kenneth E. Wilburn, Jr. (eds.) and Ronald E. Robinson, *Railway Imperialism* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1991).

¹⁰ See Introduction, page 14.

consulted the works of Liu and Hao, and reports by the Maritime Customs.¹¹ These sources enabled me to provide an account of Jiangmen immediately before it became a treaty port, and the aspirations prevailing when it was awarded that status. Those hopes are then compared and contrasted with the functions that Jiangmen did achieve. Jiangmen's failure to attract foreign merchants requires reconsideration of whether the expense and effort involved in its opening were justified. But first, we look at how interest in Jiangmen arose.

Jiangmen's role in Britain's geostrategic ambitions

By the mid-1890s, foreign spheres of influence covered much of China. Within these, the respective foreign powers sought commercial exclusivity and a degree of political control. It was in the south-west that those of Britain and France collided.¹² Both powers were keen to attract to their own sphere the imagined trade potential of Yunnan, China's south-westernmost province. The French colonial government of Indo-China promoted the diversion of trade southwards by rail into Tonkin, present-day Vietnam.¹³ British commercial interests, particularly those in Hong Kong, wanted to draw that trade to the West River, which flows east from Yunnan to Jiangmen and Guangzhou.¹⁴ British merchants saw the West River as a natural extension to their extensive inland shipping activities. France was not new to China, but the volume of French trade was insignificant compared to that of Britain.¹⁵ Railways, on the other hand, were a relatively new field of endeavour, more open to newcomers. French merchants therefore saw railway development as a welcome niche into which they could bring technical expertise and investment capital.

¹¹ Liu, *Anglo-American*; Hao, *The Comprador and Commercial Revolution*.

¹² For an analysis of the Anglo-French rivalry, mutual suspicion and manoeuvring that prevailed at the time in south-east Asia and globally, see Otte, 'From "War-in-sight"'.

¹³ Jean-François Rousseau, 'An Imperial Railway Failure: The Indochina-Yunnan Railway, 1898–1941', *Journal of Transport History*, 2014, Vol. 35(1), 4; Ronald E. Robinson, 'Conclusion: Railways and Informal Empire' in Davis, Wilburn (eds.) and Robinson, *Railway Imperialism*, 192.

¹⁴ Hong Kong Governor Sir Henry Blake addressed the Legislative Council on 9 October 1902, saying that he had striven for the opening of Jiangmen for three years (<http://library.legco.gov.hk:1080/record=b1031482> [accessed 13 September 2018]).

¹⁵ In 1901, France accounted for 2% of China's foreign and coastal trade, compared with Britain's 53% (*Customs Decennial 1892–1901*, Appendix, xviii).

Although none visited Jiangmen, Western observers had accumulated significant information regarding China's south-west. Successive British consular reports were unanimous in doubting the trade potential of the region; Yunnan and neighbouring Guizhou and Guangxi were classed by China as its three poorest provinces.¹⁶ Frederick Bourne, consular assistant at Chongqing (Chungking), conducted in 1885–6 a six-month fact-finding tour of the south-west to assess the likely effect of the 1885 French Treaty on the potential for British trade. He noted 'the poverty-stricken look of the people', and that, given the terrain, river navigation was hazardous and a railway unlikely. A consular assistant in Bangkok reported in 1892: '... it is difficult to find sufficient grounds for the high hopes entertained of the commercial development of Yunnan.' In 1898 James Jamieson, the acting-consul at the newly opened Yunnan treaty port of Simao (Szemao), questioned why Yunnan had any attraction at all for foreign merchants.¹⁷ As for the West River, Guangzhou Customs Commissioner Robert Bredon reported to Hart in 1896 that everyone he knew who had seen it was disappointed with its potential.¹⁸

These negative reports were countered by others praising commercial opportunities, including mining. An early proponent was Archibald Colquhoun, whose 1881 expedition to the region, sponsored, significantly, by the Glasgow Chamber of Commerce, concluded that Yunnan was the richest and most prosperous of the southern provinces.¹⁹ Although lack of results caused his enthusiasm to wane, Colquhoun continued promoting south-west China's prospects for twenty years. French reports also praised the potential of the region. How were these various reports received by their respective readers? French colonial advances in Tonkin were but a stepping-stone towards the markets of China.²⁰ Any reports that supported that aim were, therefore, welcomed by French officials. Conversely, Britain's interests tended to be mercantile. Hence, reports by consuls and

¹⁶ *FO Wuchow 1897*, 3.

¹⁷ *China No. 1 (1888): Report by Mr. F.S.A. Bourne of a Journey in South-Western China*, Inclosure No. 1 in 2, 6; *Siam No. 1 (1892): Report on a Journey in the Me-Kong Valley by Mr. W.J. Archer, First Assistant in HM Consular Service in Siam*, 4; *China No. 3 (1898): Despatch from HM Minister at Peking forwarding a Report by the Acting British Consul at Ssumao on the Trade of Yunnan*, 1.

¹⁸ *West River: Report on Trade Conditions, etc., in 1897* (Shanghai: Inspectorate General of Customs, 1901), 2.

¹⁹ This paragraph draws on an analysis of the various British and French reports on the commercial potential of Yunnan in Warren B. Walsh, 'The Yunnan Myth', *Far Eastern Quarterly*, Vol. 2, No. 3 (May 1943), 272–285.

²⁰ Robert Lee, *France and the Exploitation of China, 1885–1901: A Study in Economic Imperialism* (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1989), 146, quoting Prince Henri d'Orleans, great-grandson of the last king of France.

other non-business people could easily be set aside by those whose mission was the pursuit of profit. The competition that developed was between two very different imperial cultures. In the case of France, the government led and trade was expected to follow. With Britain, as we have seen with Gallagher and Robinson's thesis, it was the reverse: trade led, and the government followed only if necessary to protect that trade.

British attitudes changed in the mid-1880s. France assumed sovereignty over Tonkin in 1885, an outcome of the 1884–5 Sino-French War. This engendered a perception, on the part of the British government, of a French threat, via Burma, to British interests in India. Britain's response was a precautionary annexation of Upper Burma in 1886.²¹ Inevitably, considerations regarding the West River became more political than commercial. There was also imperial prestige; if Britain were not to stake its claim for the commercial potential, chimera though it may have been, then France would.²² Indeed, the French government had already stationed gunboats on the river (one was present at Jiangmen's opening ceremony) and was preparing to subsidise a line of steamers, actions which were in keeping with other aggressive statements regarding French ambitions in the region.²³ A rumour that France contemplated the annexation of Guangdong province prompted a shocked reaction from Hong Kong's *China Mail*: 'Hong Kong as an island off the coast of a French Colony is too dreadful to contemplate.'²⁴ In 1900 the French governor-general of Indo-China, ardent imperialist Paul Doumer, drew up a detailed plan for the annexation of Yunnan, a province he described dismissively as 'a Chinese colony', with the building of a railway as the means for its peaceful occupation.²⁵

Under pressure in the face of competing foreign demands, China's government attempted to minimise the damage by granting concessions in parts of the country where they would

²¹ Fieldhouse, *Economics and Empire*, 154–9.

²² Edwards, *British Diplomacy*, 69.

²³ Maze recorded that a British and a French gunboat attended Jiangmen's opening ceremony on 7 March 1904 (Maze to Hart, 8 March 1904 [SOAS, MS 285232, 6]). A member of a French commercial mission to China in 1900 referred to the possibility of his government subsidising steamers on the West River (Guangzhou Consul Benjamin Scott to MacDonal, 3 March 1900 [TNA, CO 129/302, 590]).

²⁴ *China Mail*, 13 July 1899, 3. At that time, the province of Guangdong stretched from the border of French Tonkin eastwards to Fujian (see map on page 55).

²⁵ Lee, *France and China*, 230–31; Rousseau, 'Imperial Railway', 4. Yunnan was only incorporated into the Chinese Empire during the Ming dynasty (1368–1644).

most likely come up against those acceded to rivals.²⁶ Hao only argued his concept of 'Chinese commercial nationalism' in the context of merchants' activities; I suggest a similar strategy was adopted here by organs of the Chinese state. In the south-west, Chinese strategy focused on the respective demands by France and Britain for railway and shipping rights. French efforts had taken an early lead; the first treaty port in the region was the West River town of Longzhou (Lungchow), some 800 kilometres west of Jiangmen, opened by France in 1887. The French colonial government's plan was to extend its Haiphong railway through Longzhou to Kunming, capital of Yunnan. Facing difficulties with securing permission as well as engineering problems, it was not completed until 1910.²⁷ But at least it was completed.

There had never been any enthusiastic official support for a British Burma-Yunnan railway. According to William Lee-Warner of the India Office, the line existed 'only in outline, traced by a magician's wand', not least owing to similar engineering challenges.²⁸ The China Association was against the idea as it saw no reason to support the trade of Burma at the expense of Hong Kong.²⁹ Successive British consuls at Beihai had stressed the advantage of a railway thence to the West River.³⁰ The idea was always met with vigorous opposition by French interests, who had already been granted the right to build such a line.³¹ Naturally, they did not exercise their right, preferring to try and divert trade to their own territory rather than to a British-sponsored treaty port. This intensified

²⁶ Young, *British Policy*, 78; Feuerwerker, *The Foreign Establishment in China in the Early Twentieth Century* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, [1976] 1992), 15.

²⁷ Robinson, 'Conclusion', 192; Rousseau, 'Imperial Railway', 3. See also the map on page 55, which shows the line from Hanoi pointing like a dagger at the Chinese border.

²⁸ Briefing to the British Cabinet, 11 November 1895, by William Lee-Warner, of the India Office's Political Department, on the various railway projects, British and French, that were being considered at the time (TNA, CAB 37/40/59). See also Young, *British Policy*, 89; and Mary H. Wilgus, 'Sir Claude MacDonald, The Open Door, and British Informal Empire in China, 1895-1900' (unpublished PhD thesis, Vanderbilt University, May 1985), 219.

²⁹ Edwards, *British Diplomacy*, 20. The China Association was formed in London in 1889 to represent the interests of British merchants trading in China. Membership included representatives of the major British companies with interests in China, as well as politicians and retired members of the consular service. For the fullest account of the formation of The China Association and its early activities, see Pelcovits, *Old China Hands*, 157-89. See also Lowe, *Britain in the Far East*, 53.

³⁰ Consular reports for almost every year from 1889 to 1914 contain such references, ranging from hopeful and constructive to resigned and despairing (*FO Pakhoi*, various years).

³¹ Hansard, 9 June 1898, vol. 58, c 1186. See also Lowe, *Britain in the Far East*, 65; and Young, *British Policy*, 88.

pressure from British merchants to open the West River to their vessels, something they had been urging since 1876.³²

In this, they were soon successful. Sanshui and Wuzhou (Wuchow) became treaty ports in 1897, and Jiangmen was made a port-of-call.³³ The next target was Nanning, 460 kilometres west of Wuzhou and only 160 kilometres from the Tonkin border. However, rather than risk losing control over this potentially revenue-generating river-port by allowing Britain or France to claim it by treaty, an Imperial Decree of 1899 opened Nanning unilaterally for foreign trade.³⁴ French interests wanted to link Nanning as an eastern extension to their Tonkin-Yunnan railway. Britain was hoping for a line from Nanning in the other direction: to Guangzhou. Neither line was built. Instead, Britain came to see Nanning as a step on a navigation route stretching eastwards to Guangzhou and Hong Kong. French hopes turned to fears that this major waterway was 'becoming British', prompting the already-mentioned stationing of French gunboats on the river and talk of a subsidised line of French steamers.³⁵ The map on page 55 provides justification for those fears: Britain had secured navigation rights potentially stretching from Hong Kong over 1,000 kilometres of the West River from Guangzhou to Longzhou through the open ports of Sanshui, Wuzhou and Nanning.³⁶ For years, the British Hong Kong Chamber of Commerce had been agitating for nothing less. So, had it all been worth it?

Foreign trade at Longzhou was insignificant; small quantities of goods were brought overland on their way to Tonkin, mainly because of excessive *lijin* on the upper reaches of the West River. Nanning's lack of success was argued by Bickers as being due to Beijing's unrealistic expectations. The only foreign business done at Wuzhou was through

³² *North-China Herald*, 30 September 1876, 326.

³³ This status meant that steamships could take on and offload passengers and cargo.

³⁴ An agreement in principle to this effect had been secured from the Zongli Yamen by MacDonald on 4 February 1897 (*China No. 1 [1898]: Correspondence respecting the Affairs of China*, 15). The 1899 decree was not put into effect until 1907 (Bickers, 'Good Work for China', 32–5).

³⁵ The member of the 1900 French commercial mission referred to in note 23 stated that the placing of French gunboats on the West River and the running of subsidised steamers was to 'prevent the river becoming British', admitting the moves were purely political (Scott to MacDonald, 3 March 1900 [TNA, CO 129/302, 590]).

³⁶ The map is also a statement of Britain's imperial dominance, if not arrogance, in the region: the recently leased French territory of Zhanjiang (Kwangchowwan) is dismissed as a mere geographical feature; the thirteen British-sponsored stations on the map contrast with the solitary French treaty port of Longzhou (Lungchow). Furthermore, the sketch on page 78 shows that possible sites for a British concession at Jiangmen were being identified in 1901, at which time its status was only that of a port-of-call, with no foreign residence permitted.

local agents. Sanshui's location had made it an 'obvious' candidate for success, according to the report from the first British consul; but difficulties in navigating the river, coupled with ever-present piracy, made this port inconvenient if not downright dangerous.³⁷ The insignificant foreign business at these places indicates imperial rivalry overshadowing commercial logic. Then, in 1902, the Mackay Treaty handed Sanshui's mantle to Jiangmen.³⁸ If Sanshui's performance had been so lacklustre, why was it expected that Jiangmen's would shine?

Negotiations for the treaty were influenced heavily by British mercantile interests, still concerned that the West River's trade potential would be usurped by French activities. Article VIII opened five new treaty ports, including Jiangmen. It also abolished the unpopular inland duty system known as *lijin*, but was conditional upon all the other treaty powers negotiating similar treaties. As only Japan and the United States did so, Article VIII lapsed.³⁹ Article X, however, in addition to amending certain regulations regarding inland navigation, provided specifically for the opening of Jiangmen, a prescient precaution against the failure of Article VIII. There was much press coverage of the treaty, but only regarding its *lijin* aspects. Shanghai's *North-China Herald* gave an eleven-page verbatim account of the deliberations on the treaty by the Shanghai Branch of The China Association, most of which related to *lijin*; there was no mention of Jiangmen other than the fact of its opening.⁴⁰ This was despite the Association's later claim that Jiangmen's opening was 'due in no small degree' to its representations.⁴¹

Scholarship relating to the treaty is sparse. Choi's focus was on tariff revision. Faure limited his analysis to the effect the treaty, and Western commercial practices generally,

³⁷ Longzhou: *FO Wuchow 1897*, 5. Nanning: Bickers, 'Good Work for China', 32–6. Wuzhou: *FO Wuchow 1897*, 11. Sanshui: *FO Samshui 1897*, 3 and *FO Samshui 1898*, 10.

³⁸ The 1902 British Commercial Treaty is generally referred to as 'The Mackay Treaty', after its chief British negotiator. Mackay, appointed to this position in 1901 by Foreign Secretary Lord Lansdowne, had spent almost 30 years in India engaged in various industries, primarily shipping. In 1892, when Lansdowne was Viceroy of India, Mackay had represented him on a government committee in London investigating Indian currency reform (Keith Grieves, 'Mackay, James Lyle, First Earl of Inchcape (1852–1932)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, online edition [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/34741>, accessed 13 September 2018]]).

³⁹ 1903 Japanese Commercial Treaty and 1903 United States Commercial Treaty.

⁴⁰ *North-China Herald*, 29 October 1902, 895–905.

⁴¹ *South China Morning Post*, 17 March 1904, 6.

were to have on the reform of China's business environment.⁴² No historian has addressed the opening of Jiangmen as an element of Britain's strategy to develop trade on the West River, despite the unique insurance of having its opening provided for by two separate articles of the same treaty.

Jiangmen's prospects, initially, looked promising. Having been designated a port-of-call in 1897, its trade came under the purview of the Maritime Customs. Reported figures were encouraging, although their reliability will be assessed in the next section. However, three developments served to alter British strategy to the further detriment of any potential the newly-opened treaty port may have had: a geographical refocusing of British interests in China; a concentration on railways rather than trade; and an unexpected *entente* with France. Lacking the resources to support two spheres of influence, British decision-makers focused their interest on the Yangzi basin, an area of higher commercial potential.⁴³ Second, in focusing on building railways rather than trade *per se*, the accustomed dominance of British merchants meant they were unaccustomed to cooperate with potential rivals. However, in the environment of intense inter-power competition in the early twentieth century, they saw that without cooperation, even with the French, their own plans would be unrealised.

A surprising *rapprochement* between Britain and France was the third development. Friction between the two imperial powers had been mounting in many parts of the world, but in 1904 an *entente cordiale* was signed which amounted to a division of colonial spoils.⁴⁴ Anglo-French rivalry persisted, but only to the extent appropriate between competing commercial interests. For Britain, those interests no longer justified promoting Jiangmen and West River trade on what had been chiefly a point of principle. Besides, there was a growing realisation that the commercial potential of the river had been overstated significantly. Foreign attempts to realise that potential had already proved challenging and, as the next section will demonstrate, the problems were not alleviated by having an additional treaty port on the river.

⁴² Choi, *Remarkable Hybrid Maritime World*, 155–68; David Faure, 'The Mackay Treaty of 1902 and Its Impact on Chinese Business', *Asia Pacific Business Review*, Vol. 7, Issue 2 (2000), 81–92.

⁴³ Edwards, *British Diplomacy*, 51; Young, *British Policy*, 89, and 161–9.

⁴⁴ Jerome Greenfield, 'Gabriel Hanotaux and French Grand Strategy, 1894–8', *International History Review*, Vol. 38, No. 3 (2015), 461–81; T.G. Otte, 'The Elusive Balance: British Foreign Policy and the French Entente before the First World War', in Sharp and Stone (eds.), *Anglo-French Relations*, 11–35.

Challenges for foreign business on the West River

The opening of the river to foreign trade in 1897 was not the boon British merchants had anticipated.⁴⁵ Two factors combined to frustrate their expectations. First, customs regulations were required and, as these had to also take account of local river trade, they were necessarily complex and required frequent revision. Furthermore, Jiangmen's first Customs Commissioner, Frederick Maze, recorded that it was the only treaty port to have been opened before the arrival of written instructions, resulting in a long period of confusion regarding such basic matters as hours of operation and the position of anchorages.⁴⁶ Second, the existing trade, including in foreign goods, was firmly in the hands of Chinese merchants. In a reversal of Murphey's concept, the vacuum left by the foreigners' inability to use the West River treaty ports to their maximum benefit was filled by Chinese interests.

This section examines the second and third arguments on which this dissertation is based, namely that practical difficulties prevented foreign merchants from operating profitably, and that foreign-initiated privileges and facilities were appropriated by local interests. My analysis starts with a consideration of what the 'opening' of the river meant in practice, and an examination of the difficulties facing foreign efforts to benefit therefrom. I then provide a commercial description of Jiangmen immediately before its opening as a treaty port, and a critical assessment of its officially reported trade figures. Finally, I analyse the commercial activity that did take root there, and the circumstances in which it came about. In conclusion, I show that the nature of the treaty port very soon bore little relation to that which was intended when it was opened.

What was meant by the 'opening' of the river?

Following requests by the foreign ministers in Beijing, the Zongli Yamen announced in January 1896 that two West River ports would be opened to steamships: Sanshui, where

⁴⁵ Pelcovits, *Old China Hands*, 148; Stanley F. Wright, *Hart and the Chinese Customs* (Belfast: Wm. Mullan & Sons, 1950), 634.

⁴⁶ Maze to Hart, 8 March 1904 (SOAS, MS 285232, 8); Maze to Bredon, 25 July 1905 (SOAS, MS 285232, 135).

the river joined its delta system; and Wuzhou, 220 kilometres upstream.⁴⁷ Steamers were permitted to navigate between Sanshui, Wuzhou, Guangzhou and Hong Kong.⁴⁸ Also created were four ports-of-call where passengers and cargo could be shipped and offloaded: Jiangmen and Ganzhu (Kumchuk), on the route taken to the river by vessels from Macao and Hong Kong; and Zhaoqing (Shuihing) and Deqing (Takhing), between Sanshui and Wuzhou. Although an improvement on the pre-treaty situation, these limitations meant the river was not entirely 'open'.

The restrictions were imposed in an attempt to address the situation whereby local vessels and treaty-port traffic were operating side-by-side, sometimes carrying the same produce, but governed by different revenue-collecting systems: steamers paid the fixed treaty tariffs, collected by the Maritime Customs for the imperial government; local trade was subject to the vagaries of the *lijin* system, the revenue of which went mostly to the province. It was almost impossible to legislate for such an absurd situation, yet regulations had to be formulated. Foreign traders expected that their treaty rights, particularly the use of transit-passes, would exempt them from *lijin*.⁴⁹ However, what the foreigners claimed as a right, the Qing government deemed a privilege. The Zongli Yamen had agreed to the opening of inland waterways in order to increase *lijin* revenue, denying that foreign privileges relating to genuine imports and exports should apply to internal trade.⁵⁰ Provincial officials pressured Chinese merchants not to use transit-passes, seeing their use as a loss to both provincial *lijin* revenue and their own personal income.⁵¹ Thus, one of the foreigners' main treaty rights was effectively denied to them.

Another restriction resulted from the river's vast delta, shared with the North and Pearl rivers and providing dozens of different channels to the sea. Most foreign goods entering

⁴⁷ This concession was encapsulated in the 1897 Burmah Agreement, Special Article. The French treaty port of Longzhou, opened at the western end of the river in 1889, was not considered to be part of the 'open' river.

⁴⁸ 'Provisional Regulations on Trade on the West River' (IG Circular 800, 21 April 1898, University of Bristol).

⁴⁹ Jardine Matheson, Wuzhou, to Guangzhou Consul Charles Campbell, 9 June 1900 (TNA, CO 129/308, 282). See also Choi, *Remarkable Hybrid Maritime World*, 6.

⁵⁰ MacDonald to Foreign Secretary Lord Salisbury, 16 April 1898 (*China No. 1 [1899]: Correspondence respecting the Affairs of China*, 105); and Zongli Yamen to MacDonald, 3 June 1898 (China Association Annual Report, 1898, Appendix B, 56, University of Hong Kong).

⁵¹ A letter of 18 January 1897 from Guangzhou Acting-Consul Fraser to MacDonald records an interview with a *lijin* officer who admitted that to do his utmost to prevent the use of transit-passes was merely part of his duty (China Association Annual Report, 1897, Appendix F, 54).

the river originated in Hong Kong, which was outside Customs jurisdiction. Therefore, in order to facilitate Customs supervision, vessels from Hong Kong were restricted to one specified channel. Naturally, foreign steamer operators objected, seeing the restriction as favouring Chinese merchants who, once in the delta system, were free to choose any channel. They also complained that Chinese sailing vessels could call at all inland ports, including the designated ports-of-call.⁵² Another irritation was that the 5% treaty tariff applied equally to long journeys, a thousand kilometres apart, and to shorter distances, such as between Guangzhou and Jiangmen. *Lijin*, almost universally criticised by foreigners, had the advantage of accruing in stages *en route*; short journeys would, in theory, attract less taxation.⁵³

We can now see that the 'opening' of the West River to foreign trade was not easy to achieve if all parties were to be satisfied. The Yangzi offered a partial precedent. Rules had existed there since 1863 restricting steam traffic to treaty ports, placing Yangzi trade on the same basis as coastal trade. In 1897, special regulations were introduced for the West River, based largely on existing Yangzi practice.⁵⁴ Then, in 1898 and in response to British pressure, China opened all its inland waters to steamers, Chinese and foreign; new Inland Waters Steam Navigation Regulations were issued accordingly.⁵⁵

Consequently, there now existed two sets of regulations, and as the West River was part of China's inland waters, there was scope for overlap and confusion between the two. For example, the 1897 West River regulations restricted foreign steamers to one channel, whereas the 1898 Inland Waters regulations allowed steamers to 'proceed to and fro at will'.⁵⁶ Moreover, steamers were required to be licensed under one set of rules or the other; they could not operate under both. Steamers licensed under the Inland Waters rules could act as a feeder service from a treaty port to and from anywhere on the river that was not another treaty port; but they could not go to a foreign port. Under the West River rules, steamers could ply between treaty ports, and from a foreign port, trading

⁵² Wright, *Hart and the Chinese Customs*, 703.

⁵³ Given the arbitrary nature of *lijin* assessment this was not always the case. Alcock observed that it could range from 10% to 90%, even within a small radius of a treaty port (Alcock to Stanley, 7 December 1868 [*China No. 5 (1871)*], 254).

⁵⁴ The 'Provisional Regulations on Trade on the West River' (IG Circular 800).

⁵⁵ 1898 Inland Steam Navigation Regulations.

⁵⁶ 1898 Inland Steam Navigation Regulations, Regulation 1.

only at ports-of-call *en route*; but they could not go from a foreign port (say, Hong Kong) to a port-of-call only (for example, Jiangmen). In creating these rules, the Customs' overriding intention was to protect that part of the revenue that had traditionally flowed to the provinces. Robert Hart also maintained that opening China's inland waters was 'not for a moment ... intended ... to kill native trade'.⁵⁷ Yet the door had been opened, and competition was inevitable.

It will be noticed that the regulations governed trading by 'steamers', not Chinese sailing craft. This gave rise to a phenomenon that further frustrated foreign steamship operators. Enterprising Chinese merchants used steam launches to tow cargo-carrying junks. The launches, which themselves carried no cargo, were treated as merely the means of propulsion, hence outwith the regulations governing steam-carried trade.⁵⁸ Using a combination of launches registered in Hong Kong and others registered under Inland Waters rules, such operators could tow junks laden with cargo from Hong Kong to any place on the West River. When foreign shippers tried to follow suit, they found it difficult to compete, owing to the sheer number of launches operated by Chinese.⁵⁹ The British shipping companies also complained that the regulations required their steamers, practically empty, to pass by places where Chinese-towed junks were free to go at will. It was difficult in these circumstances for foreign steamers to operate profitably.

The desire to optimise use of resources led operators of vessels licensed under each system to want the privileges of those operating under the other, especially as their respective ships worked the same stretch of water. In 1898, Jardine Matheson tested the new regulations and applied to have one of its vessels, already licensed to trade between Hong Kong, Sanshui and Wuzhou, to be registered also under the Inland Waters rules. They were refused.⁶⁰ An 1899 memorandum by a member of the China Association recommended all vessels on the river be licensed to conduct any trade, provided they remain in Chinese waters. Another suggestion was for the Customs to pass the treaty tariff from West River trade to the provincial government, not Beijing. The China

⁵⁷ Hart to Henry Bax-Ironside, British Chargé d'Affaires, Beijing, 12 May 1899 (*China No. 1 [1900]: Further Correspondence respecting the Affairs of China*, 186).

⁵⁸ Memorandum re Inland Navigation by Jardine Matheson and Others, 28 March 1899 (*China No. 1 [1900]*, 183); 1898 Inland Steam Navigation Regulations, clause 7.

⁵⁹ Report from British Consul in Guangzhou, 1 April 1898 (TNA, CO 129/287, 245); *FO Samshui 1900*, 7-8.

⁶⁰ China Association Annual Report, 1899-1900, Appendix H, 76-77.

Association agreed to this also; recognising the loss of provincial revenue, it preferred to see the transit-pass duties accrue to the province.⁶¹ Both were workable solutions, but Hart was adamant. In a letter to Henry Bax-Ironside, British Chargé d’Affaires, Beijing, he detailed the difficulty of addressing foreigners’ expectations regarding their treaty privileges while maintaining the balance of provincial and imperial revenue; he admitted that the concession to open the West River to foreign steamers was ‘launched without sufficient consideration or preparation, and, as it now is, it does not satisfy either side’.⁶²

The convoluted and contradictory regulations led to frustration and complaint, making trade on the West River increasingly difficult and unremunerative for foreign steamers. In an effort to resolve the impasse, a meeting in November 1899 between the Customs commissioners and British consuls of the West River ports, attended also by representatives of the British shipping companies, concluded that the difficulty of managing competing customs requirements rendered it impossible to treat the West River as ‘inland waters’; the alterations to the regulations recommended by this meeting were therefore, according to Wuzhou Consul James Jamieson, ‘of such a limited scope as to be of little practical value’. The shipping companies had already written to Minister Claude MacDonald in Beijing, complaining of the Chinese government’s ‘evasive policy [that sought] to impose such restrictions on the opening of [the West River] as will render the whole Concession valueless’. Consul Jamieson, in his trade report for 1899 emphasised the absurdity of a steamer with a West River certificate being debarred from calling at intermediate places when plying the West River, requiring a second steamer to carry cargo back over the same ground to its destination.⁶³ In late 1900, all British steamers plying between Hong Kong and Wuzhou were withdrawn. The *China Mail* described the ‘so-called’ opening of the river, with its restrictive regulations and differential treatment of British vessels, as ‘an utter farce’.⁶⁴

Furthermore, Sanshui Acting-Consul Henry Little asserted that foreign-owned vessels operating on the West River had been too expensive for the purpose, and unlikely to be

⁶¹ China Association General Committee Member George Jamieson, Memorandum on West River Inland Navigation Regulations, 8 August 1899 (*China No. 1 [1900]*, 233); *FO Canton 1898*, 6.

⁶² Hart to Bax-Ironside, 12 May 1899 (*China No. 1 [1900]*, 186).

⁶³ Intelligence Report from Wuzhou Consul James Jamieson, 31 January 1900 (TNA, CO 129/302, 524); Jardine and Others to MacDonald, 28 March 1899 (*China No. 1 [1900]*, 181); *FO Wuchow 1899*, 11.

⁶⁴ *China Mail*, 4 October 1900.

profitable. He attributed this to ignorance of local conditions and over-estimation of the volume of trade. Little suggested that a port be opened near the mouth of the river, which could be supplied by steamer from Hong Kong, and at which incoming goods could be transferred to smaller vessels running under the Inland Navigation rules, adding: 'the opening of [Jiangmen] would, no doubt, be a great benefit.'⁶⁵

In March, Ernest Satow, the incoming British Minister in Beijing, asked Hart to draw up new regulations for the West River, combining the West River and Inland Navigation rules, 'otherwise the British flag will disappear ... a result which can hardly prove conducive to the maintenance of British interests'.⁶⁶ Protection of British interests not being Hart's responsibility, Satow's proposal became part of Mackay's brief in the treaty negotiations. Mackay favoured having West River steamers loaded in Hong Kong under Chinese Customs supervision, and their manifests certified accordingly, but he noted objections by Hong Kong's governor and chamber of commerce; the chamber had only recently urged vociferously the removal of Chinese customs stations from what had become, in 1898, Hong Kong's New Territories.⁶⁷ In Hong Kong, Mackay's proposal was seen as interference by officials of the Chinese state, prompting Guangzhou Consul Byron Brennan to comment that: 'sentiment has greater weight than practical convenience ... If it is conceded that all merchandise arriving in Canton waters from Hong Kong must pay a duty, it is not conceding very much more to say that the duty shall be paid before starting.'⁶⁸ Instead, Mackay proposed that Jiangmen be opened as a treaty port, thereby enabling transshipment of goods and payment of duty to be performed there.⁶⁹ But, as we shall see, this had been the function performed by Sanshui, and that port had not grown to be a successful centre of foreign trade. Unsurprisingly, the China Association opposed the idea of Jiangmen simply replacing Sanshui as a place of enforced transshipment, but Jiangmen nevertheless became a treaty port.⁷⁰ Let us now look at the port's commercial

⁶⁵ Intelligence Report by Sanshui Acting-Consul Henry Little, 8 January 1901 (TNA, CO 129/308, 241); *FO Samshui 1891*, 9.

⁶⁶ Satow to Hart, 11 March 1901 (TNA, CO 129/308, 281).

⁶⁷ Mackay to Foreign Secretary Lord Lansdowne, 22 March 1902 (TNA, FO 17/1565, 317); *FO Canton 1897*, 9; Hong Kong General Chamber of Commerce Annual Report for 1899, 25.

⁶⁸ *FO Canton 1897*, 9.

⁶⁹ The treaty also introduced slight amendments to the West River Regulations, acknowledging, in classic understatement, that the existing regulations 'have been found in some respects inconvenient in working' (1902 Mackay Treaty, Art. X).

⁷⁰ Joseph Welch, Hon. Secretary of The China Association in London, to Leonard Kerr, Hon. Secretary of the Shanghai Branch, 8 May 1902 (China Association Annual Report, 1901-1902, 70).

activity at that time.

Pre-treaty-port Jiangmen

Jiangmen, as we have seen, was an important local agricultural, distribution and manufacturing centre, although its prosperity was affected by the opening of treaty ports in south China. The Maritime Customs had been recording Jiangmen's trade since it became a port-of-call in 1897. The recorded value of that trade in 1898 far exceeded that of the other three ports-of-call combined; it more than doubled in the next three years, almost rivalling Sanshui.⁷¹ *Prima facie*, such figures made encouraging reading. However, assessment based on Customs' statistics was flawed; although painstakingly recorded, they were not a reliable indicator, as scholars have shown and officials at the time acknowledged.⁷² Domestic trade was not included, and there was scope for interplay between the two. Given the often-arbitrary nature of *lijin* collection, varying degrees of determination by collectors to maximise their revenue could affect the route taken by Chinese importers of foreign items, as could the repositioning of *lijin* stations; there was potential for the foreign duty to be more attractive than *lijin*, and *vice versa*.⁷³ Fluctuations in recorded Maritime Customs revenue might not, therefore, reflect changes in the actual volume of trade. This was particularly the case with Sanshui.⁷⁴

As suggested earlier, foreign merchants had been overly optimistic regarding the trade potential of the West River. Yet Sanshui, a city of no commercial significance, had within four years of its becoming a treaty port risen to be the 15th-largest (of 41) in terms of shipping.⁷⁵ The port's genuine transshipment role for goods under transit-pass was one contributory factor, but there was another type of transshipment. Large quantities of Jiangmen tobacco, and other products, destined for the interior, were sent by junk to Sanshui, whence they would be exported by steamer to Hong Kong. They would then return to Sanshui, in the same vessel, as 'foreign' goods, tranship to Wuzhou and proceed inland under transit-pass, having been recorded in Sanshui's statistics four times. In this manner, domestic products could travel more than 200 kilometres along the West River,

⁷¹ *Customs Decennial 1892–1901*, 258.

⁷² Murphey, *The Outsiders*, 207–8; Van de Ven, *Breaking with the Past*, 122.

⁷³ *Customs Decennial 1892–1901*, Vol. II, 259.

⁷⁴ *FO Samshui 1899*, 7.

⁷⁵ *FO Samshui 1901*, 9.

then into the interior, and avoid the ten *lijin* stations they would otherwise encounter; the duty paid in accordance with the treaties plus the cost of shipping to and from Hong Kong were less than the *lijin* avoided.⁷⁶ The 1898 consular report for Sanshui described this practice as a reflection of the 'suicidal policy' pursued by the *lijin* authorities at the expense of a would-be flourishing trade.⁷⁷ Excessive *lijin* was also considered to be the chief reason why goods destined for Nanning were shipped first to Beihai and then overland to a point on the West River a little downstream from Nanning. Conversely, British shipping companies complained of a practice adopted by the provincial authorities in 1898, whereby *lijin* was reduced in order to divert the carriage of goods from foreign steamers to 'native craft'.⁷⁸

The apparent success of Sanshui, therefore, rested on its transshipment business, all of which was in Chinese hands.⁷⁹ No foreign merchants resided there, even four years after its opening, yet its trade was directly attributable to its treaty-port status. Steamers coming from Hong Kong were obliged to make a treaty port their terminus, and the first one they came to on the West River was Sanshui, a place, as stated, otherwise of no commercial importance. Jiangmen, conversely, not only had significant industries, but was also an important embarkation port for Chinese migrant labour.⁸⁰ Under the regulations, any Hong-Kong-bound exports or emigrants originating in Jiangmen had to first tranship at Sanshui. Likewise, any incoming vessels would first have to call at Sanshui, even though they may have passed Jiangmen on the way. As all this trade was Chinese, not foreign, was the avoidance of this time-consuming detour sufficient justification for Jiangmen's opening as a British treaty port? Sanshui hosted neither a British consulate, apart from very briefly, nor a British trading community. Surely the same would apply at any other port opened with the same rationale. Jiangmen was a commercial centre in its own right, but a Chinese one. As a British treaty port, it was destined to be as unsuccessful as Sanshui. Let us now see the extent to which this was indeed the case.

⁷⁶ *FO Samshui 1901*, 6.

⁷⁷ *FO Samshui 1898*, 7. See also The China Association to Salisbury, 8 July 1898 (China Association Annual Report, 1898, Appendix A, 281).

⁷⁸ Memorandum re Inland Navigation, Jardine, Matheson and Others, 28 March 1899 (*China No. 1 [1900]*), 183.

⁷⁹ *FO Samshui 1899*, 8.

⁸⁰ *Customs Decennial 1892–1901*, 257; *FO Samshui 1898*, 8.

Commercial activity at the treaty port

In anticipation of the port's opening, local speculators had been buying river-front sites as early as 1901.⁸¹ Also anticipating the opening of the port, Hong Kong's *South China Morning Post* stated in an editorial that Jiangmen 'bids fair to develop into the first Treaty Port on the West River [and that it] should fulfil every expectation hitherto concerning its importance as a trade centre'.⁸² However, in his first Trade Report as Jiangmen Customs Commissioner, Maze stated: 'At present there are no indications that the sanguine expectations, based upon imperfect knowledge, entertained concerning the over-estimated commercial possibilities of the place will be speedily, if ever, realised.' He expressed the same view a year later.⁸³ His comment would have been influenced by the almost total absence of foreign merchants at Jiangmen, despite all the 'hurried preparations' reported as being made in Sanshui and Guangzhou.⁸⁴ As we have seen, there were none who could have been making such preparations at Sanshui. Guangzhou, on the other hand, had dozens of foreign commercial firms, yet none went to Jiangmen. One of the few reports of the size of Jiangmen's foreign population is from March 1905, when there were ten.⁸⁵

These included four Portuguese from Macao who arrived in June 1904, erected two buildings and started a manufacturing business; two remained until 1907 and none thereafter.⁸⁶ British-qualified Master Mariner Joseph Lewingdon was listed in the 1905 directory; a Hong Kong-based West River steamer captain, in the Jiangmen entry he was described as agent for three Chinese shipping companies.⁸⁷ He does not appear the

⁸¹ Sanshui Consul Henry Little, Intelligence Report, 2 January 1902 (TNA, FO 228/1461, 2).

⁸² *South China Morning Post*, 11 March 1904, 5.

⁸³ 1904 Trade Report for Kongmoon, 2 (SOAS, MS 285232); 1905 Trade Report for Kongmoon, 1 (SOAS, MS 285232).

⁸⁴ See Introduction page 1, note 3. In October 1904, the *South China Morning Post* was still describing the keen competition at Sanshui, whereby the shipping companies were determined 'to be on the spot when the supposed goldmine of Kongmoon opens' (18 October 1904, 4).

⁸⁵ *South China Morning Post*, 8 March 1905, 5.

⁸⁶ *C&D* 1907, 903; *C&D* 1908, 923; Maze to Hart, 15 June 1904 (SOAS, MS 285232, 67).

⁸⁷ *C&D* 1905, 357. Although a person may be listed at a particular port, he or she may not have been actually resident there. Sometimes a non-resident person might specifically be listed as such, but not necessarily in every case. The directories are therefore not fully reliable in this respect. Furthermore, the *Chronicle and Directory* for any year was typically published at the beginning of that year, hence contained information pertaining to the previous year. That for 1905 was published in February 1905 (see advertisement in *Hong Kong Weekly Press*, 20 February 1905, 121). Other information on Lewingdon is drawn from ancestry.co.uk (accessed 13 September 2018) and an obituary in the *South China Morning Post*, 15 March 1924, 10.

following year although he, and a number of British officers, continued to command Chinese vessels. Also listed for 1904 was Captain J.B.A. Grote, latterly 'a recognised authority on China's waterways'; he too does not appear in later directories.⁸⁸ Four other foreign firms were listed for 1904, all handled by Chinese agents; none was listed subsequently. Canadian missionaries established a medical mission in Jiangmen in 1902; they later built 'a commodious hospital and several substantial residences'.⁸⁹ However, no other foreign merchants resided there until 1912, when British American Tobacco and Standard Oil sent resident agents; Asiatic Petroleum followed suit in 1914.⁹⁰



View of the Jiangmen Customs pontoon and bungalow, 1905. The 'New buildings' to the left are those erected by the Portuguese from Macao. (Source: Queen's University, Belfast)

Unlike Wenzhou, Jiangmen did not host a regular correspondent to the treaty-port press. We therefore know very little about the day-to-day lives of the tiny foreign community, other than periodic flooding during the rainy season; on at least two occasions the

⁸⁸ *C&D* 1905, 357; *C&D* 1906, 842; *South China Morning Post*, 2 June 1914, 2.

⁸⁹ The United Church of Canada Mission (R.G. Tiedemann, *Reference Guide to Christian Missionary Societies in China, from the Sixteenth to the Twentieth Century* [Armonk, New York: M.E. Sharpe, 2009], 226); *Customs Decennial 1902-11*, 178.

⁹⁰ *C&D* 1913, 1053; *C&D* 1915, 1058.

Customs shed was swamped and the staff houseboat flooded.⁹¹ There was also occasional drama brought about by overcrowded Chinese passenger boats. When a passenger fell from the Customs pontoon and drowned, an angry crowd of 500 threatened to destroy the Custom House. The prompt intervention of two passing gunboats restored order, but the unfortunate victim's body was left for four days at the entrance to the Customs compound.⁹² In 1905, many more drowned when an overcrowded passenger boat overturned.⁹³ Until the coming of the Sunning Railway (see below) there was nothing else to report.

A number of Chinese industries developed during the first few years of Jiangmen being a treaty port: textile and paper factories and, in 1908, a cigar factory.⁹⁴ However, given the commercial activity of Jiangmen before 1904, these cannot be attributed to the town's treaty-port status. What that status did bring, however, was significant improvements in infrastructure and communication, by steamer then rail. Imports and exports were little affected by having a direct steamer connection to Hong Kong; under revised Inland Waters rules in 1905, Hong Kong steamers bound for Sanshui and Wuzhou no longer had to call at Jiangmen for Customs clearance.⁹⁵ The carriage of passengers, on the other hand, was given a boost by both these improved forms of transport.

Since the mid-nineteenth century, Jiangmen had been an embarkation point for emigrants seeking work abroad.⁹⁶ Initially travelling to Hong Kong by junk before boarding a trans-Pacific vessel, from 1897 they would have caught a Hong Kong-bound steamer at the new treaty port of Sanshui. In 1901, an estimated 177,000 passengers, mostly from Jiangmen, passed through Sanshui *en route* for Hong Kong.⁹⁷ With the opening of Jiangmen, this traffic was able to pass direct to Hong Kong. Emigrants' remittances back to Jiangmen amounted to some \$4 million annually, giving a boost to

⁹¹ *Hong Kong Telegraph*, 1 September 1905, 4; *The China Mail*, 19 April 1906, 5.

⁹² *Hong Kong Telegraph*, 5 September 1904, 5.

⁹³ *Hong Kong Telegraph*, 15 June 1905, 4.

⁹⁴ *Customs Decennial 1902-11*, 181-2, 187.

⁹⁵ *Customs Decennial 1902-11*, 179.

⁹⁶ Elizabeth Sinn argued that perhaps half the 100,000 Chinese in America hailed from the counties neighbouring Jiangmen (*Pacific Crossing: California Gold, Chinese Migration, and the Making of Hong Kong* [Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2013], 49).

⁹⁷ *FO Samshui 1901*, 11.

local banks.⁹⁸ After 1901, numbers of passengers became hard to establish. British consular reports are often a useful source, but none was issued from Jiangmen (the consular presence lasted less than a year, after which consular matters were handled out of Guangzhou) and the Sanshui consulate closed in 1902. Maze's 1905 Trade Report for Jiangmen records: 'No reliable statistics concerning the inter-delta passenger traffic are obtainable at present, but, judging by the crowded passenger-boats, it is apparently not decreasing.'⁹⁹

To accommodate the growing passenger numbers, a thrice-weekly steamer service from Hong Kong was established in March 1904; a daily service was added in January 1905.¹⁰⁰ As the Jiangmen creek was too congested to accommodate vessels other than sampans and small junks, the centre of shipping operations gravitated towards the Custom House, on the West River bank, upstream from the mouth of the creek.¹⁰¹ There was good anchorage there and a small stone-faced bund was created, known as Beijie (North Street). The convenience of this new facility attracted a wealthy returned emigrant, Chen Yixi. He had been in North America for 40 years where, amongst other employments, he had been a labourer, then foreman, on the Canadian Pacific Railway. When he came home to Xinning County in 1904, then known as Sunning and the main source of emigrants, he decided to build a railway from his hometown to Jiangmen; it became known as the Sunning Railway.¹⁰²

⁹⁸ *Customs Decennial 1902–11*, 190; *Customs Decennial 1912–21*, 268.

⁹⁹ 1905 Trade Report for Kongmoon, 6 (SOAS, MS 285232).

¹⁰⁰ 1904: Heung Kong Steam Boat Co. (*South China Morning Post*, 1 March 1904, 6); 1905: Hong Kong, Canton & Macao Steamboat Co. (*Hongkong Telegraph*, 1 February 1905, 2).

¹⁰¹ See map on page 78.

¹⁰² Lucie Cheng, Liu Yuzun and Zheng Dehua, 'Chinese Emigration, the Sunning Railway and the Development of Toisan', *Amerasia*, Vol. 9, No. 1 (1982), 59–74.



Rough sketch of the West River at Jiangmen made by a Royal Navy officer in 1901, already showing three possible sites for a British concession. The Custom House and anchorages are also marked. The town of Jiangmen (Kongmoon) is shown some way up the Kongmoon Creek in the south-west corner. (Source: TNA, FO 228/1369, 66)

Construction of the railway started in 1906. The extension to Jiangmen was completed in December 1911. The line was immediately very popular, not least for being the first in China to be financed, built and operated entirely by Chinese.¹⁰³ In 1912, the railway company built a new wharf at the north end of Beijie, where passengers from its adjacent terminus station could transfer onto Hong-Kong-bound steamers. Within ten years the railway was carrying 3 million people annually.¹⁰⁴ It was a significant business, made possible by Jiangmen's treaty-port status, but with no input apart from Chinese.

Guangdong, like the rest of China, was to experience a number of vicissitudes during the 1920s and 1930s. Yet the merchants of Jiangmen, already prosperous before the town became a treaty port, were able to maximise the benefit of infrastructural improvements that might not otherwise have come their way. These improvements had been spawned by Jiangmen's having been made a treaty port, the result of two European powers flexing their imperial muscles, soon diverting their attention elsewhere. The Chinese entrepreneurs of Jiangmen, on the other hand, focused their efforts locally, and prospered as a result. In 1970, Murphey published a study entitled *The Treaty Ports and China's Modernization: What Went Wrong?*¹⁰⁵ Had he been writing but ten years later, such a title would have been inappropriate. Jiangmen, Wenzhou, and many others, are examples of treaty ports that benefitted local Chinese business and, taken together, since the 1980s have had a significant impact on China's modernisation.

Conclusion

The literature is rich in accounts of successful treaty ports. Architectural evidence of that success abounds in those ports today. Had there grown a thriving foreign settlement along Jiangmen's bund, with beautiful colonial residences and commercial buildings, overlooked by a fine British consulate on the hill behind, this would have suggested Jiangmen too was successful. But the only remaining foreign-style structure, apart from a Customs building and the missionary core of the Jiangmen Beijie Central Hospital, is the small, attractive, but crumbling, former residence of the Asiatic Petroleum manager. That

¹⁰³ Chen was awarded the 'Order of the Third Degree' [*sic*] by the Emperor in recognition of his achievement (*Hongkong Telegraph*, 13 July 1909, 4).

¹⁰⁴ *FO Canton 1911*, 10; Cheng, Liu and Zheng, 'Chinese Emigration', 59–74; *Customs Decennial 1912–21*, 263.

¹⁰⁵ Murphey, *The Treaty Ports*.

many of the steamers that called at Jiangmen were British-built and British-owned does not make the port a British commercial success. As a colonial port city, Jiangmen demonstrably failed. This conclusion can be reached after a half-hour's stroll along Beijie.

Yet the fact that Jiangmen was a thriving commercial centre is no paradox; it was a thriving Chinese commercial centre, before, during and after its experience as a treaty port. Furthermore, it had an impact far beyond the narrow confines of the treaty port itself, another counter to historians' contentions to the contrary. Any success that can be attributed to Jiangmen arose through Chinese efforts, not foreign ones. However, there is a paradox: this success, at least in part, can be attributed to functions and opportunities introduced by a foreign treaty.

The literature on the impact such treaties had, and continue to have, on China is extensive and evolving. I argued that the British treaty ports in China, taken as a whole, formed part of Britain's informal empire. In isolation, however, I could not claim this about Jiangmen. Darwin argued that the 'British world-system' depended on the physical trappings of business and a chain of imperial communications; neither was evident in Jiangmen.¹⁰⁶ Nevertheless, this study of Jiangmen and its role as a British treaty port underlines the importance of examining negative factors, principally why it failed, rather than solely positive ones, such as why others succeeded.

The agreement that gave treaty-port status to Jiangmen was based on a miscalculation of the benefits expected to flow to foreign interests on the opening of the West River, and reflected an inter-power rivalry that was soon to dissipate. When the foreign focus moved from the trade itself to the means of transporting it, the regulatory restrictions were such as to make the West River an unattractive place for foreigners to try to make a profit. Even though seven years had passed between the opening of Sanshui and Wuzhou, in 1897, and Jiangmen, in 1904, this chapter demonstrates that it was inevitable that Jiangmen would suffer the same fate, as a treaty port, as its two predecessors.

¹⁰⁶ Darwin, *Empire Project*.

Nevertheless, the status of being a treaty port brought with it advantages that the former Chinese port of Jiangmen did not have: principally, membership of the network of other treaty ports and foreign stations in China. Transportation of goods and people had been part of Jiangmen's commercial activity long before 1904. Treaty-port status enabled Jiangmen's Chinese merchants to streamline these activities by way of direct steamer access to Hong Kong, the main source and destination of the goods and people they carried.

Notwithstanding its almost total Chinese complexion, Jiangmen remained a treaty port from its opening in 1904 until the end of the treaty port system. A study of the place gives us a special insight into an example of the breed which, by obligation, followed some of the expectations and norms that applied to treaty ports, yet at the same time did not follow others. For example, treaty-port status enabled foreign powers to establish consulates if they wished, although Britain was the only one to do so, and that only for less than a year. Treaty ports were places where foreign merchants could live and do business, yet almost none did so at Jiangmen. Treaty ports, being technically centres of foreign trade, required the presence of the Maritime Customs to collect import and export duties. However, the foreign trade *per se* was negligible; besides, there had been a domestic revenue-collecting apparatus at Jiangmen before 1904.

Jiangmen never bore any resemblance to what was intended at the time of its creation. But even if it had 'looked more like a treaty port ought to look', would that have changed anything, apart from its physical appearance? This study has been of one port city, but it reveals practical realities that are overlooked when studying high-level strategy and the wider treaty-port experience. Jiangmen is but an example of many whose intended functions and privileges were appropriated, to good effect, by local interests. Jiangmen gives us an opportunity to consider how far, if at all, even 'successful' treaty ports were indeed 'foreign' places.



The former Asiatic Petroleum Company building, Jiangmen. (Source: Nicholas Kitto)

Conclusion

The subject of this study has been the colonial port city. By focusing on two of Britain's least successful such ventures in China, I have provided a new understanding of colonial expansion and interaction with indigenous commercial systems. Darwin, Cain and Hopkins, and Porter all suggested that colonial port cities were agents of commercial expansion and imperial control; my two case-study ports are examples where any such hopes that might have been held by their British promoters were frustrated. From a different perspective, Murphey argued that Asian colonial port cities were spaces where outsiders introduced commercial and infrastructural change; at Wenzhou and Jiangmen this was done by indigenous merchants whose influence spread beyond the confines of the respective ports. Headrick argued that Britons' superior technology facilitated their penetration of China; Wenzhou and Jiangmen saw this technology being used by Chinese themselves in pursuit of their own ambitions. Indeed, this thesis questions whether Wenzhou and Jiangmen qualified as colonial port cities at all, apart from featuring in directories, lists and shipping timetables; neither displayed any of the key functions outlined in the Introduction. This reveals the danger of generalisation; as I argued earlier, to study, and draw conclusions from, only the large and successful examples would be to ignore three-quarters of the treaty-port population. In this respect, I would argue that 'systems' in history, such as 'the treaty-port system', are less systematic and organised than historians imply. Studying these two ports, and others like them, enables us to question the generality of many scholarly assertions regarding colonial expansion, informal empire, and treaty ports.

This thesis began with a report of the opening ceremony of Jiangmen, one of the least successful treaty ports, on 7 March 1904. Chapter Two demonstrated that despite expectations, no British trading community took root there. Instead it continued as a centre of Chinese commercial activity. Chapter One showed that Wenzhou had a similar experience. Has this study, therefore, been of the development of Chinese business prompted by British initiative? No. Chinese business was, and is, capable of evolving without foreign input. Although many of China's leading cities were formerly spaces of foreign commercial activity, in most cases that activity was grafted on to existing centres of Chinese trade.

Rather, my aim has been to analyse two of the least significant treaty ports to see if their experience could explain why so many were created, only to become commercial failures from a foreign standpoint. One factor common to Wenzhou and Jiangmen is that they were in decline when they became treaty ports. Furthermore, their decline was at least partly attributable to the existence of other treaty ports: Wenzhou had lost its staple tea business to Fuzhou, and Jiangmen's role as a distribution centre suffered as a result of the opening of other nearby ports. The experience of these two suggests one answer to my question: there was only a finite amount of trade, and this could not be increased simply by opening more ports.

Yet this conclusion presupposes that a thriving British commercial centre was a viable aim. My first argument in the Introduction was that although mercantile considerations influenced British policy in China, they could be misplaced or over-ridden. Wenzhou's promoters were certain that British trade would flourish there; but as I have demonstrated, the exercise of prior due diligence would have revealed that this was a myth and that the commercial argument was, at best, weak. Five ports, including Jiangmen, were opened on the West River primarily as a result of British and French imperial hubris. Once that rivalry dissipated, the region's trade potential was seen for what it was: also a myth. In neither Wenzhou nor Jiangmen did foreign business take root. However, because of this, there emerged a different outcome of treaty-port status, an outcome less apparent through studying only the larger ports, with their thriving British and other foreign communities: treaty ports engendered Chinese business.

Yen-ping Hao argued that the 1842 Nanjing Treaty was not as 'epoch-making' as it is generally believed to be; it was but one factor, he claimed, that facilitated the rise of commercial capitalism in China, merely giving impetus to what was already happening.¹ This view ignores the 'epoch-making' effect that foreign aggression had, and still has, on the Chinese psyche; the aftershocks of the First Opium War continued to be felt as more and more treaty ports opened. Nevertheless, although an indelible mark has been left on Shanghai and a few of the larger ports, in more ways than the physical, most of the others continued largely the same as they had been before the foreigners came. Polachek

¹ Hao, *Commercial Revolution*, 336.

contended that Chinese people believed that Britain's commitments elsewhere, principally India, left it in a weak position in China and that the British would simply go away. The average Chinese did not realise that the country had lost a war with Britain in 1842; even the Chinese government was sheltered from bad news to a great extent by its own officials. Hence, Polachek added, Chinese administrators and officials believed they did not need to modernise their military and defence capabilities, for example.² However, that is not to say that the Chinese rejected foreign innovations; Dikötter argued that suggestions that they did so are not grounded in substantial empirical work.³ My point is that treaty ports, even small ones, benefitted from treaty-port status, with their steamships, particularly, helping to modernise China. This also helps to answer my question: although not seen at the time, foreign-imposed trading centres were increasingly irrelevant in the face of China's ongoing and accelerating commercial development.

This dissertation has also been a study of Britain's China policy. Scholars point to the apparent lack of an overall strategy regarding British penetration of China. Was the large number of unsuccessful treaty ports a reflection of a 'you win some, you lose some' attitude? I suggest it would be inappropriate to attribute such a casual approach to Britain's treaty-port experience. However, as Martin Lynn, argued, there was a gulf between British intentions and reality, even at the peak of Britain's power.⁴ The experience of Wenzhou and Jiangmen demonstrates such a gulf; each had its promoters, certain, albeit on unconvincing grounds, of success, yet neither was successful.

Was the number of failed treaty ports a reflection of lack of British knowledge of China? By the mid-nineteenth century, the coast was largely known, as were the lower reaches of the Yangzi. Later, the advent of railways and increased travel in the interior expanded foreigners' knowledge of the country. Yet of the successful British treaty ports, the last to be created was Tianjin, in 1860.⁵ The passage of time did not result in better identification

² James M. Polachek, *The Inner Opium War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 200.

³ Frank Dikötter, *Things Modern: Material Culture and Everyday Life in China* (London: Hurst & Co, 2007), 26.

⁴ Martin Lynn, 'British Policy, Trade, and Informal Empire in the Mid-Nineteenth Century', in Andrew Porter (ed.), *The Oxford History of the British Empire: Volume III, The Nineteenth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, [1999] 2009), 120.

⁵ Britain opened 14 more after Tianjin, and other powers 16.

of profitable treaty-port sites. Britain's dominance, among foreign powers in China, did not reflect in the possession of more profitable knowledge of the country and its commercial systems. Pelcovits argued that British merchants were often more positive than their government about China's potential, and that this led to a difficult working relationship between the two.⁶ Difficulties multiplied when merchants, with an eye to a return on their investment, adopted a shorter-term view than that of British officials. This can be seen in the case of Jardine Matheson in Wenzhou, whose presence lasted barely a year. However, whereas businesses could make quick decisions and move their operations elsewhere if things turned bad, treaty ports remained, for better or worse, and could only be successful if merchants chose to make them so.

The benefits to the Western powers of continuing their penetration of China became less clear as the twentieth century progressed. Internal disruption and popular dissatisfaction in the 1920s started the process of ending extraterritorial privileges and giving back foreign concessions. Yet, as the country opened again to the outside world in the 1980s, the majority of the new Special Economic Zones were created in former treaty ports.⁷ On a wider scale, the coming of independence to many colonies in the 1950s and 1960s saw a realisation that the formerly Western-dominated port cities had become an inalienable part of the national fabric and the irreversible focus of much of their commercial activity.⁸ Many port cities in Asia were left by the colonisers in a very different state to that in which they found them. They had adopted features of an alien civilisation and become, and remain, hybrids: part Western, part Eastern. Almost nothing is visible today in Wenzhou and Jiangmen of the foreign influence, but their development was boosted by having been, at one time, members of a global semi-colonial network.

To what extent are my two case-study ports representative of all smaller treaty ports, and to what extent can the conclusions drawn from the empirical research in my two main chapters be applied to smaller ports generally? Wenzhou and Jiangmen emerged as treaty ports from completely unrelated circumstances: redress for the death of a British

⁶ Pelcovits, *Old China Hands*.

⁷ Of the first four, declared in 1979, Shantou and Xiamen had been treaty ports; the other two, Shenzhen and Zhuhai, were adjacent to the colonies of Hong Kong and Macao respectively. Of the 14 more declared in 1984, all but two were former foreign trading centres.

⁸ Murphey, 'Traditionalism and Colonialism', 72.

consular official in the case of the former, and a post-Boxer commitment to modernise China's commercial systems in the case of the latter. Other treaty ports were created by the agreements that gave rise to these two. Study of those other ports, and any of the less successful members of the network, would doubtless prove rewarding. Yet I believe that each would support the four main arguments of this paper: that commercial considerations were sometimes misplaced or overridden; that unforeseen practical difficulties frustrated commercial aspirations; that indigenous interests benefitted at least as much as foreign ones, if not more; and that treaty ports were not homogeneous. Potter warned against basing wide generalisations upon limited case studies. However, despite their different circumstances, I believe my examples are representative of smaller treaty ports generally in all key respects.⁹

Exploring many of China's modern cities today, large and small, one is likely to come across architectural anachronisms: European buildings, former consulates, custom houses, or merchants' residences. These are increasingly being cared for by the Chinese state and showcased for their historical significance, rather than written off as alien impositions. I have been to fifty or more places in China where such evidence of the semi-colonial era remains. If any common features can be identified in China's former treaty ports it is these reminders of the foreign presence. But that is where the similarity ends. Each treaty port followed a different trajectory; each had a different outcome.

The aim of this thesis has been to promote a more nuanced study of colonial port cities in the context of the treaty-port system, differentiating among the many ports: large and small; successes and failures; those with mature mercantile systems in place and those that were less developed; those that were resistant to, and receptive of the foreign presence. Given that it covers two ports only, this dissertation is only a beginning; much scholarship and research is needed in order to achieve a fully balanced analysis of China's former treaty ports.

⁹ Potter, 'Empire, Cultures and Identities', 54.

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