

Foreign Office Files for China

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David Tyler

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Chi-kwan Mark

Globalization, some have argued, has created a borderless world by breaking down the physical barriers to the movement of people, products and ideas. Technological advance further facilitates the free circulation of information. Despite their obsession with the past, historians, archivists and publishers in the history field have not been slow to embrace the new digital technology. In the past two decades or so, many digital resources for history, covering both primary and secondary sources, have been published. Gone were the days when historians had no choice but to travel to overseas archives or libraries for research. One of the latest digital resources is [Foreign Office Files for China](#) [2] sourced from The National Archives at Kew by Adam Matthew Digital Ltd. Published in three sections (1949–56; 1957–66; 1967–80) over 2009–2010, this collection is the most comprehensive set of British Foreign Office/Foreign and Commonwealth Office documents on China available in digital and print forms.

This review is about section one of the collection. Most of the documents concern correspondence between the British Embassy in Beijing and the Foreign Office in London between 1949 and 1956, for example yearly, monthly and weekly reviews, political reports, economic assessments, eye-witness accounts and so forth. Certainly, this short review cannot do justice to this very rich collection. Instead, it will give a ‘snapshot’ of some of the documents from three main perspectives – mainland China, Cold-War Asia, and colonial Hong Kong – and discuss some of the themes underlining them – China’s attempts to end the ‘century of humiliation’ at home and abroad, the impact of US policy and the Cold War, the importance of the Anglo-American ‘special relationship’ to London, Britain’s pragmatic approach to Communist China, and the precarious coexistence between Hong Kong and China. A few comments will also be made of the research potential and digital presentation of the resource.

The year 1949 was pivotal to the political future of China and of Anglo-Chinese relations. On the mainland, the Chinese Communist Party under Mao Zedong was winning the civil war against the Nationalist government under Jiang Jieshi (Chiang Kai-shek). A total of 45 files (FO 371/75734–75778) thus detail, almost on a daily basis, the Communist takeover of major cities/provinces, from Beijing (Peking) through

Nanjing (Nanking) and Shanghai to Guangzhou (Canton). As early as 2 March, after the fall of Beijing but before the Communist crossing of the Yangtze, the British Ambassador in Nanjing sent a rather pessimistic report to the Foreign Office: 'Despite all Chiang Kai-shek's efforts it is in my view out of the question that further successful resistance to the Communists can be organised' (FO 371/75743). The main concern of the British government was the situation in Shanghai, where the bulk of British properties and nationals concentrated. Notwithstanding the British evacuation planning, the Communist takeover of Shanghai turned out to be relatively smooth and uneventful. As the British Consul General in Shanghai reported in late May: 'No British subject injured ... No serious looting. Damage to utilities and British property generally only incidental' (FO 371/75757). Indeed, in establishing and consolidating their power in 1949 (and in the subsequent few years), the Chinese Communists adopted a gradual and cautious approach to the treatment of foreigners (and of domestic capitalist elements). The documents on events leading to the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949 thus reveal some degree of hope and optimism among British officials as far as future relations with the Communist regime were concerned.

In view of the political change on the mainland during 1949, British decision-makers and officials in London had to ponder the question of recognizing the People's Republic. To them, recognition was not only a bilateral issue with the Chinese Communists but also an issue that had wider implications for Anglo-American relations and British relations with the Asian Commonwealth. The Labour government's deliberations of recognition between 1949 and January 1950 constitute more than twenty files (FO 371/75810–75830; FO 371/83279–83284), many of which feature discussions and consultation with the US administration. Because of Britain's political decline in post-war Asia, economic interests in China, and colonial interests in Hong Kong, London wanted to 'keep a foot in the door' by recognizing the People's Republic. On the other hand, Washington, for domestic and Cold War reasons, could not immediately shift its recognition from the Nationalist government, which by the year's end retreated to the island of Taiwan, to the new Communist regime. The result was that, after a series of meetings, Britain went ahead on de jure recognition of Communist China on 6 January 1950, and America agreed to disagree with its key ally. At a time when the British government decided to recognize Beijing, Mao Zedong made the decision on 'leaning to one side' by aligning China with the Soviet Union. The conclusion of the Sino-Soviet Treaty of Friendship, Alliance and Mutual Assistance on 14 February (FO 371/75832–75835; FO 371/83313–83315) was to have significant impact on the politics and economy of China as well as China's interactions with the outside world.

Between 1950 and 1956 (and beyond), the Chinese Communists sought to build a new socialist state by eliminating all privileges and institutions established by Western imperialist powers during the previous 'century of humiliation'. The bulk of the documents in section one of the collection thus feature how British diplomats on the ground observed first hand the political, economic and social transformations of China especially those affecting British interests. In the first half of 1950, the Communist authorities announced a number of new regulations concerning registration, travel, and entry and exit permits for foreign residents. The aims were to place foreigners (mostly Britons) under tighter state scrutiny and control. Not only for those who wanted to stay, Beijing also made life difficult for foreigners who desired to leave by denying, or at least delaying, the granting of exit permits (FO 371/83507 and FO 371/83509). The Chinese attitude to and treatment of diplomats were no better. Despite London's recognition of the People's Republic, Beijing refused to reciprocate and agreed merely to the opening of talks for establishing diplomatic relations. The British representatives sent to Beijing for that purpose were recognized as 'negotiating agents' rather than a formal British Mission. The Chinese regime also refused to recognize the status of British consular officers stationed across the country. Between 1950 and mid-1951, it compulsorily took over His Majesty's Consulate at Fuchou (Foochow), and, by refusing visas for staff replacements, forced the British government to close a number of its Consular posts such as Nanjing and Hankou (Hankow). Beijing's treatment of British nationals and properties in China was summed up in a telegram by the Commonwealth Relations Office to British High Commissioners abroad: 'All this suggests a deliberate and consistent policy of squeezing out by degree those United Kingdom – and, indeed, Western – interests which are not of practical use and assistance to the Chinese People's Government' (FO 371/92251).

China's policy of 'squeezing out' Western interests, to be sure, included British economic concerns, especially in Shanghai. At first, the British government and major British firms in China hoped that, with the end of the civil war, the new Communist regime would again look to the Western world for trade and capital. As time progressed, however, it became clear that China's policy was to restrict and utilize, if not expel and nationalize outright, foreign companies. Accordingly, British firms were subjected to heavy taxation and strict labour regulations; they were not allowed to close down and lay off their (Chinese) workers until after settling their liabilities with the local authorities. By mid-1952, the British government decided that the majority of the British firms could no longer operate satisfactorily in China, and it was the time for their withdrawal. The British consuls were instructed to protest to the Chinese government about the difficulties of the British companies and later to exert pressure on the authorities to facilitate more expeditious and reasonable settlement of their closure – but all to no avail. In the event, it was the British firms themselves that negotiated their own withdrawal after sacrificing their assets and capital. The related files on the years 1950–52 give meticulous details on the gradual collapse of the British 'informal economic empire' on the mainland (FO 371/83344–83353; FO 371/92259–92267; FO 371/99282–99297).

The Foreign Office files also show China emerging from the shadow of European imperialism to become a great power to be reckoned with in Cold-War Asia. In late October 1950, China intervened in the Korean War, a 'hot war' in which the Chinese volunteers would fight the United States and the United Nations coalition to a standstill. The Korean War strained the Anglo-American 'special relationship', while putting an end to the fruitless Anglo-Chinese negotiations over the establishment of diplomatic relations. Although supporting America's war efforts, Britain was also eager to restrain the more belligerent tendencies in US policy, such as the use of Chinese Nationalist troops (FO 371/99259), a naval blockade of the Chinese coast (FO 371/99261), and a total trade embargo on China (on debates in 1951, see FO 371/92233–92240; FO 371/92272–92287). The war, moreover, reversed the US 'hands-off' approach to Taiwan: just two days after the North Korean attack, the Truman administration announced the despatch of the Seventh Fleet to 'neutralize' the Taiwan Strait in order to prevent a possible communist invasion of the island. The Sino-American confrontation over Korea and the US protection of Taiwan had deep impact on Anglo-Chinese relations. As the Foreign Office documents reveal, throughout the 1950s, British officials were constantly caught in the policy dilemma of supporting the Americans over Taiwan (notably the Nationalist representation in the United Nations) and pacifying the Chinese Communists for the sake of regional peace and Hong Kong, among other factors.

Indeed, Britain's attitude and policy towards Taiwan after 1950 had been ambivalent and even self-defeating. On the one hand, despite its recognition of the People's Republic, the British regarded Taiwan's legal status as 'undetermined', maintained a consulate at Tamsui, and refused to vote for China's admission into the United Nations. All these were criticized by Beijing as London's pursuit of a 'two Chinas' policy, and the main reasons for the lack of progress on the establishment of Anglo-Chinese diplomatic relations (FO 371/83285–83295). On the other hand, British diplomats and officials found Jiang Jieshi's repeated attempts to 'return to the mainland', perhaps by involving the United States, disturbing and destabilizing. Back in June 1949, the Nationalists had declared a 'closure' of the Communist-controlled ports. After their retreat to Taiwan, the Nationalists continued the civil war on the maritime front by searching and detaining suspicious foreign ships, the majority of which were British-owned or Hong Kong-registered. The British regarded the Nationalist harassment of China's coast as 'illegitimate and unfriendly', bringing economic inconvenience to the British shipping and political tension to the region. (On events during 1949–1952, see FO 371/75900–75917; FO 371/83424–83438; FO 371/99326–99329.) Of course, the Chinese Communists were as responsible for the maritime civil war as the Nationalists. In September 1954, Mao's China began to bombard the Nationalist-held offshore islands, thus triggering off the First Taiwan Strait Crisis which lasted for some eight months. The crisis was another major challenge to the Anglo-American 'special relationship', with Prime Minister Winston Churchill (and later Anthony Eden) disagreeing sharply with President Dwight Eisenhower over the defence of the off-shore islands, if not of Taiwan. A total of 49 files illuminate Britain's role in the 1954–5 crisis, from its support for the New Zealand-sponsored ceasefire resolution in the United Nations to its discussion and debate with the US administration over the protection of the offshore islands.

(FO 371/110231–110243; FO 371/115023–115055; FO 371/115075–115077)

China's attempts to repudiate the legacies of Western imperialism were not extended to the British Colony of Hong Kong, however. Although the collection is sourced mainly from the Foreign Office files, it also contains many documents relating to the Colonial Office and Hong Kong, especially those which have implications for British foreign policy and Anglo-Chinese relations. The documents are revealing of how the Cold War and Anglo-Chinese relations were played out in Hong Kong. Some of the topics include: the defence of Hong Kong in light of the Communist victory in 1949 (FO 371/75871–75879); British deliberations of export controls against China via Hong Kong during the Korean War (FO 371/92272–92287); Beijing's criticisms of the size and activities of the American Consulate General in Hong Kong (FO 371/83557 and FO 371/92385); and the Nationalist attempts to use Hong Kong as a base for sabotage against China, for example the Kashmir Princess Incident of 1955 (FO 371/115133–115146). Taken together, these topics portray a picture of how British officials had to strike a delicate balance between China and Taiwan/America in view of Hong Kong's vulnerability. Notwithstanding that Beijing did not seek to destroy British influence in Hong Kong, as it did on the mainland and in the wider world, the British were acutely aware that Hong Kong existed in China's shadow and thus should not be used as a base of subversion against the mainland in the Cold War.

The Foreign Office Files for China, then, provides vivid and thorough documentation of the great transformation of Chinese polity and society post-1949, of China's role in Cold-War Asia, and of Britain's precarious position in Hong Kong. It is a valuable source to our understanding of the making of Britain's China policy, especially from the vantage point of the British Mission in Beijing and the Foreign Office. (The collection also features telegrams of other departments such as the Board of Trade, the Colonial Office, and the Ministry of Defence as well as extracts of British Parliamentary debates.) Besides, the files represent important primary sources for the study of modern China. The British diplomats in Beijing and other Chinese cities were among the few Westerners who were allowed to stay after the communist takeover. Their direct access to Chinese officials (however difficult and frustrating at times) and first-hand observations of the domestic scene mean that the Foreign Office documents can provide revealing insights into the Chinese Communist mindset and policy, which otherwise could only be gauged from the open sources of Beijing's propaganda machinery.

In view of the British government's thirty-year rule, the bulk of the Foreign Office documents on the late 1940s and the 1950s have been released to the public since the early 1980s. The digital publication of these long declassified materials thus provides nothing new to researchers. In the past two decades or so, a number of scholars have made extensive use of the Foreign Office records (available at the Public Record Office/The National Archives) and published research monographs on Anglo-Chinese relations from 1945 to the 1950s, covering such topics as Britain's recognition of Communist China, the evolution of Anglo-Chinese economic and commercial relations, British policy towards China in the wider Cold War context, Britain's relations with Taiwan, and Hong Kong's role in Anglo-Chinese and Anglo-American relations.⁽¹⁾ Nevertheless, the number of archival-based, book-length publications on Anglo-Chinese diplomatic history remains surprisingly small as compared with that of other topics such as Sino-American relations. Even more surprising is that historians and scholars of modern China, perhaps preoccupied with a 'China-centred' approach and 'history from below', have largely ignored the British Foreign Office records in their research. With the recent flourishing of the field of International History, which goes beyond state-to-state relations to include the interactions of peoples and cultures, the line between diplomatic/foreign history and domestic/national history has become increasingly blurred. The British diplomatic documents should be of interest to scholars who want to study modern China within a wider international context. They warrant greater use by not only diplomatic but also political, economic, social and cultural historians of China.

Finally, on the technological side of the Foreign Office files, the digital layout and design of the resource is admirably clear and simple. Historians who are put off by the ever-changing computer technology will find it easy to navigate. 'Searchability' is another valuable feature of this resource: the files can be searched by keywords and the search terms are highlighted. And the files are downloadable, either in full or in part. In

other aspects, however, the digital delivery of primary sources may not be as ‘users-friendly’ as the conventional publication of documents. In the case of printed documentary collections, editors are normally able to provide lengthy footnotes to place the primary materials in context, identify the individuals mentioned in the documents, and recommend related secondary sources to the readers. But this is not the case for the digital resource under review (although the detailed chronology of events on the website may help the readers somewhat). Nevertheless, the greatest value of the *Foreign Office Files for China* is its accessibility. Students and scholars of Anglo-Chinese relations and modern China can now consult the British archives from afar and with ease.

Notes

1. James Tuck-hong Tang, *Britain’s Encounter with Revolutionary China, 1949–54* (London, 1992); Zhong-ping Feng, *The British Government’s China Policy, 1945–1950* (Keele, 1994); Wenguang Shao, *China, Britain and Businessmen: Political and Commercial Relations, 1949–1957* (London, 1991); Aron Shai, *The Fate of British and French Firms in China 1949–54* (London, 1996); David Clayton, *Imperialism Revisited: Political and Economic Relations between Britain and China, 1950–1954* (London, 1997); Peter Lowe, *Containing the Cold War in East Asia: British Policies towards Japan, China and Korea, 1948–53* (Manchester, 1997); Steve Tsang, *The Cold War’s Odd Couple: The Unintended Partnership between the Republic of China and the UK, 1950–1958* (London, 2006); Chi-kwan Mark, *Hong Kong and the Cold War: Anglo-American Relations, 1949–1957* (Oxford, 2004).[Back to \(1\)](#)

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