

Facing late-Qing Chinese Diplomats: Ways of dealing with French maritime interest in the Treaty ports

Overview of existing scholarship on the chosen field

Tsungli Yamen is a governmental body that is essential to understanding how the emperor's power was partially transferred and the later diplomatic influence was empowered. Historical studies on this institution have been extended to explain not just its functionality but also its connections with diplomats. Late-Qing diplomatic studies are still somewhat underdeveloped; in particular, studies on local operations under the central authority in specific circumstances are lacking. That is to say, the study of Chinese diplomats balancing interests in particular issues or events against different types of spatial powers.

Interpreting Chinese diplomatic studies can take different latent politicalised lenses, such as civilisation or anti-imperialism. Late-Qing diplomats themselves have even published such texts, as a result of East–West contact. It is important to bear in mind that the lack of awareness in the transnational studies, especially colonial studies, might distort the historical facts into reiteration of a unilateral power that accused the other of evil. This pattern of research could be improved upon by contextualising the particular issues or events as a prism to arrive at a broader picture. Consequently, my dissertation will focus more on the colonial studies, to trigger greater reflection from the reader.

In order to understand the French maritime interest in China and Vietnam during the late-Qing era, a depiction of the Chinese capitalist model developed by the

Great Powers could provide the most direct answer. However, the unit of study should not always be the Western officials. The companies founded by French entrepreneurs and businessmen involved in networks of different kinds of people should also be studied.¹ This would shed light on the procedure of collaboration between the East and the West in commercial areas. In regard to the phenomenon mentioned above, the French maritime economy internalised itself into the Chinese coastal economy, indicating the product chain of different commodities on the bank.

Therefore, this dissertation aims to explain the local operations running from Tsungli Yamen to identify the operating paradigm. This could help historians to better understand the effect of Chinese diplomats on the late-Qing modernisation period. It would not only progress Chinese historiography in this field but also enrich and consolidate the late-Qing maritime communication history in terms of Western historiography.

Research methodology

The methodology of this thesis is different from some Chinese scholars' works on Sino–French relations that were conducted guided by Chinese Marxist theory. This theory of class, nation, and revolution is embedded in these works, which supported the studies of the anti-imperialism of the semifedual and semicolonial late-Qing dynasty. Similarly, modernisation theory from the West has been used to justify empire in the nineteenth century under the banner of civilisation. Such theoretical paradigms, under the shadows of Orientalism and consubstantial Occidentalism, could be lost, delineating an intended “just” mirror.

Europe and China are very different civilisations. Whilst they may have an internally coherent cultural identity and common leadership, this is certainly not the case when compared with each other. Nonetheless, they share similar elements, for example, the negotiation of maritime interests from governments to persons, in other words, a diplomatic process from a “just” price to a just price.

Accordingly, the primary source for studies of the local economy and its maritime connections could be the archives of relevant locations (e.g. Hong Kong, Taiwan, the Gulf of Tonkin, Kwangchow Wan and Hokkien areas of Amoy and Foochow). Regarding French persons, their diaries, memoirs, or official contacts could also be scattered across the aforementioned places, or in the archives of France or Vietnam. Lastly, first-hand Chinese diplomatic sources in China could be explored, possibly Peking, Hong Kong, Guang Zhou and so on.

Outline of chapters

Historiography of the maritime Treaty ports and their diplomatic management in China

- The maritime economy at the Treaty ports
- The political and personnel systems of Tsungli Yamen

Unmatched order from Tsungli Yamen to the locals

- The Western judgement of Chinese diplomats
- The Chinese view of Chinese diplomats
- Chinese featured diplomacy in both of their eyes at the Treaty ports

Bowing to familial power at the local level

- Family power and its economic basis throughout Chinese history
- The diplomatic government of the family power through Chinese history
- The transitional history of the economic and financial system in China
- Western trading at the Treaty ports

French maritime interest and Chinese family power at the Treaty ports

- The collaboration history between Chinese and Westerners on commodities in China
- The basis of French imperialism in China and Annam
- The joint work and conflict between French and Chinese businesses at sea
- The role of Chinese diplomats in business
- The transiting role of a Chinese diplomat

The paradigm for Chinese diplomats' dealings with French imperialists

- The same diplomatic issue in Tsungli Yamen and local areas
- Discussion about the different scenarios faced by Tsungli Yamen and the locals
- The lubricating role of Chinese diplomats in comparative manoeuvring
- The different reactions of Chinese diplomats in China and France

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