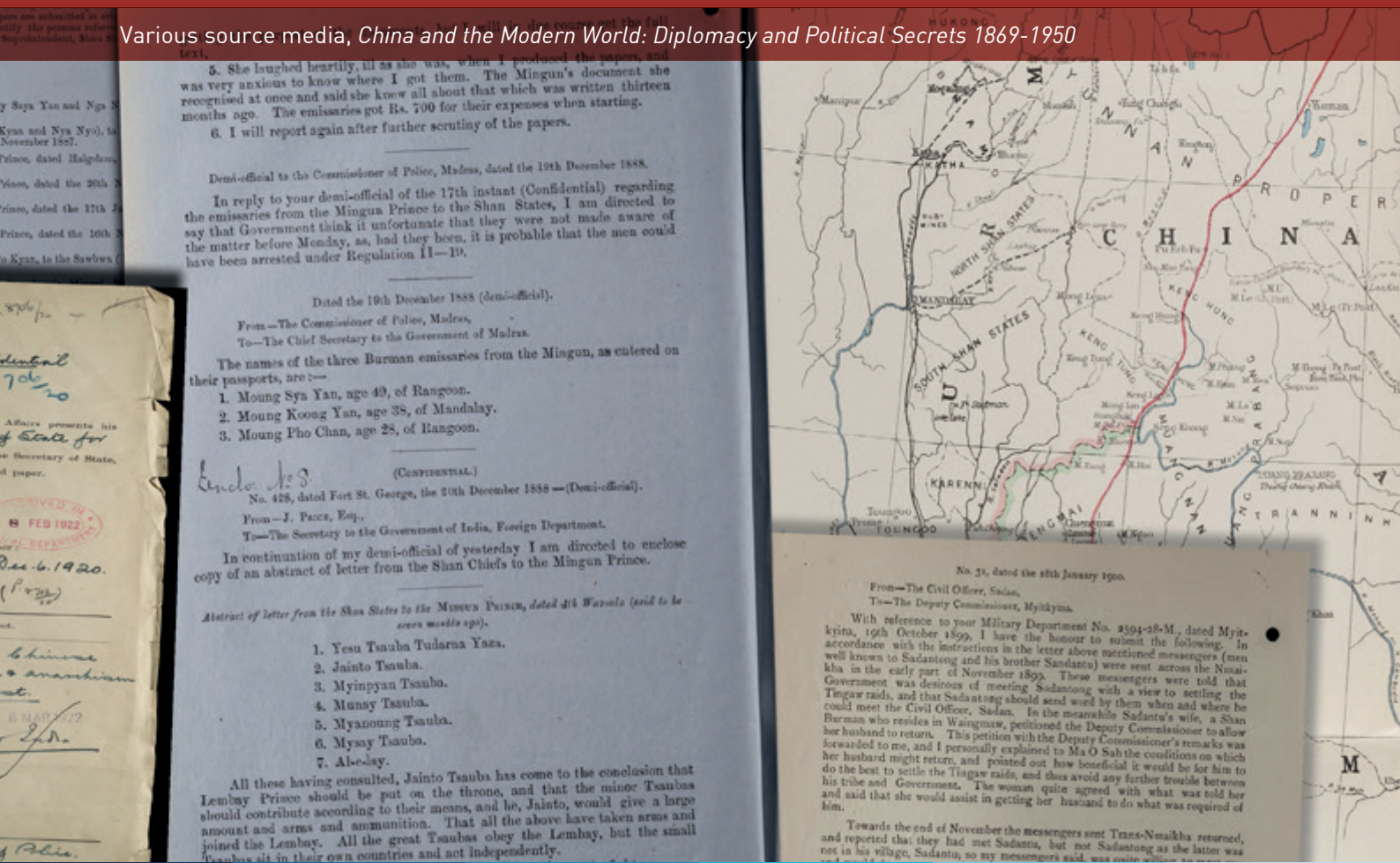


# China in the India Office Records: Three Case Studies

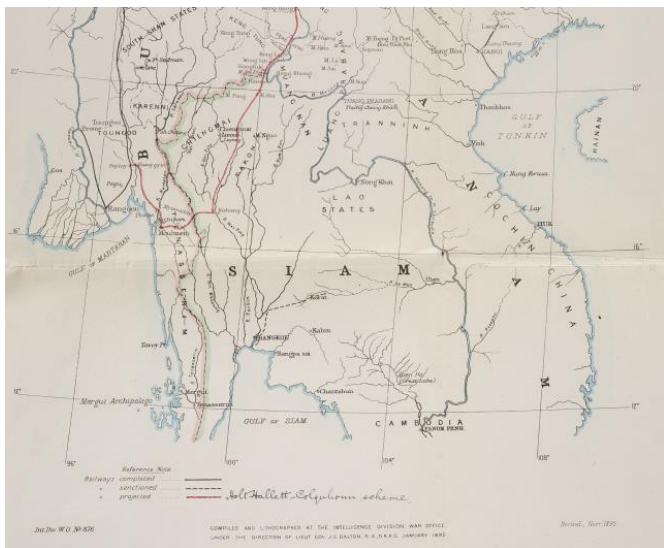
Jonathan Saha

University of Leeds

Various source media, *China and the Modern World: Diplomacy and Political Secrets 1869-1950*



## China in the India Office Records: Three Case Studies



'Schemes of railway extension into China. Prospects of trade with Yunnan and railway extension.' W Lee-Warner and E Neel, 11 & 19 Nov 1895. IOR/L/PS/18/B72/2.

Over the last twenty years historians have moved away from a focus on nation states towards an exploration of global and transnational processes and connections. The approach of studying history through individual countries alone had a number of limitations. Chiefly, nations have been shown to be limited and sometimes artificial constructs with which to understand the complexity of societal change over time. It is now commonly argued that nations are themselves shifting and changing entities whose meanings were, and remain, contested and unstable. Historical scholarship cannot be adequately contained within nation states. In this sense, the India Office Records offer a wonderful archive that can meet the needs of this new research trend, with documents that shed light on the histories of places that were at a considerable distance from the formal territorial boundaries of British India itself. It is an archive that reveals the ways in which modern national borders were established and that uncovers the far-flung webs of interconnection that crossed the planet.

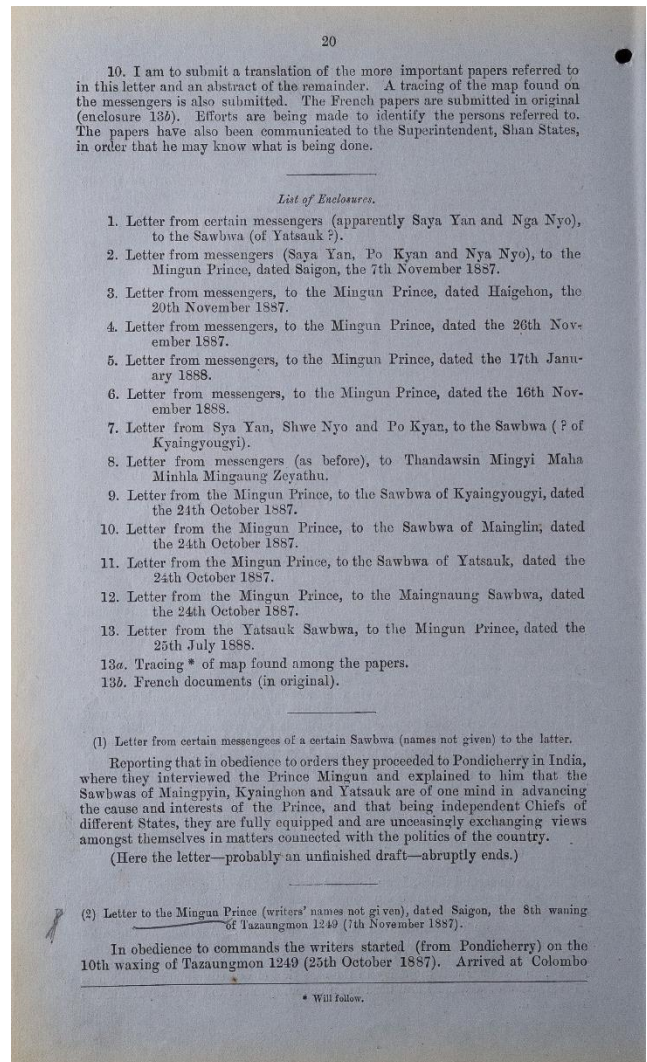
When the Government of India and its officials looked to the land frontiers of their empire to the north east, China loomed large. Whether it was governed by the Qing dynasty, which was increasingly besieged during the nineteenth century, or the emergent nationalist regime of the early-twentieth century, events in China had reverberations in the subcontinent. This collection of digitised files—China and the Modern World: Diplomacy and Political Secrets 1869-1950—pertaining to the relations between China and British India captures the extent to which the histories of these imperial formations, and nascent nations, were interwoven. In addition, in part because of the size and regional power of India and China, it is an archive containing materials on other places too. Polities in the mountains squeezed between these giant states, such as Tibet and Nepal, were the source of diplomatic tensions and flash points of conflict. Stateless peoples living in the upland regions of South and Southeast Asia, traversing borders and defying attempts to locate them in national territories, were a thorn in the side of expanding imperial bureaucracies. Beyond these borderworlds, British colonial possessions in Southeast Asia, with large overseas Chinese populations, were intrinsically linked to both India and China. Zooming out further still, the states and peoples of Central Asia, Northeast Asia and Eurasia were bound up with events in India and thus find their way into the archival records.

Freed from the narrow constraints of national frameworks, historians using this digitized collection will have the opportunity to explore the past at a range of scales – from high-level, formal political interactions between prominent state officials that play out over decades, right down to the everyday experiences of marginalised individuals. In the period covered by this archive, some of the world's most contested borders are gradually established. The perilous exploratory expeditions, brutal punitive raids and torturous diplomatic negotiations that went into the demarcation and

drawing of these borders are recorded in fine-grained detail. Through these records we can trace the movement of goods and people, both with and without legal sanction. This collection provides us with a macro-historical window onto the role of British imperialism on the subcontinent in reshaping the political geography of Asia. At the same time, there is a vast cast of characters whose lives were captured within these selected India Office Records, however briefly and partially. There are deposed princes tasking their emissaries to ferment rebellions at the frontiers of British India, the wives of tribal leaders brokering deals with British officials, and Chinese anarchists and Russian Bolshevik clerks writing journals in Esperanto advocating for world revolution. The collection contains details of moments in which individuals are negotiating rapidly changing and uncertain circumstances.

Such an expansive archive has innumerable possible entry points for the curious historian. Let us begin by dropping into Madras in December 1888 where three Burmese men were stopped by Indian police officers. The three travellers had recently arrived in the city and were on their way to the French enclave of Pondicherry when they were briefly detained and had the papers in their possession confiscated. The seized documents suggested the existence of an anti-British clandestine network connecting Qing China, French Indochina, Burmese ex-Royals and Shan rulers at the mountainous borderlands of Burma, Yunnan and Annam. Among the papers found in their possession were: French passports and permits to carry arms; numerous documents in Chinese and Pali, that British officials struggled to translate; maps of Asia in French and English; documents outlining the logistics of travelling between Burma, French Indochina and India; some “not quite intelligible” poetry; some books of Burmese medicine; lottery tickets; and, crucially, letters between rulers in the Shan States and the “Mingun Prince”. The Mingun Prince was the eldest brother of the now

deposed monarch of Burma, King Thibaw, whose reign had ended with his exile after the British annexed Burma in the third Anglo-Burmese war of 1885–1886. This brief war was followed by uprisings across the country that were still being suppressed in 1888. Several groups of rebels rallied behind the Mingun Prince who refused to surrender to the British and eventually sought protection from the French in Annam, and then Pondicherry.<sup>1</sup>



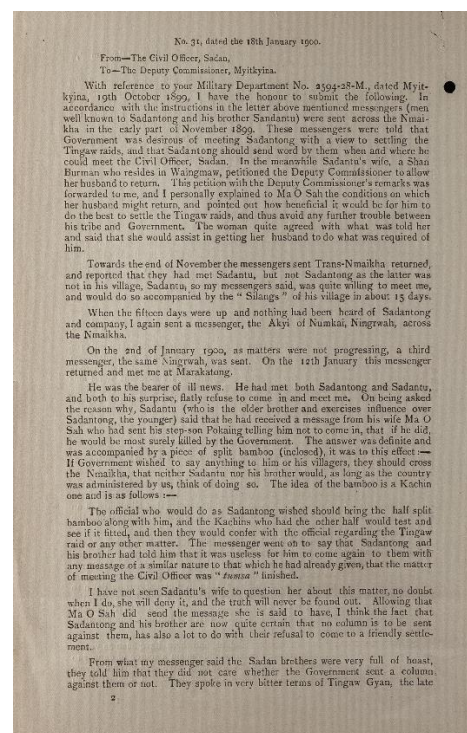
*Correspondence on certain papers seized by the Madras Police from the emissaries of the Mingun Prince of Burma, Dec 1888-May 1889. IOR/L/PS/7/57 Sec.No59*

The polyglot nature of the papers seized by the British attests to the transnational impacts of the colonization of Burma. Once released from British custody, the three men continued to Pondicherry. British intelligence confirmed that they were

in the employ of the exiled rebel prince. Despite being an eclectic bundle, the documents themselves played into British anxieties. The letters from various Shan rulers who opposed British sovereignty were of particular concern. Given the on-going restive situation in Burma, and especially in the Shan States, it was feared that the Mingun Prince could facilitate considerable disruption in the newly acquired colony. The content of the letters is also revealing. In his correspondence, the Prince offers his analysis of international affairs, suggesting that recent Russian, Chinese and French activities were portents of British decline. The Shan rulers, in their letters, pledged their steadfast opposition to the British. These letters aside, the British officials analysing the papers were uncertain of the veracity of the documents in Chinese that seemingly suggested support for the Prince from regional Qing officials. They also did not believe that the French had any interest or intention in stirring matters up. Nevertheless, the presence and circulation of these documents through these emissaries of the Prince suggest that the rebellious exiled royal was trying to invoke the spectre of a wider, transnational alliance of anti-British forces to enhance his reputation and solidify the remnants of the Burmese resistance.<sup>ii</sup>

This was a brief moment in the history of British imperial expansion; a small episode in the larger conquest of Burma. But the collection allows us to drill down further and study the quotidian experience of those living on the unruly border between Burma and China. British officials posted in these border regions fretted about the fragility of their authority. Their anxieties have led to the archives capturing some of the day-to-day diplomacy of maintaining colonial territorial boundaries. For instance, in 1900 the Civil Officer posted to the Kachin region of the Burma border with China, in the northernmost part of the colony, requested that a punitive expedition be launched on a Kachin village beyond the formal reach of British authority. He had been trying to find an

amicable resolution between two warring villages, which had resulted in raids into British territory. He feared that unless he was able to offer some form of visible chastisement, the semblance of authority that he held over their kinsfolk on the British side of the border would evaporate. To come to an agreement, he spoke with Ma O Sah, the wife of a Kachin leader, asking that she encourage her husband to meet with him for a private audience. In the event, it appears that she did the opposite, instead advising her husband that he would be killed if he met with the officer. As a result, the local leader refused to meet with the Civil Officer and instead gave him half of a piece of bamboo. The bamboo effectively set the terms with which they would meet with representatives of the Government in Burma. They would not go to government officials; officials would have to leave British territory and come to them bearing their split of bamboo. If the bamboo fitted with their corresponding half, then they would enter into discussions with the officer.<sup>iii</sup>

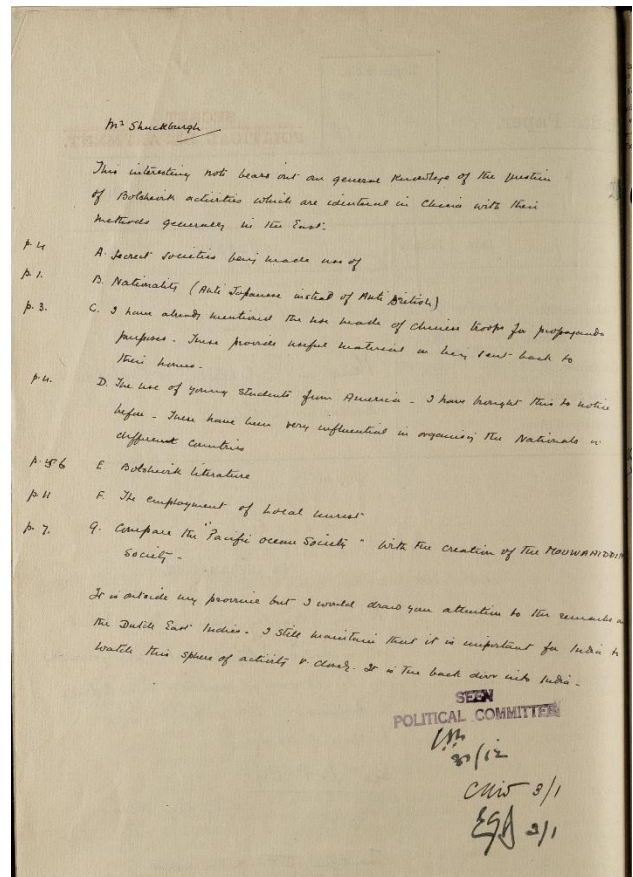


*Burma-China frontier: feud between Sadan Kachins and the Jingaw villagers; settlement impossible without a punitive expedition. June 1900. IOR/L/PS/7/124/25 M no. 62-1*

To the Civil Officer, this arrangement was unacceptable, and he asked for permission to punish them, as they were becoming “full of boast”. His colleagues in the Indian Civil Service believed that the expansion and strengthening of Chinese authority in the region was emboldening the recalcitrant villagers to defy representatives of the British state. However, at the same time the Government was hopeful that improving diplomatic ties with Chinese officials in the bordering Yunnan province would facilitate greater overland trade. The Government of India sought to balance these competing pressures. It was agreed that if matters deteriorated, a punitive raid would be allowed. But they gave a strong steer against such action, closing their correspondence: “we trust, however, that the necessity may not arise.” Ultimately then, this was a rather inconsequential episode – but it remains a rich case for historians nonetheless. It opens a window onto the gendered channels of informal diplomacy between representatives of British Burma and upland communities beyond their borders. It records some of the ethnographic detail of how these low-level diplomatic communications were conducted. And it hints at the changing balance of power in the region as British and Qing imperial reach was gradually consolidated.<sup>iv</sup>

Moving further into the twentieth century, the anxieties over the borders of empire and the rebellious actors who crossed them continued, but with new characters. For instance, the collection also contains files aggregating British intelligence on the movements and activities of interwar revolutionaries. The immediate imperative for this intelligence gathering operation was a fear of Russian nationals exporting Bolshevism to China and then further into Southeast Asia and India, although their acquired knowledge showed them that radical political ideologies were more home-grown than imported. Two reports published in the 1920s went into considerable detail into the lives and activities of key activists, whether communist or anarchist. One of the individuals that

they were most concerned about was Jack Lizerovitch, a clerk employed by the famous trading company Jardine, Matheson & Co. Operating out of Shanghai and working closely with Chinese anarchists, he was viewed as an effective propagandist and recruiter with worrying ties to English communists living in London’s East End. He set up the communist newspaper *Shanghai Life*.



‘Bolshevism, Chinese communism and anarchism in the Far East’. IOR/L/PS/11/183, P 8706/1920

Lizerovitch represented the transnational reach of the radical networks the British were monitoring in China’s coastal cities. These networks brought together Korean, Japanese, Malay and Indian radicals. Of the Chinese activists, Si Fuh (劉師復) was dubbed the “founder of Chinese anarchism”. He was one of those prominent Chinese radicals who had become active in Paris in 1907. What linked Si Fuh to the Russian communists operating in China was Esperanto. The reports warned that the language was a source of mutual co-

operation, a “common bond”. Si Fuh was apparently a committed advocate of Esperanto, and his journal *Evolucio* was published in the language. A school for Esperanto was even set up by a Russian communist who wrote for *Shanghai Life*.<sup>v</sup>

These three little case studies – the conspiring Mingun Prince, the defiant Kachin villagers, and the Esperanto-speaking anarcho-communist network – seem like discrete and disparate historical episodes, and in many ways, they are. But on a more abstract level, they are all instances of local activities that were tied into a wider and shifting transnational geo-political context, and as a result were viewed as posing some threat to British rule in India. Events in China were often keenly felt in India. As a result, the India Office Records that have been digitized in this collection provide historians with a wide range of topics to explore. Moreover, the rich detail in the collection enables scholars to

---

#### ENDNOTES

i Correspondence on certain papers seized by the Madras Police from the emissaries of the Mingun Prince of Burma, Dec 1888-May 1889. IOR/L/PS/7/57 Sec.No59.

ii Ibid.

iii Burma-China frontier: feud between Sadan Kachins and the Jingaw villagers; settlement impossible without a punitive expedition. IOR/L/PS/7/124-25M no.62.

reconstruct histories at a range of scales and zoom right into the lived experiences of actors on the ground.

#### Citation

Jonathan Saha, ‘China in the India Office Records’, *China and the Modern World: Diplomacy and Political Secrets 1869-1950*, Cengage Learning (EMEA) Ltd, 2019

iv Ibid.

v Bolshevism, Chinese communism and anarchism in the Far East. IOR/L/PS/11/183-P8706 1920.

# CITATION

Saha, Jonathan: "China in the India Office Records: Three Case Studies." *China and the Modern World: Diplomacy and Political Secrets 1869-1950*, Cengage Learning (EMEA) Ltd, 2019.

© Cengage Learning 2019

**REQUEST A  
FREE TRIAL**

**CONTACT YOUR  
REPRESENTATIVE**

**FIND OUT MORE  
ON OUR WEBSITE**

 GALE DIGITAL SCHOLAR LAB

**DISCOVER THE POSSIBILITIES**